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# Speech at Canton, Ohio

[October 1900]

by Eugene V. Debs

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This demonstration is immensely significant. It bears testimony that the cause of labor is appealing as never before to the American people. As I view this inspiring scene, I am of the opinion that at last they are beginning to stand erect, that they are beginning to think, and that they will soon begin to act. They will not much longer supplicate for their rights, but will taken them, not in lawlessness but in a lawful manner. They are beginning to realize that the ballot is the key that will unlock the industrial dungeons of the world.

I do not look on the dark side of things. The world hangs today on the greatest change in human history. Today there is a worldwide struggle going forth for economic equality. If they are economic equals, they are class equals, and at that time all differences will be set aside. I am not satisfied with the existing system, one in which one human being depends upon the will of another for permission to work. The man who works by permission, tires by permission, for man cannot live without work. This man is simply an industrial slave.

A few weeks ago the American Steel and Wire trust closed down 8 of the 11 great plants and threw 7,000 men out of employment, without a word of warning. They were helpless. Observe these men are allowed to work only when it pleases their employer. No matter how many workingmen may be idle and their families may suffer, if there is no profit in their work for the trusts, the plants are closed down. Why is this? The answer is plain. They do not own the tools with which they work. There was a time when the laborer owned his tools. The boy served an apprenticeship, and with his own tools, and by his own efforts he made his living. You never heard of overproduction in those days. The laboring man had to work from 12 to 16 hours a day to supply the demand.

Then came the machine, and this was the beginning of the industrial revolution. From out of those conditions came the large army of tramps. Fifty years ago there were no tramps, neither was there any millionaire or multi-millionaire.

When the tool evolved into the machine it caused a cooperation of workingmen. The machine increased in size, the shop grew until it became a factory, and was operated by hundreds and thousands. The small employer became the capitalist, and the wage-earner became the laborer, and this was the destruction of class.

Then came the centralization of labor and an effort to control the markets of the world. Competition is practically impossible with the condition of things today. The department store has crushed out the smaller dealer, and all business is conducted on a large and increasing scale. Laboring men at once realized that their efforts were being attacked by these conditions. Then unions were organized.

The trust is not a matter of law, it is the product of economic evolution. You might as well try to send the world back to the day of the crude tool as to endeavor to do away with the trusts.

Self-interest is the mainspring of human endeavor. I never heard of a man who opposed the trust being in the trust. The trust itself is not an evil. It would do no good if you tried to regulate it. It is a choice between a joint ownership of the trust or a joint ownership of the people. All competition must culminate in centralization. He controls the market who sells cheapest, and he undermines his competitor. In order to do that he must force down the wages of his employees. It isn't a question of white labor or colored labor or man labor or woman labor; it's a question of cheap labor. Each laborer seems to be struggling the exercise his own supremacy even if it has to be over the body of his fellow laborer. This is the competitive system in which everything is done for private profit and not for human benefit.

There can be no civilization with these conditions Businessmen array themselves against one another. He is compelled to self-defense. It seems very cruel, very bitter. This accounts for the selfishness of the world. Some say, take selfishness away from the world. I say, give us the proper form of government, and there will be no selfishness. (*Applause.*)

In this competition of business the middle class is being forced down into that of the laboring men. Only a few are successful. More and more centralization and more and more trusts, and you can't stop them! The capitalistic class is growing smaller, more condensed. The laboring class is growing larger. The easier it is to produce a thing, the harder it is to get, for the reason that

it is that much harder for competition to decide on who shall produce it.

In the early days the laborer produced for himself, today he produces for wages. Today the more he produces, the more he hurts himself, and the sooner he is out of a job. Talk about overproduction! There is no overproduction. Give all the people all the shoes, hats, and clothing they can use, and there won't be enough to go around. The trouble is the laboring man has not earned enough to buy to suit his needs.

For that reason we have no home market. We go abroad for our markets. If there was no chance of a market in the Philippines there wouldn't be any soldiers in those islands today, nor would there have been any British in the Transvaal. I stand in your presence a Socialist, because I believe this earth is the inheritance of every man who inhabits it. (*Applause.*)

There was a time when chattel slavery was a prominent institution in this country. It controlled the President, the pulpit, and the press of the country. The laboring man is today continually afraid he will be forced out of work and be starved. For that reason he holds his head and is afraid to speak his own mind. The party of the laboring man does not mean to inhabit private party (sic.), but it means if it gets the chance to place the large proprietors on the market as belonging to the people and to be made a part and parcel of them.

If I should go to work in a factory in Canton I would be a slave to the factory owner. He would tell me when I could go to work and when I could not. If I am fortunate I am allowed to work. Even this privilege may be denied me. All of this right of dictation is narrowing down to a comparative few, and will be less five years from now. Your boy is left \$10,000; shrewder men than he get it away from him; he's too old to learn a trade; he takes up heavy labor and is at once at the mercy of his employer. He lives by a slender thread. It is this condition that reduces him to the mental and moral coward the laboring man is today. But there is a solution to this problem.

The speaker then told of the condition of the laboring men in the olden days in England, when the tenants as peasants worked for their landlords every day but one in the week. Continuing, he said:

The country today is approaching a change. The trusts of today have lessened the number of capitalists, the trust is there-

fore the friend of labor. What we want is centralization of business, as trusts are, but let it be cooperative centralization.

For instance, if all the presidents of all the railroads went to Marx, we wouldn't miss them; but if the 850,000 men who run these railroads ceased work, every man, woman, and child in the country would know it. Cannot the railroad men of this country as well work for themselves as for a dozen or more railway magnates who live in Europe? See what I mean? We can work for ourselves and not make material to sell, with cooperative industry. This is the idea afar off in this the closing of the 19th Century. It's going to come soon, but I am going to help it on in my weak way. We're preparing for it, it's going to come, this Socialism. I'm working for it. Every time Rockefeller crushes a competitor he is assisting more than I. The day will come when all will be crushed out, and then will come the change.

Your schools are run by the people. How would you like to have them run by Russell Sage or some other magnate as a trust? How would you like to pay two or three prices for inferior education? If the people can run a school system, can't they run a railway system? Can't you run a factory? The railways systems are robbing the people, as are the express companies. How would you like to receive these things at a fair price? The postal clerks and the school teachers do not have injunctions served on them to restrain them from obtaining their rights. Did you ever hear of the school teacher going on strike?

This country is ruled by a class, and that is not the laboring class. But we will rule the country someday, and everyone will be of our class. When every man works for himself his badge of labor will be the badges of nobility. Now the badge of labor is the badge of servitude. In the society of the future we shall all be equals. Socialism is paving the way for it. It is coming day by day, just as sure as the rivers are flowing to the ocean. I can see the vision of it in the far distance. I can see industrial harmony and social fellowship working together. This is Social Democracy, the only real democracy. The prisons will be emptied and the army of tramps dispersed. Women will be the equal of men and they will work side by side. The day is coming when workingmen shall be rewarded for their efforts, and the right will win.

*Edited by Tim Davenport*

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