
Women in the Movement: Interview with Dorothy Richardson in the Milwaukee Sentinel
(circa July 8, 1897)¹

“But you have not said one word about women or what part they will take in this great cooperative commonwealth that you are about to establish. Do you expect to adopt any specific measures toward the emancipation and advancement of wage-earning women?”

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“Women, women,” slowly he repeated the word, dropping his face in his hands and allowing his eyes to follow the intricate figure of the Wilton velvet on the floor. It is hard to imagine the manipulator of strikes, the haranguer of infuriated mobs, the leader of socialistic factions, sitting for a full two minutes in this attitude of meditation and reflection without so much as uttering a word.

Women? What part will women play in the Social Democracy? [*he continued at last*]. Well, that question is sort of a riddle. To tell you the truth I cannot exactly define the attitude which the Social Democracy will assume toward women, further than they will stand according to our constitution on a perfect political equality with men, sharing with them all those privileges that have heretofore been considered man’s sole prerogative. Women in the Social Democracy will be entitled to cast their ballots and vote in all municipal and state elections, as well as to hold office. The Social Democracy will ultimately be the realization of the woman suffragist’s dream and the special boon of the new woman, but we have as yet given the woman question only a minimum share of attention which has been bestowed on the Social Democracy as a unit.

“But what about women in the colony you propose establishing in Washington? Have there not been any definite plans laid for giving employment as soon as the colony is established to at least a few of the tens of thousands of unemployed, self-supporting women to be found in the populous cities?”

Oh, yes, to be sure, but you must remember that Rome was not built in a day; neither can the cooperative commonwealth be established by a

wish. In the beginning there will not be any work that would be at all suited to women, not even to the most advanced of her sex. What we shall require there will be a force of rugged, able-bodied men, whose mission will be to get the colony into running order and make it a habitable place for their families. The work will be arduous and you will pardon my frankness, but there will be no room for women, nor do we care to be bothered with them. By and by, however, when things are brought into shape and system and order is established out of chaos, we will then turn our attention to women and their establishment in the colony. Indeed, to say the least, I think our colony will receive its first great impetus towards speedy success only when we can open the gate to the trammelled wage-earning woman and bid her welcome to the privileges of the cooperative commonwealth. When this time arrives, and my hope is that it will not be far off, we expect to have established diverse occupations in which women may engage without jeopardy to either the physical or moral nature. We have an appropriation of \$50,000 from the state of Washington which amount is to be expended for irrigation purposes, agricultural implements, and other necessary things, and which will constitute the monetary nucleus of the colony.²

There are tens of thousands of women who are today working in Eastern sweatshops for a mere pittance. Of all the downtrodden working women in America, I think the lot of the sweatshop slaves is the worst. Now it is our intention, just as soon as possible, to begin the manufacture of men's clothing in the colony, which will necessitate the importation of skilled operators, which I propose to bring from Chicago. Of course we cannot furnish work to very many at first, but as the movement strengthens and spreads out we will be able to increase the capacity of the establishment. The manufacture of shirtwaists³ and of women's and children's wraps and dresses will also give employment in time to a large force of women and girls, as will also the making of shoes, slippers, and notions. These industries that I have named are only a few of the many that we hope to establish. These will be inaugurated first, however, for the reason that they do not entail any great expenditure of money for buildings or machinery, and because they will give employment almost immediately to women.

"How do you regard the new woman, Mr. Debs, and will she be allowed as many privileges in your colony as she assumes elsewhere?"

How do I regard the new woman? Why I think she is the noblest kind of woman God ever made, and if I have my way she shall continue her course unhindered when she reaches the new colony. God never intended that any woman should be denied any innocent pleasure or recreation that she desires or craves, and as one of the watchwords of the Social Democracy is freedom, that freedom shall be allowed the new woman in overflowing measure.

“But are you not afraid that this unbounded freedom you propose giving women will be in time abused and prove a detriment to her higher moral development?”

Not a bit of it! Not a bit of it! I have too much faith in the new woman ever to fear that unbounded freedom as to the selection of dress, amusements, and occupation and to the expression of thought will ever be abused.

“Then I presume you would encourage rather than discourage the wearing of bloomers by the women in your colony?”

No; I will always remain perfectly neutral on that point. I say that if a woman wants to wear bloomers let her wear them, but if she does not show any such inclination so much the better. No; although the new woman shall do just as she pleases in this matter in our colony, I hope she will not entirely discard petticoats and the thousand-and-one lace befrilled odds and ends that constitute so much of the charm of femininity.

“And how do the prominent philanthropic women of the nation regard the movement? Have you sought to interest them in the plans and have you succeeded?”

Many of the great and good women of America as well as of Great Britain have come forward to extend their goodwill, money, and influence toward the success of the Social Democracy. The women are taking more interest in the movement than my most sanguine dreams ever anticipated. I have received communications from many leading club women wishing me Godspeed, while leading advocates of dress reform, temperance, and social purity have declared their intention to cooperate with us.

“Speaking of social purity, will there be any specific measures taken to preserve it in the plan of the Social Democracy?”

Well, no, no specific measures. Social impurity, like all other evils existing in society, is the outcome of a diseased industrial system. What makes nine-tenths of these poor abandoned wretches go wrong? Is it from choice? No. It is hunger — oftener starvation. You know that a proud, honest man will steal before he will beg or accept cold charity. I contend that a starving woman is not a responsible guardian of her honor.

“But do you think the people oppressed and trampled upon as they are will have the courage to assist you in carrying out this project to completion?”

Yes, I do, indeed. The people are ripe for it and the organization will grow as no organization ever grew before. The work of organizing has already begun, and in earnest. Fully 300 applications for charters for local councils are now on file, while thousands of letters are pouring in from every quarter, and with scarcely an exception they contain messages of greeting and good cheer. Never was a movement more favorably received by the common people. From every source comes the tidings that the Social Democracy is just what is wanted. The movement must go to the front with majestic stride. Its mission is the emancipation of labor from wage bondage and the inauguration of the cooperative commonwealth. Nothing can save the existing social and industrial system. Cooperation is inevitable. The cooperation that I advocate is so wide in its application, so general in its nature, so all prevailing in its scope, that altogether different conditions would surround human life and human effort under its control. Cooperation cannot fail to perform its mission and to perform it quickly.

Take the Mormons for instance. Was not cooperation there a success? Had it not been for the undermining influence of the institution of polygamy, might they not have been a power in the land today? Cooperation, knit together and made strong a nomadic little band of people driven from pillar to post. Cooperation raised a splendid acropolis by the shores of the Great Salt Lake, and made a veritable Egypt out of an arid waste. If cooperation did so much for the Mormons, will it not do more, infinitely more, for us?

¹ Debs arrived in Milwaukee to speak on July 7, 1897, with one published report still having him in town until leaving for Oshkosh on July 12.

² Details of this alleged \$50,000 appropriation remain unclear.

³ *Women's blouses.*