
The Withdrawal of Debs and What It Means

by Joseph R. Buchanan ¹

(July 2, 1898)

“What’s the matter with Debs?”

I have heard that query propounded many times during the past four weeks. Men whom I met at different places on a trip from New York to Omaha and return asked me the question. The division in the Social Democracy was in the mind of everyone who asked it, and what they really wanted to know was the cause of the split in that organization. I was in Chicago two or three days after the break occurred [June 11, 1898], and I met and talked with representative men of each wing of the divided movement. I tried hard to see Debs but failed. However, I saw two men who undoubtedly had the knowledge to speak for his



side, and they claimed the authority to do so. However, both sides agree as to the real reason of the division, and that reason is not a secret, as it was given in the daily press of Chicago at the time.

A minority of the delegates to the national convention held in Chicago [June 7-11, 1898] wanted to change the program and policy of the Social Democracy by abandoning the colonization feature. When the test vote was taken, the result showed 52 for retaining the colony scheme and 37 against. The 37 bolted the convention and Debs joined them. They afterward met and decided to reorganize the minority on educational and political lines, entirely abandoning the colony project and to go forth with a new plan for a socialistic political party.

It is understood in Chicago that Debs is going to take a much needed rest, probably taking a trip of two or three months in Europe.² He will not take part in the new organization until his return from abroad, and he may not then accept the active leadership.

The majority, which retains the name and other assets of the Social Democracy, changed to some extent the organization and will continue the agitation on lines slightly altered from those followed prior to the convention. The control of the organization is now vested in a National Executive Council of nine men. They are James Hogan, Utah; W.P. Borland, Michigan; R.M. Goodwin, Illinois; John F. Lloyd, Illinois; L.L. Hopkins, New Jersey; I. Frank, New York; C.F. Willard, Colorado; R.J. Hinton, District of Columbia, and G.C. Clemens, Kansas. While in Chicago I was given a copy of the manifesto just adopted by this council, with the request that I publish it....

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As will be seen, politics and political agitation will hereafter figure only incidentally in the program of the Social Democracy. It had been better for the movement, in the past as in the future, had it always steered clear of politics — as an organization. The recent political campaign it took part in at Milwaukee had more than any other thing to do with the split which took place at Chicago. An organization which asks the financial support of all well-disposed persons in an effort to establish an industrial enterprise must not either ally itself with an existing political party or attempt to form a new one. A cooperative movement such as the Social Democracy from its incipiency aspired to establish must be without politics — in a party sense.

All this and in detailed reasoning was laid before Debs by one of his best friends, one whose advice I thought he valued, while the Social Democracy was less than a month old. As I remember it, he was told that the well to do, from whom must come the greater part of the funds to establish such a cooperative scheme as he proposed, would not give of their means to aid in the formation of a political party. There were many rich men who sympathized with the poor and who gave liberally to charitable institutions and who would be willing, under proper guarantee, to donate to any practicable scheme that had for its object the establishment of colonies or other cooperative enterprises which would relieve the congestion of the labor centers and give the helpless poor a chance to help themselves. Hundreds of thousands of dollars could have

been raised on these lines, and Debs was the man to raise them. Notwithstanding the misrepresentations and vilifications of the plutocratic press the thoughtful and generous people of the country knew and know today that there never was a dishonest drop of blood in Eugene Debs' veins and that he is brainy and courageous. But when these men understood that the purpose was to colonize a state, capture its political machinery, and substitute socialism for the existing system they would not give up a cent.

They believe in our system of government. It isn't administered to their taste, but this they charge to men and not to the system. They admit that many wrongs have grown up under the system and that the innocent suffer through them, they admit that there is not equality of opportunity and that we are monopoly cursed, but that these are questions that should be settled by legislation and not by revolutionizing our form of government, which is "the best under the sun." While philanthropically inclined, these men are not ready to surrender their notions about government along with their gifts of money to help the victims of the errors in our system. I am not going to argue the question or whether their notions are sound or not. I am only pointing out facts and their relation to the ways and means problem of a large cooperative enterprise.

There are hundreds of millionaires in this country who would like to do something to permanently benefit the poor. They say, "If the unemployed would only go on the land, they could make a good living for themselves and assist those who did not go by relieving the congestion in the wage labor market." We know that money is required to establish men on the land, and these millionaires — or some of them — would give of their means to put men to work for themselves. Some say the millionaires would be glad of such a safety valve to relieve the tension which makes them uneasy and fearful of consequences. But when they are asked to finance a movement that is intended to overthrow "the existing order" and establish socialism as a state institution they are not disposed to jump from the frying pan into the fire. Foolish? Maybe, but you must remember we are "70 million persons, mostly fools!"³

One thing is certain, and that is that the large sum of money necessary to float the great cooperative ship designed by the Social Democracy could not be raised from among the working classes. The rich would not furnish it, and I am of the opinion that Debs' friend was right.

Millions will sympathize with Eugene Debs in what must be to him a great disappointment. No man ever worked harder in the cause of the

oppressed, no man ever brought to the aid of that cause greater abilities than his nor made heavier sacrifices than he has made. Though many will say he made mistakes, no one whose opinion has value will question his motives.

And Debs is not dead yet, not by a long shot. When he has regained the strength he laid so freely on the altar of oppressed labor, when he has recuperated and is again fit to buckle on the armor, you will see him in the front rank battling against the hosts of plutocracy, fighting, as only he can fight, where the struggle is the fiercest. He won't fool away much if any time on the new political movement that is trying to hover around his name and fame. He'll see, if he hasn't already seen, that if he wants a political party he can find it either in the People's Party or the Socialist Labor Party; that there isn't any use trying just now to split in between those two organizations. In any event, the labor movement needs the services of Eugene Debs, and, while it is to be regretted that he has separated from his old associates, there is a work for him to do,⁴ and I believe he will do it.

As to the Social Democracy without its originator and leader — well, it has a reasonable program and good men to carry it out. Its backers are firm in the faith and are determined to go ahead along the lines they have marked out. Their manifesto speaks for itself, and when I saw them in their Chicago office they were about as busy a lot of men as could be found in that bustling town. They say they mean business, and I guess they do.

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¹ Joseph Ray Buchanan (1851-19XX) was publisher of the Denver-based *Labor Enquirer* and the *Chicago Labor Enquirer* during the decade of the 1880s. He published his memoirs, *The Story of a Labor Agitator*, in 1903.

² Debs did not travel to Europe but curtailed his political activity dramatically during the summer of 1898.

³ Adaptation for America of a line attributed to Thomas Carlyle (1795-1881), who when asked the population of England famously replied, "Thirty million — mostly fools."

⁴ Two of Debs' former ARU associates incarcerated with him at Woodstock Jail in 1896 were part of the National Executive Council of the Social Democracy after the split — James Hogan and Roy M. Goodwin.