

No Negro Question Outside the Class Question:
An Open Letter to J. Milton Waldron, President of the
National Negro American Political League
(June 30, 1908)

Girard, Kansas, June 30, 1908.

Rev. J. Milton Waldron,¹
Washington, DC

My Dear Mr. Waldron:—

I have received and carefully read your communication of the 25th instant and beg to say in reply that I am in hearty sympathy with you insofar as your organization seeks the political and economic freedom of the Negro race. The people of your race are entitled to all the rights and opportunities that other races are entitled to, but they have never had them, nor will they have them under the administration of either the Republican or Democratic party.

Let me say to you candidly that in the individual matter of defeating William H. Taft as the candidate of the Republican Party we cannot join you. We Socialists attach no importance to mere individuals in political campaigns, and have no sympathy with any movement designed to inflict punishment on individual candidates for real or fancied wrongs. We are organized to overthrow the capitalist system which is maintained politically by both the Republican and Democratic parties, and to establish the socialist republic in which all men and all women, regardless of race, nationality, or creed, may enjoy equal freedom. To accomplish this we are not making war upon individuals, but upon a social and industrial system in which individuals, especially those prominent in political life, do practically as they must to obtain their ends.

The Brownsville affair,² we admit, was disgraceful and indefensible; but it cannot be said that it was due to race discrimination. At least the outrage cannot be supported upon that theory. The officials of the Western Federation of Miners were not Negroes, but white men, and yet they were kidnapped by conspiracy of the Republican governors and by sanction of

President Roosevelt at the behest of the Mine Owners' Association. It is not a question of race, but a question of class. The white workingman is no higher in the present social scale than is the Negro, and although the prejudice of the one against the other is assiduously cultivated by the ruling class, that class has no more real regard for a wage-slave of one color than of another. Here we have the crux of this question.

I agree perfectly to what you say about President Roosevelt. He is in truth a tsar, but whether he is or is not makes but little difference, after all, in this capitalist system. The president of our so-called republic has equal power, to say the least, with the emperor of Germany or the king of England, and, as a matter of fact, he makes use of power which neither of these monarchs would dare exercise over his subjects.

This country is ruled today by the president and the Supreme Court, and this resolves itself practically into the president alone, since Supreme Court judges are the creatures of his appointment. Whether this president happens to be Mr. Roosevelt, Mr. Taft, or Mr. Bryan, makes no difference so far as the working class is concerned. The fact remains that under the present system government is controlled absolutely in the interest of the capitalist class and its chief function is to keep the working class in subjection.

I have not now time to go into this matter, nor is it necessary for the purpose of this communication. The point I wish to make is that the capitalist system is a class system and that we live today under class rule, whether the administration is Republican or Democratic, and that the president and Supreme Court and Congress — the executive, judicial, and legislative branches of the government — are simply the functionaries of the ruling class and could not, even were they so disposed, materially change conditions resulting from the class ownership of the means of production, that is to say, the means of life.

In this system class rules class and while the system lasts, and this, as I have already indicated, is not a race question, but a class question, and when the Negroes, the great mass of whom are wage workers, develop sufficient intelligence to understand their true economic and political interests, they will join and support the Socialist Party, the only political party in the world today whose declared purpose it is to abolish class rule and establish a republic whose fundamental principle is the equal rights and freedom of all.

Ever since the close of the Civil War the Republican Party has used the Negro as a political asset. The Republican Party cares not one whit more for the Negro than does the Democratic Party, its protestation to the contrary notwithstanding. The boasted love of the Republican politicians for the Negro is sheer buncombe. The Northern Republican manufacturer places precisely the same estimate upon the Negro as the Southern cotton-grower. He esteems him for the use he can make of him and the surplus value he can extract from his labor-power. When it comes to the capitalist politician, he simply speaks for the ruling class, and if for a brief period preceding the election he develops a passion of friendship for the Negro it is to get that Negro to cast his vote to perpetuate the rule of his master and his own political degradation and economic slavery.

Even Senator Foraker himself,³ who is now almost a demigod in the eyes of many Negroes, does not differ from President Roosevelt or from any of the rest of politicians in the matter regarding Negroes, and white men as well, who work for wages as unfit, as a class, to rise above the dead level of wage slavery. Senator Foraker, like President Roosevelt, is a political representative of the capitalist class, serves that class in every speech he makes and every vote he casts in the senate, and upon this proposition I challenge his record and defy successful contradiction.

Senator Foraker, like President Roosevelt, believes in the capitalist system and is, in fact, a capitalist himself; supports the private ownership of the means of production, and believes that the great mass of workers, who produce all wealth and support all government and all civilization, should be dependent upon the capitalists for the opportunity to work, and therefore doomed to live and die in wage slavery.

There is no Negro question outside of the class question. Abolish capitalism, the private ownership by the few of the means whereby the great mass live, give Negroes economic freedom so that they may have the right to work and to receive and enjoy all they produce, and the race question, as it menaces capitalist class society, will be no more. As it is now the wage working Negro, like the wage working white, is simply merchandise, bought and sold in the "labor market." The Republican Party does not intend that he shall ever be anything else, and as for the Democratic Party, which is even now depriving Negro wage slaves of their political franchise in the South, it is not necessary to even raise the question as to where it stands.

Between the two capitalist parties there is no economic difference so far as the great mass of the people is concerned. They are both committed to capitalist ownership, class rule, and wage slavery.

