
Open Letter to the Members of the Socialist Party, May 17, 1908 by Eugene V. Debs

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Comrades:—

The honor of the Presidential nomination has come to me through no fault of my own. It has been said that some men are born great, some achieve greatness, and some have greatness thrust upon them.¹ It is even so with what are called honors. Some men have honors thrust upon them. I find myself in that class. I did what little I could to prevent myself from being nominated by the convention now in session at Chicago, but the nomination sought me out, and in spite of myself I stand in your presence this afternoon the nominee of the Socialist Party for the Presidency of the United States. Lon, long ago I made up my mind never again to be a candidate for any political office within the gift of the people. I was constrained to violate that vow because when I joined the Socialist Party I was taught that the desire of the individual was subordinate to the party will, and that when the party commanded it was my duty to obey.

There was a time in my life when I had the vanities of youth, when I sought that bubble called fame. I have outlived it. I have reached that point when I am capable of placing an estimate upon my own relative insignificance. I have come to realize that there is no honor in any real sense of that term to any man unless he is capable

¹ The reference is to William Shakespeare, *Twelfth Night* (c. 1601), Act 2, Scene 5.

of freely consecrating himself to the service of his fellow men. To the extent that I am able to help those who are unable to help themselves, to that extent and to that extent alone, do I honor myself and the party to which I belong. So far as the Presidency of the United States is concerned, I would spurn it were it not that it conferred the power to serve the working class; and he who enters that office with any other conception prostitutes and does not honor that office.

Opposed to the Ethic of the Jungle.

I am opposed to the system of society in which we live today, not because I lack the natural equipment to do for myself, but because I am not satisfied to make myself comfortable knowing that there are thousands upon thousands of my fellow men who suffer for the barest necessities of life. We were taught under the old ethic that man's business upon earth was to look out for himself. That was the ethic of the jungle, the ethic of the wild beast. Take care of yourself, no matter what may become of your fellow man. Thousands of years ago the question was asked: "Am I my brother's keeper?" That question has never yet been answered in a way that is satisfactory to civilized society. yes, I am my brother's keeper. I am under a moral obligation to him that is inspired, not by any maudlin sentimentality, but by the higher duty I owe to myself. What would you think of me if I were capable of seating myself at a table and gorging myself with food and saw about me the children of my fellow-beings starving to death?

There is Food and Plenty for All.

Allow me to say to you, my fellow man, that Nature has spread a great table bounteously for all of the children of men. There is room for all, and there is a plate and a place and food for all, and any system of society that denies a single one the right and the opportunity to freely help himself to Nature's bounties is an unjust and iniquitous system that ought to be abolished in the interest of a higher humanity and a civilization worthy of the name. And here let me observe, my fellow men, that while the general impression is that human society is stationary — a finality as it were — it is not so for a single instant. Underlying society there are great material forces that are in operation all of the circling hours of the day and night, and at certain points in the social development these forces outgrow the forms that hold

them, and these forms spring apart and then a new social system comes into existence and a new era dawns for the human race.

The great majority of mankind have always been in darkness. The overwhelming majority of the children of men have always been their own worst enemies. In every age of this world's history the kings and emperors and tsars and the potentates, in alliance with the priests, have sought by all the means at their command to keep the people in darkness, that they might perpetuate the power in which they riot and revel in luxury while the great mass are in a state of slavery and degeneration, and he who has spoken out courageously against the existing order, he who has dared to voice the protest of the oppressed and downtrodden, has had to pay the penalty. I am opposed to capitalism because I love my fellow men, and if I am opposing you I am opposing you for what I believe to be your good.

Where the Workingman Injures Himself.

I don't hate the workingman because he has turned against me. I know the poor fellow is too ignorant to understand his self-interest, and I know that as a rule the workingman is the friend of his enemy, and the enemy of his friend. He votes for men who represent a system in which labor is simply merchandise; in which the man who works the hardest and the longest has the least to show for it. If there is a man on earth who is entitled to all the comforts and luxuries of this life in abundance it is the man whose labor produces them. If he is not, who is? Does he get them in the present system?

Why the Change is Necessary.

