

Mastery of the Machine:  
Campaign Speech in Oklahoma City  
[excerpt]  
(July 5, 1908)

Ladies and Gentlemen, Comrades and Fellow Workers:—

I need hardly say that I appreciate this cordial reception. It is more than a passing pleasure to me to stand in this inspiring presence.

Yesterday, a hundred and thirty-two years ago, the Declaration of Independence was issued. Crowns and scepters sunk together, and for the first time in human history man stood forth the political sovereign.

When great changes have occurred in human history, when great principles have been involved, as a rule the majority have been wrong, the minority right. In the march of time, the minority, in alliance with the forces of evolution, become the majority; their principles are enrolled and then all the world applauds. Living, these men are reviled, they are treated as the enemies of human society; dead, they are almost deified and monuments are erected where they sleep.

But, my friends, we are not yet free. It is true that we are living in a so-called republic, but no man is truly free unless he is master of the means that sustain his life. The revolutionary patriots proved to the world that politically they were capable of self-government. It now remains to prove to the world that we are also capable of industrial self-government.

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A political party expresses the material interest of its supporters provided they have intelligence enough to understand their material interests. When your grandfathers and great-grandfathers lived they worked with their own tools. They were the masters of their product and they were reasonably free. It was about that time that the simple tool was transformed; it became the machine and industrial revolution had a beginning. Up to this time the employer was also a workingman and had to pay them substantially what they produced as they could quit his service and provide themselves with the simple tools required and work for themselves. But

the tool became the machine and we have today one class who are the tool-owners, called capitalists, and on the other hand, that great class who are the tool owners, called capitalists, and on the other hand, that great class who are tool users and who are known to us as the wage earners. these two have different interests and are continually pitted against each other, and we have a constant succession of strikes and lockouts, sometimes accompanied by bloodshed. This, my friends, is the class struggle. The capitalist seeks to obscure this fact that his position and possession may be perpetuated, but the socialist points it out that we may put an end to it, that we may work side by side and begin to march to the noblest civilization that the human race has ever known.

In this system, in which the capitalist owns the machine that he does not use and the workingman uses the machine that he does not own, we have a fundamental contradiction — social labor, social production upon every hand and individual appropriation of the social product. Eighty-five percent of the wealth is produced by the machine of today. When it was produced by hand, the man who produced it furnished a market for it. But the machine does not furnish a market for what it produces. The capitalist produces for the whole world in competition with the capitalists of the world. In order to hold his market he must produce more cheaply than his competitor. To produce more cheaply he must have a more effective machine, and in exact proportion as machinery replaces labor the market is restricted and destroyed. This accounts for the fact that every few years we are afflicted with what is called overproduction, and we suffer all these ills because we have machinery with which we can produce in such overwhelming abundance.

Upon the average you can produce twenty times as much wealth as your grandfathers did. Why should you that are willing to work suffer for the want of it? And have you ever thought about it long enough to satisfy yourself that every system of society first appears immature, then matured, and then passes away to make room for one more in harmony with the onward march of civilization? Capitalism is only about 175 years old. We have passed through all the early stages of it. Competition has been, and is being constantly eliminated. Going forward we shall soon have industry organized upon a cooperative basis, all workers working together cooperatively in every department of activity, and thus laying the foundation gradually for a new social order and for a higher civilization than mankind has every known.

How fares the master in this system? We are taught that he is its beneficiary and that he has solved to problem of success. But take the average capitalist, subject him to ordinary examination, and you will find that he is wonderfully deficient in all those qualities that dignify and glorify manhood. I am not referring to the smaller capitalists, but to those that are full-grown. Most of you have just started your pinfeathers. Most of you are opposed to socialism. Most of you are not ready for a king. You have but little and that little not for long. We are not going to take from you what you have. Your larger competitor will tend to that and when he gets through with you, you will be ready for us. But take the full-grown capitalist. He has an abnormal brain development. He is not wise but cunning. He can see an opening for profit; he knows how to take advantage of his fellow men; he can beat you in a trade; he is very unscrupulous. But ask him a few simple questions about the history of his own country and you will find that he doesn't know as much as a schoolboy ought to know; ask him about evolution and he has never heard of it; ask him about the science of economics, or again of literature, and he knows nothing about it, nor of art nor of the sciences. He simply knows how to gouge profit out of the working class. He knows nothing about the higher enjoyments; though he lives in a palace and fares sumptuously and has a private yacht, he does not enjoy the ecstasy of the handclap of comradeship; loves no one and is loved by no one.

