
Socialism or Capitalism? :
Open Letter to R.S. Thompson,
Chairman of the Union Reform Party
(February 16, 1899)

[Terre Haute, IN], February 16, 1899.

R.S. Thompson, Esq.
Chairman, Union Reform Party
Springfield, Ohio.

Dear Sir:—

Your favor of the 8th inst. [Feb. 8, 1899] with enclosure has been received. I thank you for the courtesy of the invitation to attend the conference of the Union Reform Party with a view to organizing a new national party, but being a socialist and a member of the Social Democratic Party and being profoundly impressed with conviction that only through socialism is there relief from the ills of capitalism, I am not in favor of such a party as is proposed, which, in the nature of things, must be founded in compromise and cannot long survive the internal dissensions which swept its predecessors from the field and are bound to overwhelm and destroy the new party. It is either socialism or capitalism — complete freedom or total slavery. I am a socialist without a shadow of concession or compromise.

Socialism is founded on the rock of truth and while its growth is slower than that of “reform” movements that spring up spontaneously and disappear likewise, it is a sound and permanent development and no power on earth can resist its march to victory.

Apart from socialism, the initiative and referendum has little, if any, value. Under capitalism the ignorance of the mass makes it even a dangerous weapon. Had my fate been decided by it in 1894 I would have been hanged for the crime of trying to help humanity.

For these reasons I am a social democrat and will give my support to a straight socialist party to the exclusion of all other parties, especially those that make concessions and compromises to secure a union of forces.

Yours very truly,

Eugene V. Debs.

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