
Workingmen and the Social Democracy (October 28, 1897)

Boston, Oct. 28, 1897.

Never since history gives any account of man has the struggle for universal liberty and justice been carried forward with so much earnestness and determination as at the present time. Discontent and unrest have wide sway. To the most superficial observer it is evident that there is something wrong in our social and economic life, and ignore it as we may, the question is daily expanding in proportions and will not down until it has arrested the public attention and has been settled in accordance with the principles of justice.

At the bottom of this widespread unrest is the grievance of the laboring class. The marvelous inventions and discoveries which were hailed with joyous acclaim because designed to lift the burden from the bowed form of toil have not only brought no relief to workingmen, but the machine, under the control of the private capitalist, has driven thousands from employment and forced the wages of other thousands to the starvation point.

In the days of the handicraftsman, the workingmen, as a rule, were far better off than they are today. The young man mastered a trade and was then sure of steady employment at fair wages. He worked a reasonable number of hours, had some leisure for reading and recreation, and was able to lay by something for a rainy day. In that day there were no great employers of labor as we now understand that term. The modern "Captain of Industry" was unknown. The millionaire manufacturer had not yet made his appearance, nor had his corollary, the tramp. They came together, after the machine appeared upon the scene, and the minute subdivision of labor which followed. Then it was no longer necessary to be a skilled mechanic, for the machine did the work; production was indefinitely increased and cheapened, and the process of making millionaires upon the one hand and mendicants upon the other was begun in earnest, and we have today the results before us and can contemplate the picture at our leisure.

The system which has thus been evolved is known as the capitalist system. That is to say, a comparatively few individuals own the capital,

including land, factories, mines, railroads, and machinery of production, and by virtue of such private ownership control the destinies and the very lives of the toiling millions of our population Without this capital labor is helpless. The workingman is denied access to the land, and machinery of production, unless he will agree to the terms fixed by capitalists, and as they invest their capital solely to make profits, the wage allowed the workingman is, as a general proposition, no larger than is required to maintain his subsistence. And even were the capitalist disposed to allow a liberal wage, he is in competition with other capitalists, and the wage of the worker tends irresistibly downward to the point of subsistence.

To give it still further power, capital combines and centralizes, and having crushed out competition, it enjoys a monopoly which makes it the master of the industrial no less than the commercial situation. The great body of wage workers, the active producers of wealth, are at its mercy. They are essentially slaves under this system. They are compelled to accept what is allowed them, and must work under such conditions as capital imposes or pay the penalty of idleness, starvation, and death. There is no possible escape from, economic servitude under this system.

It is true that workingmen still have their political rights, but these are largely infringed, if not destroyed, by their economic dependence. Thousands of employees of corporations know that their employment depends upon their voting as their employers want them to vote, and their political independence is thus extinguished and they become the unresisting serfs of the capitalist class.

It is thus that workingmen are reduce. From this social condition flows all the vice and crime that curse the world, and the stream will widen and deepen as long as we have a commercial system which traffics in the lives of human beings and reduces all men who labor to the level of merchandise to be bought and sold in the ever-cheapening markets of the world.

I need not for the purpose of this article show how, upon the other hand, corporate capital debauches public morals by the corrupt use of a large share of its ill-gotten gains in controlling legislation and other sources of power that perpetuate its supremacy at the expense of the people and to the utter subversion of the free institutions of our country.

Let it be borne in mind that it was Jefferson who said: "We want to establish a government under which there shall be no extremely rich and no extremely poor, and under which there shall be an equitable distribution of property."¹

Who will be bold enough to aver that there is anything like an equitable distribution of property in this country? The laboring class, which alone produces, is poor, often to the verge of want and suffering, and the capitalist class, which does not live by useful labor, but by its cunning, riots in luxury and wealth.

The two hideous extremes mar and scar our civilization. They are widely separated by a yawning chasm of hate. Under such a condition there can be no social peace, and such a condition can not be a permanent one.

To meet this social disintegration the Social Democracy of America has been organized. Its motto is "Peace on earth, good will toward men."

The following is its declaration of principles and specific demands for relief:

Declaration of Principles.

We hold that all men are born free, and are endowed with certain natural rights, among which are life, liberty, and happiness. In the light of experience we find that while all citizens are equal in theory, they are not so in fact. While all citizens have the same rights politically, this political equality is useless under the present system of economic inequity, which is essentially destructive of life, liberty, and happiness. In spite of our political equality, labor is robbed of the wealth it produces. By the development of this system it is denied the means of self-employment, and by enforced idleness, through lack of employment, is even deprived of the necessities of life.

To the obvious fact that our despotic system of economics is the direct opposite of our democratic system of politics, can be plainly traced the existence of a class that corrupts the government, alienates public property, public franchises, and public functions, and holds this, the mightiest of nations, in abject dependence.

