

The Red Sea of Socialism: Campaign Speech at Convention Hall, Philadelphia (September 28, 1912)

Comrades and Fellow-Workers:—

Never in my life has it been my privilege to stand in the presence of such a vast congress of people and to address such a perfectly magnificent audience. This must be the Red Sea of socialism, beyond which lies the promised land. Compare this for a moment to the Dead Sea of capitalism — the one surging with living, joyous, powerful, aspiring humanity; the other seething with humanity, crushed, bleeding, despairing, and powerless. Only they can appreciate in the fullest measure this marvelous outpouring of the people under the inspiration of socialism who were pioneers in the movement in the days of long ago when socialists were few and far between, when they were regarded as insane fanatics.

Recalling those pioneers, there is one who stands out by reason of his rare mental endowments, his indomitable courage, his unflinching strength and intuition. Death has stilled the tired heart of Fred Long,¹ his worn out body has been laid away, but his soul is in this great demonstration here tonight. Fred Long was in the true sense of that term a pioneer of progress. He was a pathfinder in the wilderness. He was an evangel of the new civilization. He was a herald of the dawn. It required some moral courage to be a socialist in his day. He fought a good fight. He did not live to see his dream realized. It is but fitting that we who have survived him bear witness to his memory.

I can feel, I can hear, and I can see the approach of the impending social revolution that is to sweep capitalism and wage-slavery out of existence and usher in the commonwealth of the working class — the Socialist Republic. Each passing day makes clearer the battle, and this year is to mark as never before the awakening of the working class, the rise of the Socialist Party. This is to be a historic campaign in the United States. Never before have so many men severed the affiliation of party lines; and never before was there such a realization of political affairs.

The system under which we live has fulfilled its historic mission. It has outgrown its usefulness and today upon every hand we behold the unerring signs of change. The Socialist Party is the only party that has a live issue in this campaign. Almost everyone is talking socialism this year and socialism is the only thing worth talking about in this campaign.

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When the Republican Party met in convention in the city of Chicago I happened to be there. I had occasion to see the delegates at short range. I saw the prosperous politician, the capitalist, the officeholder, the office seeker, the gentleman of leisure — but I saw no worker. They were conspicuous in their absence. the very personnel of this convention marked it as the convention of a capitalist class party.

The same was true of the Democratic convention in the city of Baltimore. The same gentlemen were in attendance — the same absence of the workers. The same was true of the so-called Progressive convention that met in Chicago. No workingmen there nor women. The truth is that these three parties are three parts of the one and same capitalist party and no matter which one will be elected there will be no change in the condition of the workers.

There was a fourth convention this year held by the Socialist Party in Indianapolis — the only party that represented a dues-paying membership; the only party organized, financed, and managed by the workers in the real interest of the workers; the only real live party, the only progressive party.

Tell me who finances a party and I will tell you who controls that party — that is the test. The Republican and Democratic and Progressive parties are all financed from the same sources. They stand for the same capitalist system. they stand for the exploitation of the workers. They stand for wage-slavery. These parties are not your parties. What have they ever done for the workers?

When Mr. Taft was nominated by the Republican Party it was soon announced that he would be backed and supported by John D. Rockefeller and John Pierpont Morgan. When Mr. Wilson was nominated by the Democratic Party it was announced that he would be supported and backed by Thomas F. Ryan of the Tobacco Trust and Roger P. Sullivan of the Chicago Gas Company. When Mr. Roosevelt was nominated by the Progressive Party it did not take long to learn that he was to have the financial support of George W. Perkins, Mr. [Cyrus] McCormick of the Harvester Trust, and of Frank Munsey of the Eastern Newspaper Trust. The truth is that all of these trusts are backing and supporting the Republican, Democratic, and Progressive parties in their own interest. Is there anyone foolish enough to suppose that the trust magnates are going to

finance political parties for the benefit of the workers? How perfectly absurd! These men are in politics on their own account.

What is a party? Simply an expression in political terms of the economic interest of those who belong to it. The only difference between these three parties is that they are financed and supported by different groups of the predatory interests. Otherwise there is absolutely no difference between them.

On the other hand, the Socialist Party avows itself to be the political expression of the interests and of the aspirations of the workers. It makes its appeal direct to them. They are beginning to understand that this is their party, and this accounts for the fact that socialism is spreading rapidly, that socialism is making such stupendous progress, all over this country. The workers are in the very great majority, and the Socialist Party is organized regardless of nationality, creed, color, or sex. Their interests are absolutely identical. All they have to do is to unite, to act together in their interests, to develop their economic power and their political power, and when they do this there is nothing between each and the sky that can stand between them and their complete emancipation.

