

What Did the Old Parties Do?

Congressional Campaign Speech at Terre Haute (November 4, 1916)

Friends, Comrades, and Fellow Citizens:—

We are here tonight as the guests of the Central Labor Union, and you will permit me to return my hearty thanks to the members of the body for the privilege of standing in their presence and presenting the claim of the Socialist Party to the consideration of the working classes in the present campaign.¹

First of all, the Socialist Party is the political expression of the labor movement; the Socialist Party is the only party ever organized to vow itself the party of the working class; it is the only party organized and financed and controlled by the working class for the benefit of the working class. I have here a copy of the platform of the Socialist Party that, unlike other political parties, does not make incidental reference to labor, but from the first paragraph to the last embodies the rights and interests and hopes and aspirations of the working class. From beginning to end this platform voices the demands of the working class, not only for better wages and shorter hours and improved conditions, but for the ultimate industrial emancipation.

It is not merely by its platform and by its profession that a party is to be judged. To be rightfully understood, a party must be judged on the light of its performances, and here let me call your attention to the fact that when the workers were engaged in a strike — and a strike is a battle for bread and therefore a battle for life — the Socialist Party is the only party that demonstrated itself to the working class by going to the rescue of the working class.

Ten years ago, in the state of Colorado, when under a Republican administration the workers of that state engaged in the mining industry went out on strike, and were clubbed by the police and shot down by the militia and seized and thrown aboard a special train and deported from the state and dumped upon the plains of Kansas to perish there, the Socialist Party was the only party that espoused the cause of the striking miners, and the only party that raised funds to support them in their strike and feed their families.

Three years ago, in the same state, when under a Democratic administration the same outrages were perpetuated on the miners, when Lud-

low occurred — Ludlow, that seems too horrible to be true; Ludlow, where pregnant women were shot down by Rockefeller gunman; Ludlow, where eleven babies were roasted to death for the greed of the capitalist class — the Socialist Party was the only party that stood behind the workers, backed them in their strike, and helped them all in their power.

Where was the Republican Party?

Where was the Democratic Party?

Where were their leaders? Did they have a word to say in protest against those infamies?

In that strike, that amounts to civil war, we socialists were on the ground; we protested the injunctions — we ourselves were threatened with arrest — and those miners will tell you the Socialist Party was the only one that stood by them.

Do you remember the strike in Lowell four years ago, when under a Republican high protective tariff administration thousands of textile workers there were forced out on strike; when women with babes in their arms were clubbed by the police and thrown into jail? Do you remember the Socialist Party was the only party that went to the rescue of these strikers — and the Socialist Party raised \$60,000 to feed those strikers' wives and babes? When the wives of socialists went to Lowell and took those babes and cared for them while the fathers were fighting a battle for bread? Did the Republican Party have a word to say in protest? Where were their leaders when those men stood face to face with the corporations? When they were protesting against a starvation wage and were thrown into jail by the scores and their wives with them? When they were on the very edge of starvation, it was then the Socialist Party went to their assistance — and the Socialist Party is the only party that fights the battles of the working class.

Do you remember Calumet, up in Michigan? Under a Democratic administration, where almost a hundred babes were burned to death? Do you remember the crimes perpetrated against the strikers there, and the injunctions issued, and do you remember the jails were filled with strikers, and Moyer, the president of the miners' union, was attacked by gunmen, and do you remember the Socialist Party, through its national office, raised \$80,000 and sent the money to the strikers to feed them while they were fighting a battle of their class, and the women of the Socialist Party sent six carloads of clothes and food to the families of the men who were fighting?

Where was the Republican Party?

Where was the Democratic Party?

Did they protest against the injunction? Did they protest against thugs and gunmen? Did the Republican and Democratic parties raise a dollar? All the Democratic and Republican Parties sent in there were the gunmen and thugs to murder the honest men.

I want to say to you working men here tonight, that is exactly what you vote for when you vote the Republican or Democratic tickets.

