

The Greatest Optimists in the World (August 19, 1908)

The socialist never sees anything but victory ahead. Even where the vote is small, and outward indications might, to the average beholder, carry but little hope, the socialist sees nothing but ultimate triumph. The socialist is the greatest optimist the world has ever produced. No one but he has ever planned for a world free from want, and no one but he has steadfastly believed that his ideals would be wrought into a fact so glorious as to excel all the utopias of which man has dreamed.

And yet the socialist is not a visionary. He believes in the future just as much as the inventor believes in the machine which as yet exists only in his brain, because he has figured it out on scientific principles and *knows* that it will work. He is sure socialism will come, because he has caught the scientific meaning of history and realizes that the next step after capitalism must be socialism.

Socialism Logical Development

The truth of his position is seen in the development of the worldwide socialist movement within the past thirty years, and in the recognition of the power of socialism by thoughtful men everywhere. But the socialist is neither surprised nor unduly elated. It is precisely what Marx predicted nearly fifty years ago, and is merely the logical development of events and industry that is believed in rather than hoped for.

Non-socialists are not expected to see this. But they do begin to recognize the way events are shaping themselves. Even in 1900 the astute Mr. [Mark] Hanna predicted that the fight of the future in the United States would be between republicanism and socialism. Mr. Roosevelt, the executive of the capitalist class, has for several years lost no opportunity to attack socialism, and the fact that he has repeatedly referred to it as a menace is proof that he recognizes its growing power.

But it was not until this campaign that socialism was mentioned in the platform of a dominant party.¹ That it should be given a large place in the Republican platform this year shows that the battle lines forecasted by Mr. Hanna are already being drawn.

The fact is that the contest, even this year, is between the Republican Party and the Socialist Party. The Republican Party stands definitely for the capitalist class. It refused to grant the working class even so much as an injunction plank. But the Democratic Party is without policy and without principle. It pleads for the votes of all, without giving either class any assurance that will warrant its support.

The Democratic Party lives in the past and imagines that the middle class of small capitalists and independent farmers which existed in the days of Thomas Jefferson and Andrew Jackson is dominant today and can elevate a party to power. It has failed of power these many years because its class was disappearing, and in appealing to conflicting classes it presents a ridiculous straddle which condemns it with all.

Republican Party's Strength

But the Republican Party, frankly representing the capitalist class from the time this class overpowered the slave-owning class until now, when it has half the voters of the country working for it and depending on it for a job, and half the farmers either tenants or borrowers from it, has grown in power because it has represented something definite, even though bad, and has stood for a class that was growing instead of decadent.

The present campaign is the last political stand of the middle class, and after it is over the Democratic Party, which has been disintegrating for the past dozen years, will rapidly reach dissolution, while the Socialist Party will remain as the logical and living opponent of republicanism. And why should the two be pitted against each other? Because republicanism represents the wage system and has reduced a majority of the people of America to dependence on it for a job, while the Socialist Party is the avowed enemy of wages and profits and the exponent of every man owning himself by virtue of owning his job.

Many suppose that the present capitalist system has been dominant through all time. The fact is that it has been dominant for only the last fifty years, or during the life of the Republican Party. It is true that there was a mild commercialism before that and some worked for wages. But, as a system, it was not a controlling force.

The frontier enabled the wage-worker to escape from his position and to become what was then not inappropriately called an independent farmer. Slavery was more of a dominating force in politics and industry at

that time than was the wage-working system, for the factory system has been mainly built up since 1860. The invention of machinery was the real force that wrought this change. The machine did so much more than the individual could accomplish that manufacturing was done by the machine, and, as the machine grew, it naturally passed into the hands of the rich or the corporation. We have reached the present state of dependence on the few rich owners of railroads and manufacturing plants because these men have come to own the machine and exact their tribute by virtue of that ownership.

Socialism Workman's Champion

Socialism arises as the champion of the growing working class. Even the farmer is becoming a wage-worker to a large extent, as the machinery of the farm is growing and making it impossible for a man of small capital to work as extensively and as efficiently as can the wealthy farmer. It will, in future days, become more and more so, and as the people begin to recognize this fact, or to become, as the socialist puts it, class conscious, the capitalist system will be overpowered at the polls and the dominance of the system will be at an end.

Socialism will restore to the worker the tools of production, which will enable him to be master of his own job and to retain his full product, instead of paying tribute of profit to the owner of the machine. It will not subjugate him in the least, but, on the contrary, will make him master of his own life and earnings. So far from telling men what it will do with them and for them, it tells them that it will merely establish an industrial democracy and enable them to work out their own salvation under perfect freedom.

To this issue must things come ere long. Even now there are outward and visible signs that it is nearer than many think. The fact that the dues-paying members of the Socialist Party — those who pay the campaign and agitation expenses — are more than twice as numerous as ever before, argues, within itself, a vote for this year far above a million.² Another very hopeful sign is the fact that Socialist speakers all over the country report a far larger attendance than ever before with an enthusiasm that is plainly absent at the old party gatherings; and as more than five times as many speeches are being made as in any previous campaign, this is most

significant. Plenty of Socialists predict a Socialist vote this year of from 1,500,000 to 2,000,000, and the election of Socialist congressmen.

Ballots Not Furnished

Letters received from the *Appeal to Reason* from the recent primary election held in Oklahoma reveal a surprising condition. Some 50 precincts report that the old parties sent to the various precincts only enough ballots to supply the Socialist voters from the last election, and there were calls for ballots from 200 to 800 percent greater than the supply furnished. In many cases the Socialists wrote their ballots out and voted them. In other places, where the judges refused to accept such ballots, they contented themselves with canvassing the community for subscribers for socialist papers, and with success.

So the socialist outlook is encouraging — tremendously encouraging. Even from the standpoint of immediate results, it is cheering. But from the larger viewpoint it is sure and undeniable. It is going to capture America, and, more than that, it is going to capture the world.

Yet, if it was merely the triumph of a party, the encouragement and glory of it all would be but small indeed. It is only when we reflect that it means the freeing of all men and women from economic want and the lifting of the world to a higher and juster plane, the giving of equal opportunity to every child, and the laying of a sound economic foundation that shall give basis for a grander idealism than ever prevailed in this weary world, that the outlook for socialism is transfigured and glorified by the outlook of a regenerated earth.

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¹ A lengthy paragraph of the Republican platform of 1908 declared that “present tendencies of the two parties are even more marked by inherent differences. The trend of [the Democratic Party] is toward socialism, while the Republican party stands for a wise and regulated individualism.... In line with this tendency the Democratic Party of today believes in government ownership, while the Republican Party believes in government regulation.” The Socialist Party is not mentioned in the document.

² Socialist Party membership grew to a monthly average of 41,751 in 1908 — an increase of 42.6% over the 1907 monthly average tally of 29,270. It was thus factually incorrect for Debs to assert the total was “more than twice as numerous as ever before.” The Debs-Hanford ticket would ultimately receive just under 421,000 votes in November 1908 (2.83% of votes cast).