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Within the last forty years the workers have organized the greatest political movement in all the history of mankind. Within that time they have developed the international socialist party, the greatest political party in the world — the party that has already cast more than 10 million votes, that has 50 million loyal, devoted adherents, who are to be found in all the zones that girdle this globe.

Here let me say that we live in the most highly favored land on earth. We have all the raw materials in abundance. We have the most marvelous productive machinery in the world. We have millions of workers who are ready to apply their labor to that machinery to produce an abundance for everyone. And notwithstanding this, more than one-tenth of our entire population are in a state of chronic pauperism.

There are 30 million wage-workers in the United States at present. Six million of these are women, two million are children. You do all the useful work. You make all the sacrifice of health, of life and limb, producing wealth in fabulous abundance. You support the government. You create and serve all civilization. Without you every wheel would cease to turn, progress would be paralyzed. Without you civilization would perish from this earth. And yet you are the lower class, the subject class. The

brand of inferiority is on your brow. You are in industrial servitude and that is where the worker has been since the dawn of history.

In the ancient world for thousands of years they were abject slaves, the property of their master and of their lords. In the Middle Ages they were the serfs who were not allowed to own a square inch of soil. They were treated as beasts of burden. The feudal aristocrats said they were authorized by divine right. "It is ordained of God that these inferior beings shall work and produce that we may enjoy all the bounties of this earth." And they believed the feudal system would last forever. But they knew nothing about the laws of social evolution. These forces outgrow the forms which contained them. Gradually they are thrown off; then a new system comes into existence. A new social order is established and a new civilization is born. This is the unfailing law of social development.

When at last the feudal system had fulfilled its mission and outlived its usefulness, a great upheaval took place and the system under which we live today called capitalism evolved from it. And this system has been steadily developing until it has reached its climax, and now again the world trembles upon the verge of a great revolutionary change. The Socialist Party is the only party that is in line with these evolutionary forces. It is the only party that stands for the impending social change. You may hasten the day of its triumph or you may retard it just as you will, but you can no more prevent it than you can prevent the sunrise on the morrow.

Concentration and combination, based upon cooperation, are the conquering forces of this age and they are steadily paving the way to the new social order; steadily evolving from the present competitive chaos. All the forces that are playing on modern society are making for socialism. All of them, even the capitalists themselves in their mad anxiety to destroy each other in competition, are doing what they can to hasten the overthrow of their own system. Every time the big capitalists put a lot of little capitalists out of business they furnish us with a new set of recruits. There are many tonight who were violently opposed to socialism two or three years ago.

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What are the Republican and Democratic candidates discussing in this campaign that is of the slightest interest to thinking people? Read the daily reports of the interchanges between Mr. Roosevelt and Mr. Wilson, and what do you find in it? What do you get out of it? They are quibbling

over matters that are of no concern to you at all. They are careful to ignore the only issue in which you have any interest. Of course Mr. Roosevelt now poses as the champion of the common people. But we judge him not by what he promises if he gets in office, but by what he did when he was in office.

It so happens that Mr. Roosevelt has a public record. It so happens that I am somewhat familiar with that record. Nothing would suit me better than to have Mr. Roosevelt on this platform tonight, that I might have the opportunity of putting him face to face with himself. He is now for the eight-hour work day in the interest of the workers, but when he was governor of New York, he sent the soldiers to shoot the workers who were asking to have the ten-hour law enforced. Here we have a chapter from his record. It is black as a raven's wing. When he had the power to serve the workers, he proved himself to be the official of the capitalist class.

It was while he was president that he prostituted his high office by denouncing three labor leaders who were under arrest as undesirable citizens, to prejudice the public mind against them to make sure they would not escape the gallows; and this was all in the interest of the mine owners of the West who financed his campaign.

This Mr. Roosevelt is now the champion of the oppressed and down-trodden people of this country. The truth is that he is standing upon a platform, some of the planks which he denounced as treason and anarchy less than four years ago. Mr. Roosevelt nominated himself by acclamation — there was not a dissenting voice. When he was in Chicago last week, he was charged with being the candidate of the trusts. He did not attempt to deny it. He said in answer that he could prove that the majority of the owners of the Steel Trust and the Harvester Trust were supporting Taft and Wilson. He did not attempt to deny that he was being backed by the trusts, he simply charged that Wilson and Taft were also being backed by the trusts, and not one of them denies it.

We have the truth from their own lips.