To awaken the Negro, the same as the white man, who works for a living, to open his eyes and to educate him along true lines is now the great problem to which the Socialist Party is giving itself with all the means at its command. It already has several Negro organizers in the field and expects to have more in the near future.

Here let me say that the Socialist Party is not seeking to get the votes of Negroes except upon the one condition that the Negroes who give it their support do so not only of their own will, but have intelligence enough to know what they are voting for and what a vote for socialism means to them. If the Socialist Party could by the trickery and fraud employed by the Republican and Democratic parties obtain the entire vote of the 600,000 Negroes for whom you speak it would scorn to stoop to that level.

The Socialist Party knows that the great mass of Negroes are ignorant and it is the only party that refuses to traffic in that ignorance, to build upon and exploit that ignorance, that a few may riot in luxury and some others hold fat offices as the fruit of their part in robbing and degrading their unfortunate fellow beings.

The Socialist Party wants every Negro vote it can get, provided it represents the intelligence, dignity, and honesty of the man who casts it. The Socialist Party does not invest in whiskey and cigars as a means of influencing the votes of Negroes or others, nor does it spend a single cent to influence any man's vote except as that vote can be influenced in an educational way. The Republican and Democratic parties, on the contrary, rely upon the ignorance of their supporters, use their means to corrupt them and their power to keep them in ignorance, that they may continue to be exploited by the class which supports and is supported by these parties.

I read with much satisfaction of the part taken by yourself and co-workers in the late Republican convention⁴ and of the vigorous protest made by you against the subservient attitudes of that party toward the trusts and its cowardly attitude toward your race. The spirit which animated you is splendid and I congratulate you upon having the courage to freely stand up in defense of your convictions. This to me is the signal that henceforth the Republican Party is no longer to confidently and coolly base its certainty of success upon its title deed to the Negro voting population of the United States. The influences back of you, while not yet clear

and conscious in their aim, are yet right and full of promise of better, far better things in the near future.

I should be only too glad to meet you and your people, and but for the fact that I am having to leave here to fill a series of speaking engagements, I should seek a personal interview with you and your colleagues at the earliest opportunity. As you are near New York let me suggest that you arrange to meet the representatives of our movement located there. You will find the headquarters at 6 Park Place, where the official papers, daily and weekly, of the Socialist Party are also published.⁵ You will find there a number of representative socialists who will be glad to meet you and your associates and talk over this entire matter with you. Let me further suggest that you get in touch with the national office of the party, which is located at Chicago, the national secretary being J. Mahlon Barnes, whose address is 180 East Washington Street. Mr. Barnes will be glad to give you any information you may desire in regard to the party and furnish you with such printed matter as may be of interest to you in the consideration of this question.

At a later day I may have the pleasure of meeting with you in person, and meantime I wish you all success in your very commendable undertaking.

Believe me

Very sincerely yours,

Eugene V. Debs

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¹ J. Milton Waldron (1863-1931), born in Richmond, Virginia, was an ordained Baptist minister who spent nearly two decades at the Bethel Baptist Church of Jacksonville, Florida, where he became known for his outspoken opposition to lynch law. He later assumed the pastorate at the Shiloh Baptist Church of Washington, DC, where he served for a time as treasurer of the Niagara Movement, a civil rights organization launched in 1905 by historian W. E. B. DuBois and journalist William Monroe Trotter. He was later president of the Washington, DC chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. Waldron's National Negro American Political League was a short-lived attempt to exert political influence on behalf of the African-American community within the Republican Party; the group changed its name to the National Independent Political League in 1912 and

moved close to Woodrow Wilson's Democratic administration. Waldron supported American participation in World War I through an organization called the Committee of One Hundred.

² The Brownsville Affair of 1906 revolved around the August 13, 1906 shooting of a white bartender and wounding of a white police officer — acts for which the black soldiers of the segregated 25th Infantry Battalion were duplicitously implicated. Following an investigation by the Army's Inspector General, President Theodore Roosevelt dishonorably discharged 167 men, ostensibly for having participated in a "conspiracy of silence" as to the identity of the shooter or shooters. The military affairs committee of the US senate conducted an investigation of their own in 1907 and 1908, with a majority ultimately supporting Roosevelt's decision in their March 1908 report. A new investigation by the Army in 1972 found the soldiers innocent and posthumous honorable discharges were granted, with the sole living participant awarded a \$25,000 cash award and tax-free pension by Congress.

³ Joseph B. Foraker (1846-1917) was a corporation attorney from Ohio elected as the Republican candidate for governor of Ohio in 1885. In 1896 Foraker was elected to the first of two terms in the United States senate. Foraker was a leading exponent for public scrutiny and fairness towards the 167 black soldiers of the 25th Infantry Battalion embroiled in the 1906 Brownsville Affair. He filed a minority report proclaiming the innocence of the soldiers in the senate military affairs committee's investigation of the incident.

⁴ The 1908 Republican national convention was held June 16-19 in Chicago. It nominated judge William Howard Taft and Rep. James S. Sherman to head its ticket in the fall general election.

⁵ There was no party-owned press in New York City at this time; Debs refers here to the privately owned daily *New York Call* and the weekly *New York Socialist* (formerly *The Worker*), both of which were close to the Social Democratic Party of New York but neither of which were technically official. The German-language daily *New Yorker Volkszeitung* and Yiddish-language daily *Forverts*, also privately held socialist broadsheets, were published at other locations in the city.