

The Great Game of Politics:
Speech at Chicago Coliseum
[excerpt]
(December 6, 1903)

I stand in your presence this afternoon a Socialist — class-conscious, revolutionary, uncompromising. I have little time and no use for what is commonly called reform. you cannot reform rottenness. The only reform of the capitalist system which is possible is overthrow and destruction. Capitalist politics are essentially corrupt and demoralizing. Pick up your daily newspaper — it is a chronicle of crime. What is the status of the workingman in the present government? Has he a voice loud enough to be heard? As a matter of fact he is completely ignored for the reason that he is not yet conscious of his conquering power.

The Republican Party is in absolute power in the interest, we are told, mainly of the working class, the producers of wealth. The Democratic Party is not only dead, but in an advanced state of decomposition. But it will not be permitted to disintegrate entirely. It still has a mission. The time has come to shove in a Democratic administration because a panic is due, and the panic must of course fall upon the Democratic jackass, and then we will hear the old stereotype cry, “That is what you get for turning out the Republican Party. Give us eight more years of Republican rule.”

But there is an ever-increasing number of workingmen in this country who can no longer be deceived.

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The politician on the eve of any election tells you that you are a sovereign citizen. You are nothing of the kind. In the present system you are simply labor-power, merchandise, bought in what they call the labor market as if you were hair, hide, bone, or any other commodity subject to the law of demand and supply. The more labor-power and the less demand, the lower your wages. The lower your wages, the less you can consume. You are always in competition with each other — men, women, and children — to sell your labor-powe to the woners of the machinery. You cannot compete against them with your pare hands. You have got to sell them your labor-power.

At this point it is pertinent to ask, what is labor-power? Labor-power is human energy. Labor-power is life, or as sacred as life itself. Looking backward over the past 40 years we read of the auction block and the slave pen. We see a human being with a throbbing heart and an immortal soul; we see him placed upon the auction block in public, his teeth inspected and his body examined to see if he is sound. He is then torn from his wife and children and sold to the highest bidder.

We stand aghast as we contemplate the fact that this auction block existed for 200 years upon American soil. The time will come when the world will again take a backward look and stand horrified as it contemplates the harder spectacle of the entire working class flung between what is called the labor market, where the labor-power of human beings is sold every day and every hour, year in and year out, by the lowest bidder.

You expect to reform such a system. I ask you: How? You punish crime, but you produce it a hundredfold. We socialists do not propose to mend this system; we propose to put an end to it, and that is the reason we are appealing to you this afternoon, not to accept our philosophy unthinkingly, not to subscribe to our principles without investigation.

We are appealing to you to preserve your mental integrity, your moral rectitude; we are appealing to you to think for yourselves. You have been satisfied to do your thinking by proxy. It is a thousand times better for you workingmen and workingwomen to spend your time in cultivating self-reliance. Stop crawling in the dust. Stand erect. See how tall you are in the sunlight. Brush the dust of servitude from your knees. Hold high communion with yourself.

You are a worker. The first thing necessary for you to understand is that you are bound irrevocably to every other worker in the country. As individual workingmen you are ground to atoms, you are reduced to slavery, and you are at the mercy of the masters. When you unite, however, there will be twelve of you for every capitalist. You are fighting them with your stomachs. We Socialists want you to fight them with your brains.

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The workingmen are beginning to realize that if they would emancipate themselves from the degrading thralldom of the ages they must unite upon the economic field and upon the political field, but above all things they must unite. The solidarity of the working class is the supreme demand of the hour.

There are some so-called leaders of labor who favor solidarity upon the economic field, but who are opposed to it on the political field. They are not in fact union men. They lack the vital, essential principle of true unionism. They lead the working class backward, not forward. They are in alliance, active or passive, with the capitalist class.

Samuel Gompers, president of the American Federation of Labor, said the other day that he had read socialism in two languages. He had better have understood it in one. he is opposed to politics in the union. He knows very well that when politics comes into the union he will go out of the union. He and Mark Hanna will solve the labor question if you working-men will let them alone, but when it is solved in their way it will not be solved in your way.

The capitalist press united in pronouncing the coal strike the greatest victory ever achieved by the working class. It is true that their wages were increased 10 percent. It is also true that their living expense increased from 15 to 20 percent. The board created by the commission made Carroll D. Wright, the national labor commissioner, umpire. Every single solitary question submitted to that tribunal was decided against the striking miners with but one exception, and that but a nominal exception.

The corporations are in absolute control in those coal fields — bleak, barren, desolate beyond the power of language to describe. There is an army of 150,000 human beings miners of coal, in a state of abject slavery, from which their is no escape under the capitalist system. I have been in those mines again and again and I know whereof I speak. I have heard the echo of the pit that sounded like muffled drums beating funeral marches.

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