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There is a class struggle between these two classes, into which society has been divided in the evolution of this system. If you are a workman and a Republican, it is only because your father was a Republican before you. If you are a workman and a Democrat, it is only because your grandfather was a Democrat. But you see all things have changed

since your grandfather lived, except his grandson. You are not doing anything in the same way that your grandfather did, except to vote as he did, and his politics are as completely out of date as the tools he used. I appeal to you to take counsel of yourself, to realize that you belong to the working class, that your place is in the Socialist Party, and when you come to that conclusion to take your place in that party where you rightly belong, you help to speed the day of its triumph.

What magnificent progress this party has made is shown by these figures: Four years ago, with a dues-paying membership of 40,000, the Socialist Party polled a vote of more than 400,000. This year we have 120,000 dues-paying members, and when the Socialist vote is cast and announce on the 5th day of November next, it will be heard all around the world.²

Fellow workers, there is nothing for you in the capitalist system. In supporting the capitalist parties you have all to lose; you have nothing to gain. In giving your support to the Socialist Party you have all to gain and nothing to lose. This party may not yet be popular. We may still, in the estimation of the eminently respectable people, be undesirable citizens, but we have become somewhat respectable during the last few years.

Theodore Roosevelt now alludes to me as “Brother Debs.”³ I do not acknowledge the new relation. I still wish to be the undesirable citizen in his eyes. If he knew me then, I know him now. I know what he stands for and what his methods are. I know he is the enemy of the workers. I know he is now trying to deceive that class to further his own selfish ambition — to get back into the White House and if possible remain there for life.

I say again that this great change is inevitable. We fight and we work. We are never impatient, never discouraged, never tired. We are compensated in full measure every step of the way. Speaking for myself, I know that the socialist movement has done infinitely more for me than I can ever hope to do for the socialist movement. When I come to these eastern cities, and when I come into the districts where the workers live, when I see the little girls that work in the sweatshops, the victims of this system, who do not live in homes that are fit for human habitation, who are but half fed, and who are born in poverty and reared in misery, who have never had a chance in life — when I see them, as I do, at meetings, when I see them deprive themselves of needed food to drop a penny or two into the contribution box, to contribute their mite to this work, when I see them and think of them and take into account the sacrifices they make, I

ams ashamed of myself. When I think of them, I receive a fresh inspiration, a new consecration to this great movement.

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And still there are those who fear that if they join the Socialist Party they will have no incentive to do their best. Allow me to say in answer that they will have a higher incentive than they have ever known in the sordid, brutalizing system in which we live today. In this system a man accumulates dollars. He may get wealth — but still, what has he that dignifies, glorifies, and ennobles mankind?

His success, if it can be called success, is secured at a price that no good man can afford to pay. He succeeds at the cost of the failure of hundreds of others. For in this system, we must fight each other, ruin and destroy each other. That is the incentive we have under capitalism and in this struggle all that is brutal in human nature is appealed to and comes to the surface.

We do not envy the so-called beneficiaries of capitalism. We would not change places with them even if they do live in palaces. They are not normally developed, mentally and morally and spiritually. Show them a great masterpiece, a painting that throbs and breaths with the genius that placed it there. They will take out their pencils and figure out how much there is in that proposition for them. They have no ideals.

When we have the industrial democracy, our interests will be mutual and not competitive. If men have a larger mental capacity, they will be placed where they may serve instead of exploit humanity. They will have all they have today, except that which is a burden and a curse. They will have in addition the love and respect of their fellow men.

We will take the great industries, place them under the supervision of trained experts. And then the railways will be operated in the interest of the people. So with the telegraph; so with the mines; so with the great mills and factories. All of these means of wealth will become the common property of all. Then we will no longer produce for the enjoyment of a few. Then we will produce to satisfy the wants of all. Then poverty will no longer trouble the race. Ignorance will disappear. We will have a real social order, a true civilization, and if you wish to see the dawn of this great change, all we ask is that you shall be true enough to take your place in the party where you belong.

There is something splendid in the working man who can think for himself. He has the moral courage to stand erect and to express his con-

viction, to be proud of himself. He may have lost his job but he has found his manhood. A fresh born power throws within his veins. He has expanded to his full proportion, he has risen to the stature of a man. You may not love him; you are bound to respect him. You may point him out with the finger of scorn. You think you know him — he knows that he knows you. He reads and he thinks and he studies and he acts for himself. He is doing what he can to achieve the economic and political solidarity of his class — and this is a splendid work to be engaged in. Make this experiment and all the latent powers within you will develop and you will write your name forever in the deeds that will live after you.

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Here let me say that this movement is a woman's movement as well as a man's movement. The women are received in the Socialist Party on equal terms with the men. We propose that women shall have every right, they shall have every privilege, and they shall have every opportunity that men enjoy, and until this be true, we have no just claim to being civilized people.