Just a few weeks ago 20,000 iron workers on the Mesaba Range in Minnesota, under a democratic administration — 20,000 Rockefeller slaves — were force out on strike, and the Socialist Party was the only party that espoused their cause. through its papers and members it raised funds for them, helped them in every way in its power. What did the Republican and Democratic party do for them? This is the question you have to answer on election day when you perpetuate a system by which you are robbed of the greater part of what you produce and continue your everlasting servitude.

Only a few weeks ago a strike of the miners occurred at Scranton, Pennsylvania. Thousands of those miners went out on strike in their rages, in their poverty that defied the power of any to describe, and what happened then? An army of Cossacks, under a Republican administration, swooped down upon them and put them in jail and kept them there under bonds amounting to more than \$400,000, and after the strike was over they were released for the reason they had no charge upon which to hold them. The Socialist Party was the only party that sent their leaders in that field to fight for them. Where were the Republican and Democratic parties?

So it has been since the Socialist Party was first organized as the political expression of the interests of the working class. It is the only party on earth that dares to avow itself the champion of the working class.

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There is a strike over in Clay County. Do you know any Republican or Democratic politician who had the courage to attack those capitalists over there? What were they striking there for? For the constitutional right to organize by peaceable means, bettering, if possible, their conditions. Then an injunction was issued by the notorious corporation tool, Judge Anderson.²

I think I can truthfully say that I have been one in this campaign who has not uttered one word that would reflect upon the personal character of either of my competitors. I shall not do so. There is no argument in

abuse. Personally, I fell very kindly to those gentlemen; politically, they are my enemies and I am theirs. There is no compromise between us, it is a fight to the death. I think I can say, without self-flattery, I am the only candidate who dared to go into Clay County and call Judge Anderson by his right name. I know his record by heart. I know who placed him where he is and for what purpose. All the federal judges have been placed where they are by the influence of the corporations and trusts, and they rule those men absolutely. But Judge Anderson was placed upon the bench for another purpose than to serve the corporations — I did not hesitate to go there and strip him stark naked, and call him by name and defy him to put me in jail along with the rest.

Now, why is it that my competitors do not attack Anderson? Why is it they do not attack the capitalists that own the plants? Because those capitalists finance their parties. They pretend to represent all the people — I make no such claim. I represent the working class, and as a socialist I am fighting the capitalist class, and no living man can represent both the exploiter and the exploited. It is either one or the other, and I stand squarely on the side of the working class, and from the beginning to the close of this campaign I shall plead the cause of the men, women, and children who toil — of the working class — the multiplied millions of men, women, and children who do this world's work, who feed and clothe and shelter the world. Those who by their labor support the government and through all the centuries of the past have been exploited — and exploitation is simply a conventional term for robbery. They have been exploited and oppressed for centuries and centuries. If you read history, you know in years gone by they were abject slaves. During the Middle Ages those same workers were servants, not allowed to own a foot of soil, fit only to produce the wealth to be enjoyed by their masters.

You are now wage-workers and you are nominally free; and yet in this system you support when you vote the Democratic or Republican ticket, you vote to perpetuate a system under which you haven't a tool you can call your own. You are compelled to compete against each other for the sale of your labor-power... Isn't it strange, by our votes and otherwise, that we tolerate a system in which that produces all the wealth is poor, and the class that produces nothing is rich? The man that produces all the wealth has nothing but his rags to show for it.

Take the miners of this district, 11,000 of them, whose wage on an average isn't above \$1.25 a day. I have so often stood over them; I have heard, often heard, the echo of his pick. Under this infernal system he is simply working his wife away and following his own hearse to the pot-

ters' field. Without his labor civilization itself would disappear, yet he is a miserable wage-slave, he has no home he can call his own, and at night he goes to his shack and gets what rest he can to recuperate animal power enough to enable him to repeat the same thing the next day, and the next — no hope for him, for his wife, for his children, abject poverty all his lifetime. And yet they have the audacity to say this country is prosperous, when the men that produce all the prosperity are in poverty.

