

Socialism's Steady Progress (March 7, 1903)

The returns of the national election last fall revealed an unexpected factor, a new force, as it were, in American politics. The large and rapid increase in the socialist vote was a surprise to the nation. In the short space of two years the voted leaped from about 130,000 to almost 400,000, and this at a time when "prosperity" was the dominant issue and "let well enough alone" the slogan of the campaign.

The significance of this vote lies not so much in its size as in its character, since the socialist movement is essentially revolutionary, and the Socialist Party, unlike the Greenback, Populist, and other parties, to which it has been likened and which sought simply to "reform" the present economic system, is unequivocally committed to the abolition of capitalist production and the substitution of the cooperative commonwealth.

There are many who look upon the rapid rise of socialism as the ebullition of a passing hour, an ephemeral growth not at all calculated to menace the well-established political and economic regime of the time. They have not been critical students of the past, nor are they more than superficial observers of the present transition period in which industrial evolution is transmuting competitive small capital into centralized cooperative capital and recruiting isolated workers into industrial armies, the forerunner of a new economic system and a higher order of civilization than this earth has ever known. Such astute politicians as Mark Hanna see it. Said he: "The great political struggle of the future will be between the Republican Party and the Socialists." He is right.

Rev. Lyman J. Abbott, the Brooklyn divine, can see it. Just after the late election he said: "Socialism is inevitable."

J. Pierpont Morgan can see it. According to a late issue of the Springfield (Mass.) Republican, he said: "We are simply organizing industry for the people, and sooner or later they are bound to take possession."

This is the trend, and socialism, the political expression of it, can no more be restrained than the evolution that brought it into existence.

Where modern industry develops, socialism is bound to generate. This is as true of Indiana as of Massachusetts. Production on a large scale is the

life preserver of the capitalist. This means centralization of capital, and this means the trust. It also means destruction to the small capitalists, and hence the vain cry against the combine — the protest of the past against the future.

Listen to what Karl Marx, the great economic philosopher and prophet, said 55 years ago:

The essential condition for the existence, and for the sway of the bourgeois class, is the formation and augmentation of capital; the condition of capital is wage-labor. Wage-labor rests exclusively on competition between the laborers. The advance of industry, whose involuntary promoter is the bourgeoisie, replaces the isolation of the laborers, due to competition, by the revolutionary combination, due to association. The development of modern industry, therefore, cuts from under its feet the very foundation of which the bourgeoisie produces, and appropriates products. What the bourgeoisie therefore produces, above all, are its own grave-diggers. Its fall and the victory of the proletariat are equally inevitable.ⁱ

What we observe today upon every hand are simply signs of economic transformation, and socialists interpret them to mean that the present competitive system has about fulfilled its mission, and that, like the feudal system from which it sprang, it must soon give way to another, more compatible with the onward march of civilization.

A little over a century and a quarter ago the colonists were compelled by the pressure of events to declare their political independence. The day is near when the people will be compelled to declare their industrial independence.

The combines and trusts are doing their work in converting competition into cooperation and laying the foundation for the industrial public. The vast army of working men are being forced into political and industrial solidarity, and every clash between them and their exploiters hastens the end of wage-slavery.

The recent strike of the miners brought the class struggle into bolder prominence than it had yet been revealed to the country. What the [coal strike] commission may or may not do is of little consequence to the miners, for, if the wage is increased the amount will be added to the cost of production and the living expense will absorb the wage as before; but in the struggle the eyes of hundreds of miners and other workmen were

opened to the fact that they have identical interests as a class, just as the coal barons have identical class interests, and with this fresh-born conviction they went to the polls on election day and voted for working class candidates, standing on a working class platform, and it is this that accounts in large measure, for the rapid increase in the Socialist vote in Pennsylvania and nearly all the other states of the Union.

Every combine increases the momentum and hastens the end. Every injunction is a lubricant to the machinery.

Industrial and commercial competition have had their day. The small tools used by individuals have become mammoth machines operated by armies. Production has been socialized; the means of production will have to be. Fifty thousand steelworkers will not forever permit Andrew Carnegie to take their product upon the pretext that the tool they use is his “private property,” and that the product, therefore, belongs to him.

The coal mines of Pennsylvania are as necessary to modern life as the sunlight and atmosphere. So are the railroads and telegraph and telephone. So are the oil and sugar refineries, steel mills, tanneries, and all the rest of these agencies as soon as they have destroyed competition and monopolized the field.

Private ownership of the centralized means of production and distribution — an industrial despotism, or collective ownership and an industrial republic? It must be one or the other — which? History leaves no room for doubt.

What “the people” want they take. The trouble is that they have been too patient and too modest, but they do finally act, and one of these days they are going to realize that this earth is theirs, and then they will take possession of it in the name of the human race.

If the triumphant and defiant capitalist insists upon precise and detailed information as to how the people are to come to their own, he may, with profit, consult the late feudal baron of Europe and the recent slave-owner of the United States.

Socialism is the scientific and historic fulfillment of the law of social and economic progress. It is indeed inevitable, and the only danger, as Sprague has said, is in obstructing it.ⁱⁱ

Victor Hugo uttered the noble prophecy that the twentieth century would abolish poverty. Socialism will fulfill that prophecy. Whatever may be said of the past, the present with all its marvelous wealth-producing

agencies can plead no excuse for the poverty and misery that scourge the multiplied millions of the earth.

Industrial democracy will wrest the earth from its exploiters and its vast and inexhaustible storehouse will yield abundance for all. The growth of socialism is the promise of freedom and brotherhood — the radiant herald of the dawn.

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ⁱ Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party* [1848]. Terre Haute, IN: Debs Publishing Co., July 1901; p. 23. Reprinted in *Marx-Engels Collected Works: Volume 6: Marx and Engels, 1845-1848*. New York: International Publishers, 1976; p. 496.

ⁱⁱ In the preface to *Socialism from Genesis to Revelation* (1893), Rev. Franklin Monroe Sprague (1841-1926) wrote: "Socialism being the product of social evolution, the only danger lies in obstructing it. Evolution is a normal development, a growth; revolution is a creation. To obstruct evolution is to invite revolution."