As long as a relatively few men own the railroads, the telegraph, the telephone; own the oil fields and the gas fields and the steel mills and the sugar refineries and the leather tanneries — own, in short, the sources and means of life — they will corrupt our politics, they will enslave the working class, they will impoverish and debase society, they will do all things that are needful to perpetuate their power as the economic masters and the political rulers of the people. Not until these great agencies are owned and operated by the people can the people hope for any material improvement in their social condition. Is the condition fair today, and satisfactory to the thinking man?

According to the most reliable reports at our command, there are at least 4 millions of workingmen vainly searching for employment. Have you ever found yourself in that unspeakably sad predicament? Have you ever had to go up the street, begging for work, in a great city thronged with surging humanity — and, by the way, my friends, people are never quite so strange to each other as when they are forced into artificial, crowded, and stifled relationship.

Have You Ever Been Hunting for a Job?

I would rather be friendless out on the American desert than to be friendless in New York or Chicago. Have you ever walked up one side of the street and come back on the other side, while your wife, Mary, was waiting at home with three or four children for you to report that you had found work? Quite fortunately for me I had an experience of somewhat similar nature to this quite early in life. Quite fortunately because, had I not known my own experience just what it is to have to beg for work, just what it is to be shown the door as if I were a very offensive intruder, had I not known what it is to suffer for want of food, had I not seen every door closed and barred in my face, had I not found myself friendless and alone in the city as a boy looking for work, and in vain, perhaps I would not be here this afternoon. I might have grown up, as some others have, who have been, as they regard themselves, fortunate. I might have waved aside my fellow men and said: "Do as I have done. If you are without work it is your own fault. Look at me; I am self-made. No man is under the necessity of looking for work if he is willing to work."

Nothing is more humiliating than to have to beg for work, and a system in which any man has to beg for work stands condemned. No man can defend it. Now, the rights of one are just as sacred as the rights of a million. Suppose you happen to be the individual one who has no work. This republic is a failure so far as you are concerned.

Nothing to Sell But Your Labor Product.

Here I stand, just as I was created. I have two hands that represent my labor power. I have some bone and muscle and sinew and some energy. I want to exchange it for food and clothing and shelter. Between my right to apply my labor to the tools with which work is

done there stands a man artificially created. He says, "No, no!" Why not? "Because you can not first make a profit for me."

Now, there has been a revolution in industry during the last 50 years, but the trouble with most people is that they haven't kept pace with it. They don't know anything about it and they are especially innocent in regard to it in the small western cities and states, where the same old conditions of a century ago prevail. Your grandfather could help himself anywhere. All he needed was some very cheap, simple, primitive tools and he could then apply his labor to the resources of Nature with his individual tools and produce what he needed. That era in our history produced our greatest men. Lincoln himself sprang from this primitive state of society. People have said: "Why, he had no chance. See how great he became." Yes, but Lincoln had for his comrades great, green-plumed forest monarchs. He could put his arms about them and hear their heartthrobs, as they said: "Go on, Abe, a great destiny awaits you." He was in partnership with Nature. He associated with flowers and he was in the fields and he heard the rippling music of the laughing brooks and streams. Nature took him to her bosom. Nature nourished him and from his unpolluted heart there sprang his noble aspirations.

The Curse of the Sweatshop.

Had Lincoln been born in a sweatshop he would never have been heard of.

How is it with the babe that is born in Mott Street, or in the lower Bowery, or in the East Side of New York City? That is where thousands, tens of thousands, and hundreds of thousands of babes are born who are to constitute our future generations.

I have seen children 10 years of age in New York City who had never seen a live chicken. They don't know what it is to put their tiny feet on a blade of grass. It is the most densely populated spot on earth.

I know by very close study of the question exactly how men become idle. I don't repel them when I meet them. I have never yet seen the tramp I was not able to receive with open arms. He is a little less fortunate than I am. He is made the same as I am made. He is the child of the same Father. Had I been born in his environment, had I been subjected to the same things to which he was I would have been where he is.

Wendell Phillips — The Greatest American.