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Don't you know that the real high men finance both of those parties? Free silver, free trade, high protective tariff are humbug issues upon which they defend their actions — they haven't an actual issue upon which they can appeal to you, not one. If the Republican and Democratic parties were to carry out their platforms in full faith and entirety, your condition remains just what it is today. You have no tools to work with, you have [nothing] you can call your own. If you have no tools to work with, you might as well be without arms — the class that owns the tools you work with is the class that owns your job. When they allow you to work it is on condition you surrender to them the bulk of what you produce and to keep for yourself only enough to keep you today....

Both the Republican and Democratic parties have repeatedly pledged themselves to lower the cost of living, but under the administrations of both about \$4 million worth of our surplus products are being shipped to all the markets of the world for the profit of Wall Street. They ship out the wheat and the oats and the rye and the corn for the profit of the ruling class, keeping a scarcity here at home. You talk about the high cost of living — and you vote to increase the cost of living every time you vote the capitalistic ticket. Are you a working man and in the capitalist's party? What business have you there? Rockefeller doesn't care a snap of his finger whether the Republican or Democratic party is in power. Under the administration of either one his wages are still \$60 million a year — \$5 million a month in his pay envelope. If you can afford to perpetuate this system, I think John will be able to make both ends meet.

Under the report of the bureau of health,³ a man woman, and children ought to have an average wage of \$800 a year. What do they actually get? We have in the same report this statement: "According to the same investigation, in the principal industries, fully one-fourth of metal workers, heads of families, earn less than \$400 per year."

One-fourth of all the workers in the principal industries today have an income of a little over a dollar a day. Visit them in the industrial centers of this country, go to their rotten tenements, sit at their rotten tables

— see yourself reflected in their rages. Those are the workers who should live in the best houses and have the best clothes and food and the best of everything. Instead of this they are housed in kennels the Rockefellers wouldn't use for their dogs, and they have the coarsest food. In other words, one-quarter of the workers get just one-half of a living. They work and by their labor, day after day and week after week, they are able to get just half a living in this highly favored land. This administration that has given us such "overwhelming prosperity" can, according to this same statement, allow one-half of the workers to receive less than \$600 per year — that is to say that one-half of the men and women employed in the principal industries get but two-thirds of a living, according to the standard prescribed by the US bureau of health, and four-fifths get less than the prescribed \$800 — and this is all they will ever get under this system....

Yes, the Morgans and Rockefellers and Goulds and Vanderbilts are our economic rulers. They become immensely rich, they ride in fine automobiles and rot in luxury wrung from the misery and sweat and blood of the working class — many of whom struggle, die, and rot without having known the joy of life for a single hour.

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The Socialist Party is the only party that declares to the world that to the workers belongs the tools, all the machines you use. Why, after you have made them, should you not own them and employ yourself and be master of your own jobs and enjoy the fruits of your labor? Why should you produce the hundreds of millions of dollars for the pirates of Wall Street? Why shouldn't you produce wealth for yourself and build comfortable homes for yourself?

Just about this season of the year the capitalist politician comes before you and tells you how happy he is to look into your manly face — yes, your face becomes manly about election time — and they are so profoundly impressed by your intelligence. You workers build all the palaces — all the beautiful residences are built by you. do you live in them? No. You build them all, but your masters live in them, the masters who exploit you for what you produce. You make the silks and satins and broadcloths for them and their wives and daughters and you are satisfied with overalls, and your families are satisfied with calico and linsey-woolsey.⁴ Yes, you are satisfied with them, that is what you vote for every time you vote the Democratic or Republican ticket.

I challenge any man here or anywhere — and, by the way, I do not object to being heckled, I don't need the protection of the chair; I can answer for myself and the Socialist Party, and if I can't stand the heckling, I will resign⁵ — I challenge any man here or anywhere to show me the slightest difference between the Democratic and Republican parties from the working class point of view. They both stand for the private ownership of this nation's industries; they both stand for the capitalist system; they both stand for the exploitation of the working class, and whether one or the other is in power, your condition remains the same. Haven't you tried them over and over again, with the same inevitable result?

Mr. Workingman, I think I have a right to make my appeal direct to you. In the biographical sketches of most of the politicians at Washington, you read where they rose from the ranks to places of distinction. I can make no such claim for myself. I have never risen from the ranks, and I want to say to you tonight when I rise, it will be with the ranks and not from the ranks.