Labor, manual and mental, being the creator of all wealth and all civilization, it rightfully follows that those who perform all labor and create all wealth should enjoy the fruit of their efforts. But this is rendered impossible by the modern system of production. Since the discovery and application of steam and electric powers and the general introduction of machinery in all branches of industry, the industrial operations are carried on by such gigantic means that but few are now able to possess them, and thus the producer is separated from his products.

While in former times the individual worker labored on his own account, with his own tools, and was the master of his products, now dozens, hundreds, and thousands of men work together in shops, mines, factories, etc., cooperating according to the most efficient division of labor, but they are not the masters of their products. The fruits of this cooperative labor are, in a great measure appropriated by the owners of the means of production, to wit: by the owners of machines, mines, land, and the means of transportation.

This system, by gradually extinguishing the middle class, necessarily leaves but two classes in our country: the large class of workers and the small class of great employers and capitalists.

Human power and natural forces are wasted by this system, which makes "profit" the only object in business.

Ignorance and misery, with all concomitant evils, are perpetuated by this system, which makes human labor a ware to be bought in the open market, and places no real value on human life.

Science and invention are diverted from their humane purposes and made instruments for the enslavement of men and the starvation of women and children.

We, therefore, hold that in the natural course of social evolution, this system, through the destructive action of its failures and crises on the one hand, and the constructive tendencies of its trusts and other capitalistic combinations on the other, will annihilate the middle class, the basis upon which the system rests, and thereby work out its own downfall.

We therefore call upon all honest citizens to unite under the banner of the Social Democracy of America, so that we may be ready to conquer capitalism by making use of our political liberty and by taking possession of the public power, so that we may put an end to the present barbarous struggle, by the abolition of capitalism, the restoration of the land, and of all the means of production, transportation, and distribution, to the people as a collective body, and the substitution of the cooperative commonwealth for the present state of planless production, industrial war, and social disorder — a commonwealth which, although it will not make every man equal physically or mentally, will give to every worker the free exercise and the full benefit of his faculties, multiplied by all the modern factors of civilization and ultimately inaugurate the universal brotherhood of man. The Social Democracy of America will make democracy, "the rule of the people," a truth by ending the economic subjugation of the overwhelmingly great majority of the people.

With a view to the immediate relief of the people, all our efforts shall be put forth to secure to the unemployed self-supporting employment,

using all proper ways and means to that end. For such purpose one of the States of the Union, to be hereafter determined, shall be selected for the concentration of our supporters and the introduction of cooperative industry, and then gradually extending the sphere of our operations until the National Cooperative Commonwealth shall be established.

We also make the following specific demands for relief.

Demands for Relief.

1. The public ownership of all industries controlled by monopolies, trusts, and combines.

2. The public ownership of all railroads, telegraph, telephone, all means of transportation, communication, water works, gas and electric plants, and all other public utilities.

3. The public ownership of all gold, silver, copper, lead, coal, iron, and all other mines; also all oil and gas wells.

4. Reduction of the hours of labor in proportion to the progress of production.

5. The inauguration of a system of public works and improvements for the employment of the unemployed, the public credit to be utilized for that purpose.

6. All useful inventions to be free to all, the inventor to be remunerated by the public.

7. The establishment of Postal Savings Banks.

8. The adoption of the Initiative and Referendum, the Imperative Mandate, and Proportional Representation.

The organization is national and international, and is political as well as economic in character. No organization ever launched has met with such spontaneous and widespread favor. Less than four months old, it is already organized in 26 states in the Union.

The first national convention will be held at Chicago in June 1898. Every state and territory in the republic will be represented. A national political platform will then be formulated, and the organization will be formally launched on the waters of national politics.

The main object will be economic emancipation, that is to say, the abolition of the capitalist system of production and distribution and the substitution of the cooperative commonwealth. In a word, Economic Democracy. Then "all men will be born equal" and the Declaration of Independence will become a realized fact. Then poverty, the prolific parent of

crime, will disappear. Then all men will have equal right to labor, and they will receive the full product of their toil. Then production will be carried forward for the use and comfort of man, and not for the gratification of private greed. Then we shall have industry organized, and work, being scientifically done, will be relieved of all drudgery and the hours of labor reduced in proportion to the progress of invention — and it is then that we shall begin the march to a diviner civilization.

Published as “His View of the Workingmen” in *Boston Journal*, (Oct. 31, 1897), pg. 10.

¹ While not themselves Jefferson scholars, the editors have been unable to connect this quotation directly with Thomas Jefferson (1843-1826). It seems likely that this is a fabricated chestnut which was circulated in slightly changed variants among many progressive orators and writers of the 1890s, with one writer quoting another who had quoted another.