

Woman's Day is Dawning (February 1911)

The struggle of the last fifty years or more, begun by a few noble pioneers who are now at rest, for the political enfranchisement of the women of this country, is now rapidly coming to fruition. In five states of the union women now have the unqualified franchise, Washington having been added to the number in the last election.¹ The rest will now follow quite rapidly for the battle against ignorance and prejudice is practically won and the remaining strongholds will soon fall before the onslaughts that are being made upon them.

This great change in public sentiment required many years of persistent agitation, the beginning of it fraught with the greatest difficulties, but this work has been so completely done and the public mind so thoroughly permeated with the idea of sex equality that the remaining states will surrender to the inevitable as rapidly as the most enthusiastic suffragist could desire.

The campaign in the state of Washington was a peculiarly interesting one on account of the woman question which was happily determined in favor of equality and progress by a triumphant majority which proclaimed the end of the long night of political superstition and the dawn of woman's day on the Pacific coast.

It was the good fortune of the writer to have a small part in the campaign in the state of Washington and it was a privilege to him at the meetings addressed by him to raise his voice in behalf of the amendment clothing women with the elective franchise.² All these meetings, with an exception, were held in the largest halls available, and all were crowded to the doors. At most of them the capacity was inadequate and many were unfortunately barred for the want of room. The women were largely in evidence, almost equal in numbers to the men.

The leaders of the suffrage movement are among the most energetic workers for these meetings. Most of them were non-socialists, but they appreciated the fact that the Socialist Party was the only woman's party and hence gave its meetings their enthusiastic support.

Before reaching Washington on the westward trip letters were received from the state officials of the suffrage movement, asking us to speak for the suffrage amendment and of course the assurance was promptly given that we would do so with pleasure. After the election

these officials did not fail to send us their written acknowledgement, including expressions of appreciation from the state committee, to which were added a number of letters from individual members who assured us not only that the Socialists were the principle factor in carrying the day, but that their close contact with the Socialists in the campaign had resulted in a decided change of attitude toward the socialist movement. I do not in the least doubt that a great many of these women who have hitherto been opposed to socialism will now become quite as ardent in their support of the party as they have been in the advocacy of woman suffrage.

In the western states, where women vote, they are conspicuously in evidence at Socialist meetings and in all the activities of the movement. And in this regard at least the suffrage is a decided advantage to our cause.

But the mere franchise in itself is but the beginning of the agitation required to secure it; not the end, but only one of the means to the end. After women have the franchise they are on an equality with men, politically speaking, and that is saying but little for them. The work of education must then be energetically pushed that the women who have the franchise may know how to make proper use of it. Unless they have the intelligence required for this it will do them but little if any good beyond the undoubted advantage it will be to them in acquiring that very intelligence.

At the bottom of the suffrage question and every other economic and political question is the class question and it is this that must be clearly understood before any substantial progress can be made toward woman's actual emancipation. The great masses of women are in and of the working class, and like the great masses of men who are in the same class, are exploited under capitalism of what they produce, held fast in economic bondage, and decorated with the badge of social inferiority. These working women who constitute the majority must make common cause with the workingmen who are also greatly in the majority; their economic and political activities must be in harmony and they must express themselves in a united voice through the political party and the economic organization which stand uncompromisingly for, and fearlessly proclaim, their working class interests.

The franchise has proved beyond all doubt a factor in awakening woman to the new activities which are the necessary outgrowth of her position in modern industrial society, and in the opening to her of this door of opportunity she realizes as never before the possibilities that now

lie before her and feels stimulated to rise from her drudgery and dull indifference and join her sisters and brothers in the great struggle to make this a habitable world.

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¹ Washington suffrage vote INSERT FOOTNOTE HERE

² Debs made a six-week tour of the Great Plains and the Pacific Northwest in conjunction with the fall 1910 Socialist election campaign. He addressed 3,000 people in Spokane (Oct. 19); 2,000 in Everett (Oct. 20); and a crowd of between 3,000 and 4,000 in Seattle (Oct. 21); as well as smaller gatherings in Aberdeen (Oct. 26), Bellingham (Oct. 27), and Sedro-Woolley (Oct. 28).