If you are a workingman in a capitalist party, you are about as sadly out of place as Rockefeller would be in the Socialist Party. They don't vote your ticket, you vote their ticket — you place them in power. Do you know of a single governor, Democrat or Republican, who has ever called out the troops to shoot down the capitalists? Did you ever know of a judge to issue an injunction and paralyze business? If you are a working man and in a capitalist party look at yourself in the face, if you can, without a blush, just once.

What excuse can you give for voting to perpetuate a system — and both the Democrats and Republicans stand for the same — by voting for a system under which you are robbed and impoverished and enslaved, and in a lower class because of your servitude? Have you read the platform of your party? Give me 50 Republicans and Democrats, let me examine them in your presence, and I will prove 49 out of the 50 never read the platform of their party. They don't know what the party stands for — if they did, they wouldn't vote the ticket. They don't appeal to you to think for yourselves, but to vote for them. The Socialist Party is the only party that urges you to stand erect in your manhood and develop your own capacity for clear thinking. You workers have brains, as well as hands and bodies, and if you refuse to use your brains, you have yourself to blame.

The Socialist Party is the only party that has an educational program. The day after the election the Democrats and Republicans will close up

their headquarters, fold their tents, and disappear. They disappear as soon as the spoils of office are distributed — they are out of business. And then before the next election they go to cold storage and draw out their moth-eaten old issues. They have always contrived to keep you workers divided, and as long as they can keep you divided, they will keep you where you are, and they will be where they are.

The only difference between Mr. Hughes and Mr. Wilson, as [one representative] noted in congress, could be removed by any barber in about 15 minutes time. They are both for capitalism, they are both for preparedness — and preparedness is militarism — they are both for a large standing army, and both of them unite in enacting the Hay-Chamberlain bill that makes a soldier of every boy of 18 and every man under 45.⁶ They surreptitiously inserted the word “draft.” Under that bill the president of the United States has greater power than then King of England, for when Wall Street declares war and you refuse to volunteer, the president and the war department can draft you and force you into service. If you still refuse you may be courtmartialed and punished as a traitor — you have no voice in it.

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It is the ruling class that declares every war and the working class that fights the battles and furnishes the corpses on the battlefields. Are you aware of the fact two-thirds of the people of this country do not own one square inch of ground; two percent of the people own and control 60 percent of the wealth, and 65 percent of the people have but five percent of the wealth. This is capitalism, and both the Democratic and Republican parties stand for it. The only difference there is Mr. Wilson stands for untainted Americanism, and Mr. Hughes for undiluted Americanism.

Americanism — what a meaningless phrase. Americanism, like charity, covers a multitude of sins. Americanism is the last refuge of the [scoundrel] in politics. Americanism — what does it mean to the 10 million women in this country who have been robbed of their franchise? Every degenerate in the red light district has a vote, but the mothers, sisters, wives, and sweethearts are mute. They may sit in silence and meditate about the glory of Americanism, but every vote in the red light is either for the Democratic or Republican candidates — there is not one there for the Socialist Party. We do not canvass the red light, we do not comb the filth for votes — the Socialist Party appeals to the intelligent

manhood and womanhood, those of integrity, of influence, of good repute among men.

What does Americanism mean to the 25 percent of the American workers who get but a dollar a day? What does Americanism mean to the 2 million little children, especially in the southern mills where the Democratic Party has ruled for a century, where organized labor is still held as a conspiracy —and I know, for I have gone over the ground often enough? If there is a crime that should bring to the cheeks of society the crimson blush of shame, it is the unspeakable system of child labor that never can be abolished under the Republican or Democratic Party.

The Socialist Party is the only party that declares that the child ought to have time to grow up, time for sunlight, time to play, time to develop a strong body, and time to be educated. The Socialist Party is the only party that proposes, when it gets into power, to take those 2 million children out of the sweat shops and factories.

Americanism doesn't mean much to the miners of this country, who are overworked and underpaid. It is a phrase that is mouthed for no other purpose than to deceive the people, it means absolutely nothing to the working class in this system.