John Boyle O'Reilly<sup>1</sup> says [the capitalist] lives apart from the common heart of humanity; does not know the meaning of human brotherhood. Take him out into the woods, and if your ears are attuned you can hear the trills of birds making the woods vocal with their melodies, and he looks at the great monarch of the forest that towers aloft — I never see one but I want to put my arms around it and hear its heartthrobs — and when the capitalist looks at it he can tell you to a nicety how many feet of lumber it contains and how much profit this will bring in the market. He is filled with fear and dread; he knows about the pitfalls of trade, is suspicious of his fellow men, and when he appears in the streets, he tries to hide his identity.

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The Republican Party held its convention a few days ago. I would do them no injustice, but I would ask you as workingmen what they did for

you. Now your father may have been a Republican, and may have had good reasons for being a Republican. The trouble with you is that you do not think for yourself. You do not know that parties are subject to the laws of evolution, and that parties that serve a good purpose today may be out of date tomorrow. Many of you workingmen vote the Republican ticket because your fathers and grandfathers did. You imagine that you are respecting their memories. As a matter of fact you are disgracing them. There is only one way in which you can respect their memories and that is by being true to yourselves. Did it ever occur to you that you have a brain and that you should use it in your interest instead of being satisfied to use your arms in the interest of your master? A beast can fight — it takes a man to think. It is his highest and noblest characteristic.

Shakespeare said there is no darkness, but ignorance;<sup>2</sup> and there is no slavery but ignorance. The great majority of mankind have always been ignorant and this is why they have always crowned their oppressors and crucified their saviors. There is no longer any excuse for ignorance or poverty, and but for ignorance there would be no poverty. Nothing is so easily produced as wealth. All the earth consists of raw material — in every sunbeam, in every waterfall — which properly applied transmute these raw values into wealth. If there is a human being upon earth who cannot secure life's necessities, it is not due to Nature, it can not be charged upon the Almighty — it is due to man.

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The right kind of an education is the great need of this time. Are the capitalists trying to educate you workingmen? Are they not doing what they can through the politicians to perpetuate the power by which you are enslaved? You are satisfied with too little. The average worker with a wage that will keep body and soul together is content, and he is told that he is blessed to be content. I am doing what little I can to incite him to discontent. Intelligent discontent is the torchbearer of civilization. Jefferson, Payne, Otis,<sup>3</sup> Franklin, Adams — all of the revolutionists whose memories you revere, yesterday were agitators. It is a choice between agitation and stagnation. The majority said: "Let well enough alone or you'll bring trouble upon the country." They did bring trouble upon the country and it resulted in American independence, and if it had not been for their agitation, you would still be British subjects. Many are proud to call themselves the

children of the revolution, but talk to them of the revolution coming and they have chills and fever. Being now on top, they want to suspend the law of evolution, and the revolution that is coming is condemned. Why, do you suppose that we have had our last revolution? Do you suppose that the laws of evolution can be suspended by any class until at last mankind in the aggregate is released from the degrading thralldom of the ages?

The workingman has had to struggle through all the phases of his development. He was the abject slave of ancient masters; he was the serf of feudal barons; after which he is the exploited wage worker of modern capitalists. He is to become the free man in socialism, the next stage of our advancing civilization.

There will be this difference between the impending social revolution and all others which have preceded it since the dawn of history: Hitherto in every revolution the ruling class has been overthrown by another lower, but middle, class — which then became the ruling class; but the working class can only emancipate themselves by emancipating all humanity.

