
Milwaukee Enthused: Debs Speaks to Tremendous Meetings in the Cream City [Report of a July 7, 1897 Speech]

Unsigned article in *The Social Democrat* [Chicago], v. 4, no. 15 (July 15, 1897), pg. 4.

On Wednesday evening, July 7 [1897], an immense audience that completely filled West Side Turner Hall assembled to hear Eugene V. Debs expound the gospel of the Social Democracy. In the throng were many members of the National Educational Association, who, according to one of the daily papers, “were merely spectators,” though an unprejudiced observer could note that they took as much interest in the eloquent words of the speaker and applauded the good points as freely as “the workingmen.”

As a matter of fact the audience represented all sorts and conditions of men and women, and all were equally inspired and enthusiastic, even the prejudiced *Sentinel* remarking that the hearty and frequent applause was “proof that the speaker had lost none of his old-time popularity.”

William Beimdecke, organizer of the Milwaukee Trades Council, presided, and in a few appropriate remarks introduced Mr. Debs as the representative of the newly organized Social Democracy.

Mr. Debs was greeted with a thunder of cheers, renewed again and again. When silence was obtained he made one of those earnest, impressive addresses which carry conviction to the mind and touch the heart. It was mainly an exposition of Socialism.

There were two different systems of economics in the world which had been in conflict ever since creation. The exponents of one system — the individualists — claimed they had the right to live upon the toil of others, while the others — the collectivists — believed that “the earth and the fullness thereof” belonged to the people. The former system was in vogue today, and as one of the results

there was a vast army of men tramping through the country in search of work — and searching in vain.

Then followed a pathetic description of the tramp and the conditions that had produced him. For those who were at work — the great American workingman — Mr. Debs said he was reduced to the grade of serfdom and his family, wife, and children shared in the slavery. In the cotton mills of the South little children were toiling from morning to night for 35 cents a week.

In a striking arraignment of the trusts the speaker said that when the mines of Pennsylvania were owned by individuals, miners earned \$4 a day, but that owing to the greed of the corporations which had absorbed the small mine-owners, either by taking them into the trusts or by ruining them financially, the miners' wages had been reduced to 45 cents a day — starvation wages.

The competitive system was, Mr. Debs said, an abnormal one in this respect, that it produced millionaires and millions of mendicants, and it was also abnormal in that he who worked the hardest and did the most earned the least.

Competition makes it necessary for the successful man to destroy his competitor in self-defense. It was not "the survival of the fittest," but "the survival of the most unscrupulous," and as a natural result an honest businessman was an anomaly nowadays.

As a remedy for this pernicious system the Social Democracy was organized. Its object was to achieve the Cooperative Commonwealth, where men would stand shoulder to shoulder for the uplifting of our common humanity.

It was absurd to talk about "the ethics of commerce." In a cut-throat system there could be no ethics.

Alluding to the educational convention, then in session in Milwaukee, Mr. Debs reminded his audience that the educational system of the country was socialistic.

The colony scheme, said Mr. Debs, is a feature much misunderstood.

Some think isolated colonies are to be established. The plan is to go to some state sparsely settled, which has been favored by nature, and there mass sufficient people to get control of the state government. All this to be strictly within the limit of the law. Washington

was such a state, the officials believing in cooperation and willing to aid the plan. It is easier to get control of a state than of the United States. If we wait for the latter, men may become so degraded as to be unable to recognize the Cooperative Commonwealth when it comes. The colony scheme is a measure of temporary relief which will help out in the general plan of doing away with the competitive system.

In conclusion, Mr. Debs said what was needed was education. There was no slavery, but ignorance.

“Read! Think! Study!” A working man should be ashamed to follow leaders. They may betray him. Unions should be educational and every lodge room a college to spread economic knowledge. Ignorance is slavery. Intelligence is freedom.

Mr. Debs said he was glad to see so many women. In the Social Democracy they would be at least equal to the men. When women vote, 10,000 ills disappear. You can't buy a woman's vote with whiskey.

At the close of his address there was a renewed and vociferous applause, which was followed by resolutions endorsing the program of the Social Democracy.

Edited by Tim Davenport

1000 Flowers Publishing, Corvallis, OR · December 2016 · Non-commercial reproduction permitted.
Second Edition (First Edition was 2006).