In the evolution of this system 6 million women have been torn from their homes, have been forced into industry. Here they are in the mills and factories and workshops, side by side with the men, subject to the same oppressive and degrading conditions, victims of the most cruel discrimination. Why should they not have a voice in controlling the conditions in which they are compelled to work? Why should women not have a voice in determining the environment in which their children shall be born and reared? I have never yet met a man who was ingenious enough to make an argument against woman suffrage that was worth of intelligent consideration. If women have no right, I wish you would tell me where you get the right. You have no more right to say that she shall not vote than she has to say that you shall not vote.

The Socialist Party proposes to open all the doors to women, all the avenues, so that they may freely do the work they are fitted by nature to do; that they may be economically free; that they may provide for themselves; that they may stand erect in the innate purity of their womanhood; that they may express the best and noblest that is in them. You are afraid that politics will degrade women? Then you admit that politics degrade you, and you need a change of politics.

We have no such fear. Socialist politics, that is to say, working class politics, is never involved in corruption. Every penny of the money that

is raised is used for educational purposes. We do not buy votes. We would not have a vote that could be bought — that would do us no good. We only want the vote in the hands of the man, the man of intelligence, and in the spirit of Garrison we say: “We do not equivocate, we do not excuse, and we do not retract.”

It is true that we may encounter many a defeat. But every defeat brings us nearer to our destined victory. And when it comes, as come it will and must, then at last the vision of Ingersoll⁴ will be realized:

I see a world where thrones have crumbled and kings are dust. The aristocracy of idleness has perished from the earth.

I see a world without a slave. Man at last is free. Nature’s forces have by Science been enslaved. Lighting and light, wind and wave, frost and flame, and all the secret, subtle powers of earth and air are the tireless toilers of the human race.

I see a world at peace, adorned with every form of art, with music’s myriad voices thrilled, while lips are rich with words of love and truth; a world in which no exile sighs, no prisoner mourns; a world on which the gibbet’s shadow does not fall; a world where labor reaps its full reward, where work and worth go hand in hand...

I see a world without the beggar’s outstretched palm, the miser’s heartless, stony stare, the piteous wail of want, the livid lips of lies, the cruel eyes of scorn.

I see a race without disease of flesh or brain — shapely and fair — the married harmony of form and function; and, as I look life lengthens, joy deepens, love canopies the earth; and over all in the great dome shines the eternal star of human hope.⁵

And now in closing allow me to say that I never in all my life addressed a more magnificent audience, and I thank you all for your patience and kindness from the bottom of my heart. I return my profound thanks to the comrades of Philadelphia who have given me this beautiful offering this evening.⁶ No words of mine, however carefully chose, however carefully uttered, could give adequate expression to my appreciation of this beautiful offering.

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¹ Fred Long was a printer active in the socialist and trade union movements in Philadelphia. His greatest lasting claim to fame was having converted fellow printer Ben Hanford to the socialist cause in 1893. Hanford would go on to run with Debs as the Socialist Party's nominee for vice-president in 1904 and 1908.

² Debs is correct here, speaking in round numbers. Actual paid membership of the Socialist Party of America averaged 41,751 for 1908 and 118,045 for 1912, the latter ultimately proving to be the high water mark for the 75 year history of the party. Since dues were paid in monthly and the dues stamps sold to members were purchased in bulk in advance of that by state party organizations and the semi-autonomous foreign language federations, the actual count for any given month could vary considerably; thus monthly averages are used.

³ The appellation "Brother" has long been used by participants in the trade union movement of each other in the same way "Comrade" is used by the socialist movement and "Fellow-Worker" by the Industrial Workers of the World. Debs here indicates that he does not regard the newly minted "progressive" Theodore Roosevelt as an honest collaborator in advancing the agenda of the trade union movement. Note also that by opening this speech with the words "Comrades and Fellow Workers," Debs signals his specific greetings to members of the Socialist Party and the IWW in a way that starting with "Ladies and Gentlemen" would not.

⁴ Robert G. Ingersoll (1833-1899) was a noted religious skeptic regarded as one of the best public orators of his era. In 1878 Debs had played a key role bringing Ingersoll to Terre Haute for a paid lecture, an event which gave the young Debs a brief chance to interact with Ingersoll and observe the professional lecture process. Ingersoll would remain a lifetime hero as well as an obvious career role model of Debs.

⁵ From "Decoration Day Oration" (1888) by Robert G. Ingersoll.

⁶ Debs had been presented with a loving cup as a gift.