As I speak here this evening about one-fifth, 20 percent, of the working class is in a state of enforced idleness. There are about 30 million of these and there are about 6 million out of work. Take the coal miners in this vicinity. Many of the mines have been shut down four long months, and the miners are in a state verging on starvation. I have just been in the coal fields. I have seen the victims of this insane system. I know of what I speak. Now what do you think — and bear in mind that this condition prevails under Republican and Democratic administrations? In the past 24 years we have had 8 years under the latter and 16 under the former, and panics with enforced idleness under them both. Don't talk to me about tariff or about the currency when thousands are starving for the opportunity to work.

From ten thousand rostrums, the Declaration of Independence was read, that all men are created equal, that they have certain inalienable rights — life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. No man has the inalienable right to life unless he also has the inalienable right to work. Whatever stands between him and work must be removed. Now why don't the thousands of miners work? Is it because they are not willing to work? No, because they are denied it. I have already stated it. There is no demand for their labor-power. They themselves are in a state of degeneracy. They will become tramps and criminals. It is in this way that criminals are created — all the way from petty larceny to homicide.

How are you workingmen going to make it possible for you to have the inalienable right to work? In just one way. First of all, you must recognize your interests — you must unite. The very hour you unite there is nothing between this earth and the starry heavens that can stand between you and emancipation; but as long as you divide upon election day, as long as you vote for the capitalist ticket, you will be responsible and you must accept the consequences. It is you who must change this. It will not be changed until you do change it. You have a part in this great struggle — every workingman who has a conception of the duties he owes himself, his country, and his family, and everyone who sympathizes with the workingman and his class and there are many of them and I pay to them the humble tribute of my respect. They are only a few, but they are so highly organized, spiritually and intellectually, that they espouse this cause, this cause that is ultimately the cause of humanity.

I was in New York last month and attended a meeting there of 700 people, called together by 210 ministers of the gospel, representing all of the various denominations, and in that meeting these ministers, who are the true followers of the Nazarene, the carpenter, these ministers appealed to their people to vote the Socialist ticket this fall.<sup>4</sup> There never was such an awakening in all the history of the United States.

We are just beginning to understand the true meaning of civilization. We are just beginning the first anthem of real freedom. Many here, men and women, are joining this conquering movement. Many of understanding are rallying to the standard of emancipation. Don't think the Socialist Party wants your property. Disabuse your mind of that vagary. You cling to a grain of sand and you become an insect and you are afraid you will lose it...

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Now the Socialist Party is differently organized than any other party in the field. It has no corruption fund. It has never bought a vote and never will. If it could buy the vote of Oklahoma with a 5-cent piece and sweep into power this fall, it would scorn to do so. Socialists know that socialism can't come until the people are ready for it, and the people will be ready for it as soon as they know what it is. Most of you have everything to gain and nothing to lose, and from a true rational point of view, you have everything to gain and nothing to lose. No one has any reason to fear it.

The two old parties organize just before election. They represent the predatory interests and they both get their campaign funds from the same interests. Even Mr. Bryan's party got \$15,000 from Thomas Ryan,<sup>5</sup> the notorious traction manipulator in New York. Mr. Bryan says he knew nothing about it, but his party not only accepted it, but sent a committee to New York to get it. That is the party I am discussing and not the individual. Do they rely upon the intelligence of the people? Don't they do all they can to keep the people ignorant? Don't they make campaign funds just as large as they can for the purpose of debauching the people? The corruption funds flow out like lava. If the Democratic Party is the [more] scrupulous, it is because it can't raise the same amount. As a rule the big capitalists belong to the Republican Party and the little ones to the Democratic Party. The little ones would be big; they stand for the same principle and I defy anyone to show me the slightest difference so far as the workers are concerned.

The middle class is being ground to atoms in the mill of capitalism, and the Democratic Party that is the expression of the middle class is in a state of disintegration. What is "Democratic" is the great question. A few days ago Mr. Parker offered a resolution before the Democratic convention. At once there was an uproar. It was charged that in glorifying Mr. Cleveland he was outraging Mr. Bryan.<sup>6</sup>

In due time the big capitalists will find their way into the Republican Party, and the little ones finally into the Socialist Party. We will have but one party representing the capitalist class and the Socialist representing the working class. They will have the dollars and we will have the votes.