I heard this story from Wendell Phillips one evening. I never can forget it. How I wish he were here today. We sat together and he said: "Debs, the world will never know with what bitter and relentless persecution the early abolitionists had to contend." Wendell Phillips was the most perfect aristocrat in everything I have ever seen; who came nearest being a perfect man; who, when he stood erect, instantly challenged respect and admiration — almost veneration. Wendell Phillips was treated as if he had been the worst felon on earth. They went to his house one night to mob him, and why? Because he protested against sending a young negro girl and a man back into slavery. They came to take them back, and the whole Commonwealth of Massachusetts said: "Take them back! Obey the law!" That is what they are everlastingly saying to us — "Obey the law!" Just above the door of the statehouse there was an inscription: "God Bless the Commonwealth of Massachusetts." Wendell Phillips said: "If Massachusetts has become a slave hunter, if Massachusetts is in alliance with the slave catchers of the South, that inscription over the portal of the doors should be changed, and in place of 'God Bless the Commonwealth of Massachusetts,' it should be 'God Damn the Commonwealth of Massachusetts!'" God smiled in that same instant.

The Great Change Will Come.

There will be a change one of these days. The world is just beginning to awaken, and is soon to sing its first anthem of freedom. All the signs of the times are cheering. Twenty-five years ago there was but a handful of Socialists; today there are a half million. When the polls are closed next fall you will be astounded. The Socialist movement is in alliance with the forces of progress. We are today where the abolitionists were in 1858. They had a million and a quarter of votes. There was dissension in the Whig, Republican, and Free Soil parties, but the time had come for a great change, and the Republican Party was formed in spite of the bickerings and contentions of men. Lincoln made the great speech in that year that gave him the nomination and afterward made him President of the United States.

Remember the Ante-War Days.

If you had to say to the people in 1858, "In two years from now the Republican Party is going to sweep the country and seat the President," you would have been laughed to scorn. The Socialist Party stands today where the Republican Party stood 50 years ago. It is in alliance with the forces of evolution; the one party that has a clear-cut, overmastering, overshadowing issue; the party that stands for all the people and the only party that stands for all the people. In this system we have one set who are called capitalists, and another set who are called workers; and they are at war with each other over the division of the product.

What the Socialists Want.

Now, we Socialists propose that society in its collective capacity shall produce, not for profit, but in abundance to satisfy human wants; that every man shall have the inalienable right to work, and receive the full equivalent of all he produces; that every man may stand fearlessly erect in the pride and majesty of his own manhood. Every man and every woman can be economically free. They can, without let or hindrance, apply their labor, with the best machinery that can be devised, to all the natural resources, do the work of society and produce for all; and then receive in exchange a certificate of value equivalent to that of their production. Then society will improve its institutions in exact proportion to the progress of invention. Whether you work in the city or on farm, all things productive will be carried forward on a gigantic scale. All industry will be completely organized. Society for the first time will have a scientific foundation. Every man, by being economically free, will have some time for himself. He can then take a full and perfect breath. He can go to his wife and children because then he will have a home.

Today the Great Mass of People Have No Private Property.

We are not going to destroy private property. We are going to introduce and establish private property — all private property that is necessary to house man, keep him in comfort, and satisfy all his

physical wants. Eighty percent of the people in the United States have no property of any kind today. A few have got it all. They have dispossessed the people, and when we get into power we will dispossess them. We will reduce the workday and give every man a chance. We will go to the parks, and we will have music, and we will have music because we will have time to play music and inclination to hear it. Is it not sad to think that not one in a thousand know what music is? Is it not pitiable to see the poor, ignorant, dumb human, utterly imperious to the divine influence of music? If humanity could only respond to the higher influences! And it would if it had time.

Release the animal, throw off his burden; give him a chance; and he rises, as if by magic, to the plane of a man. Man has all of these divine attributes. They are in a latent state. They are not yet developed. It does not pay to love music. Keep your eye on the almighty dollar and your fellow man. Get the dollar and keep him down. Make him produce for you. You are not your brother's keeper in this system. When we are in partnership and have stopped clutching each other's throats, when we have stopped enslaving each other, then we will stand together, hands clasped, and we will be friends. We will be comrades, we will be brothers, and we will begin the march to the grandest civilization that the human race has ever known.

Edited by Tim Davenport

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