It is upon this vital issue I am appealing to you tonight. The simple question is, shall a few parasites organized in trusts control the country and rob the workers? Shall we civilize civilization and at last christianize Christianity?

The Socialist Party proposes to transfer the title deeds from the Rockefellers, Morgans, and Goulds to the people. In their collective capacity we will come in possession for the first time of the product of our labor — the worker will own the tools he works with, he will own the machine with which to do the work, the machine that has no heart to break, the machine that has no soul to crush, and at the touch of organized manhood and womanhood of this nation, the machine will do the work. Every man will have a right to work without a master — we will fill this life with love. Instead of building battleships, we will build schools and homes, and the people will live lives of utterly civilized human beings.

This is the change upon which I am appealing to you in the name of the working class, through the only party that has a moral right to appeal to the workmen in this campaign. You men of labor stand erect, and when you go to the ballot box on the 7th day of November, go there and work for socialism and emancipation. You recognize the class struggle upon the industrial field, but when you go to the battlefield, you go

alone. You strike against the capitalist class every time you get a chance, and vote for them every time you have a chance. You strike for cents and vote against dollars.

You are entitled to all the wealth produced by your labor, and you will never get it under this system — the great bulk goes to those who own the tools with which you work. The Socialist Party stands for the emancipation of the working class, for worldwide democracy. It stands for women's equal rights. The Socialist Party was the first party to make the political discovery woman is a human being — we Socialists didn't wait until women voted in twelve states and had 4 million votes. Both Mr Hughes and Mr. Wilson are now for woman suffrage; we have always been for it. Mr. Hughes says it is "inevitable." And do you know who made it inevitable? The Socialists.

The only man who ought to be disfranchised is the man who disfranchises women. No man can deny the right of women to vote and justify the ballot in his own hands. Women are admitted to the Socialist Party on equal grounds with men, and when you go to a convention you will find them there, side by side with men.

I am appealing to you again, as individuals and collectively, you of the working class, you who have always been oppressed. Bear in mind that it is labor only that mines the coal from which the power is generated that moves the modern world. It is labor that gathers all the fleece, whitens it in steaming vats, and transforms it into clothes. It is labor, and labor alone, that feeds and guides the black cavalry of commerce, in the golden harvest field, in the din and roar of the city. It is toil alone that keeps the nation, and, gentlemen, labor will come into its own. Who shall doubt it when a man watches the signs of the times? He turns his eyes toward the heavens as the midnight approaches, and with starry fingers points the Almighty, and marks the passage of time upon the dial of the universe, and those who look out know relief and rest are close at hand. Let labor everywhere take hope and know the midnight is passing and you cometh in the morning.

From my heart I thank you, I thank you all, and bid you all good night.

¹ This speech was delivered at Knights of Columbus Hall in Terre Haute on the last Saturday before the 1916 general election. It was reproduced in full in the official organ of the Vigo County Central Labor Union early the following year.

² Albert Barnes Anderson (1857-1938) was appointed to the US District Court for the District of Indiana by Theodore Roosevelt in December 1902. He held the position until 1925, when he was appointed to the US Court of Appeals for the Seventh Circuit by Calvin Coolidge. He retired from the bench in 1929.

³ The published transcript hastily cites "US Bureau of Health, March last, Bulletin No. 76."

⁴ Coarsely woven linen fabric.

⁵ While Debs certainly must have faced hecklers from time to time over the course of his long speaking career, this is a rare documented instance when it did happen. Press accounts of his paying audiences uniformly speak of crowds being held spellbound, whether or not they personally agreed with Deb's specific arguments.

⁶ The Hay-Chamberlain bill, passed by Congress in the spring of 1916, was a major piece of so-called "preparedness" legislation which expanded the size of the regular army beyond the 100,000 man limit then currently specified by law to what was characterized as "full war strength." Socialist congressman Meyer London of New York was the only member of the US House of Representatives to vote against the bill's initial passage, with three other members refusing to vote. The final version was passed May 20 following joint conference between House and Senate and was signed into law by Woodrow Wilson on June 3. The final version of the bill expanded the army to 175,000, federalized payment of the National Guard, and established a network of citizen training camps.