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In the last session of Congress Senator LaFollette named one hundred capitalists who absolutely control our industrial and political life. No man is appointed to the courts unless his record is perfect — not only his ability, but his willingness to obey; and every time the decisions are in favor of the capitalist class and against the working class.

A striking case was that in which William Howard Taft issued one of the first injunctions that paralyzed organized labor. This same gentleman appears on an anti-injunction platform appealing to workingmen for support. Can you think of anything more grotesque? And but for the injunctions he issued I would not be the candidate for the presidency on the

Socialist ticket. A certain engineer refused to haul certain cars, preferring rather to quit work. This man was arrested and sent to jail. Bear in mind that he was a free-born American citizen and he simply exercised the right to quit work. The Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers appealed his case to the supreme court. The supreme court affirmed this decision — that a workingman hasn't the right to quit work unless his employer is willing.

In another case, where a workingman had been discharged for belonging to a union, he took the case to the lower court, and then to the supreme court and the supreme court decided that the company had a right to discharge him and place his name upon the "blacklist" so that he cannot again obtain employment and must become a hunted vagabond until he commits suicide.

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We have 30 million wage slaves — about 7 million of these are women and about 2 million of them are children. The capitalist system wants the cheapest kind of labor. Women and children can operate the machinery and they receive just enough to keep them in working order. They say we are going to destroy the home. What kind of a home can a woman have on \$3.20 a week? Go there, if you have time to spare in this savage competitive system, go to any of the great industrial centers with their red light and slum districts. What kind of homes are these? In this miserable system the laboring man must exchange his labor-power for just enough to keep him in working order and after awhile he loses even this. He has his two hands and sinew to exchange for those things that are needed for himself and wife and three or four children; but the mills are closed down, so he leaves the home, their very humble home, where there is no paper nor pictures on the wall, and starts looking for employment that can't be found. He doesn't ride on a Pullman, but on the trucks — if he is not found — and renews his search for work. He can live only by permission. He has no tools; they are privately owned though socially used. He becomes a mendicant; his clothes become seedy; nobody knows him but the policeman. He reaches a point three or four hundred miles from home; he is a stranger in a city of thousands of human beings, famished in heart. He takes a backward look at the little cottage; he is heart-sick; he recognizes that on all of God's earth there is no one to call him to the

banquet board of nature. He is a tramp. It is but a stop from this condition into crime.

That is why we are having great and growing armies of tramps — why all our penitentiaries are filled to overflowing; why the insane asylums must be more numerous; why crime is rampant. In all the centers of population there are the fruits of capitalism, which has outgrown its usefulness, and ought to be abolished, not only in the interest of the working class, but in the higher interest of all mankind. It is this which constitutes the issue in this election, and on this issue we make our appeal to you. There are mill hands, factory hands, farm hands — all hands and no head. They want you to run to hand. You remember Lincoln said that if God Almighty had meant for some men to do all the eating and others all the working, he would have produced some all mouth and others all hands.<sup>7</sup> They don't want you to think. When they think, they think in their interest, and when you think it will be against their interest. I mean their so-called interest. Ultimately it will be in their interest.

Their grandchildren will rear monuments to where you sleep. You are in the majority, but you do as others do. They tell you that socialism would destroy your individuality. That would be miraculous — that would be a miracle! Because you have none. No man has any individuality who has got to bet for permission to live. They charge us with destroying what doesn't exist. That is true of the charge of destroying the home. The great majority have no homes.

Socialism is going to make them masters of the machinery they work with so that they will have the inalienable right to work. Then work will be as elevating as it is now degrading. It is well enough for you in an office to talk about the dignity of labor, but let me put you in a sawmill or mine and then ask you what you think about the dignity of labor — under a boss who treats you as a menial and then ask you what you think about your individuality. If you marry a nice girl, you have got to reduce her to your level if she is not already there. The wage slave feels his insecurity. It is bad enough to be a single man when you are out of work; it is infinitely worse if you are married. Every man ought to have a family and taste the sweets of home where the noblest aspirations are induced.

These things don't exist and never will under capitalism. Every charge capitalism makes against us it is guilty of itself. It is claimed that socialism is a dream, that it is impossible; and so long as you think it is impossible, it will be; but when you think that you can make a machine and then own

it, we will have socialism. Your grandfather owned the tools he worked with. You don't though you produce twenty times as much as your grandfather could. Every man ought to have abundance and every man would have abundance if the tools that are socially used are socially owned. That is the issue that divides the socialists from the capitalists.

How are you going to effect this change? It is so easy that a child can grasp it. You have a majority of the votes. Read the Socialist platform. That party is the only party that declares that when it succeeds to power it will transfer the machinery of production to the people. It can be done legally and peacefully if the capitalists will submit to the majority, and if they don't, it will come anyway. Now when the Socialist Party succeeds to power it can legally relieve Rockefeller and Vanderbilt of their burdens. They will not have to relieve themselves. We will have to do that for them. Their great-grandchildren will thank us. We can afford to wait.

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What can we promise you? Ostracism and persecution. We can promise you more. We promise you victory in the interest of the human race. I want to see the time come when every human being on this earth is free. I want to see the time when human society is reconstructed — not by destroying private property, but by establishing private property, making it possible for every human being who works to possess the fruits of his labor, making it possible for him to live a complete life. We don't propose a public ownership of pictures and musical instruments. These are privately used. We propose the common ownership of the things collectively used. When industry has culminated in the private monopoly, such as the oil monopoly, we will socialize it.

Now can we run it? It is running itself now. When Rockefeller was put on the witness stand he testified that he had nothing to do with the oil business for seven years. He might just as well live upon another planet. Here's a full-fledged capitalist. We propose to deprive him of his taxing power. Socialism will transfer this social enterprise to the people. It is already cooperative and self-operative, since competition is eliminated. Society will take these enterprises and operate them for the benefit of all. First the firm, then the corporation, then the trust — next the people. Society is to succeed the trust. As soon as we have socialized these trusts, we will give work to all. Then the working day need not be more than four or

five hours long. What it will be, will be determined by society. Society could not be given a perfected machine now, but they are being educated and when evolution has completed its work, revolution will come as the climax. There need not be a drop of bloodshed.

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<sup>1</sup> John Boyle O'Reilly (1844-1890) was a Irish-born American poet, journalist, and writer who as a youth was active in the Irish Republican Brotherhood, the so-called Fenians. As a result of his activity in the Irish revolutionary movement he was sentenced by the British to twenty years of penal deportation to Australia, from which he escaped to America.

<sup>2</sup> Allusion to *Twelfth Night* (c. 1601) by William Shakespeare, Act 4, Scene 2.

<sup>3</sup> James Otis, Jr. (1725-1783) was a Massachusetts lawyer, pamphleteer, and politician. A friend of Thomas Paine, Otis was active in the political movement against the Stamp Act and penned the famous slogan "Taxation without representation is tyranny."

<sup>4</sup> Debs spoke to the National Conference of Christian Socialists on May 31, 1908, at Carnegie Hall in New York City. Others delivering addresses to the gathering included Edmond Kelly, former counsel to the American legation at Paris; E.E. Carr, editor of *The Christian Socialist*, and former Socialist Party national organizer Charles H. Vail.

<sup>5</sup> Thomas F. Ryan (1851-1928) was one of the wealthiest people in America, a multimillionaire who founded his financial empire in public transportation. Ryan established the forerunner of the Metropolitan Traction Company in 1883, soon dominating street railroad service in New York City. He was also a founder of the American Tobacco Company and further expanded his vast holdings with the 1905 purchase of the Equitable Life Assurance Society, one of the three biggest insurance companies in America.

<sup>6</sup> Former President Grover Cleveland was associated with the Democratic Party's conservative "Bourbon" wing; William Jennings Bryan with its progressive faction.

<sup>7</sup> Allusion to a speech made by Lincoln in Cincinnati on Sept. 17, 1859. Lincoln's exact words were reported as "I hold that if the Almighty had ever made a set of men that should do all of the eating and none of the work, He would have made them *with mouths only*, and no hands; and if He had ever made another class that He intended should do all the work, and none of the eating. He would have made them *without mouths*, and with *all hands!*"