
Speech to the Conference for Progressive Political Action

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by Eugene V. Debs

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Fellow Delegates and Friends:—

I appreciate fully the very cordial reception you tendered with such marked enthusiasm, but I don't forget that this high compliment is paid to the cause that I have been endeavoring to serve and to me personally not at all.

I wish that you were all Socialists. But I realize that a great many of you are not. I hope I have never been and never shall be narrow enough and bigoted enough to deny any human being the same right to his or her honest conviction and the same right to express these convictions and stand up and fight for them that I shall claim for myself.

There are, as I see it, two paramount questions before this body. The first is, shall a new party be organized, and secondly, if a new party is organized, what kind of party shall it be?

It is quite natural that there should be a very wide divergence of opinion as to these questions. It would be a miracle almost if the delegates composing this great body, representing so many different elements and constituents, were of one mind, of one purpose, as to the questions that confront them for consideration and action.

Speaking for myself and my colleagues, I favor the organization, here and now, of a new party. I also stand, in addition to the demand for a new party, that this shall be a party of the working class.

A party in this later day of our industrial and social development is either a capitalist party or it is a labor party. It is the one or the other. It cannot be both. We all know that in the evolution of industry and of society there has been a division of society, and that today it consists mainly of two economic classes,

The capitalist class upon the one hand and upon the other the working class; and these two classes, whether you admit it or not, are pitted against each other, not only in this country, but throughout the world, in an irrepressible struggle. These two classes can never be permanently harmonized or reconciled. It is this that is called the class struggle, that is shaking the foundations of the whole civilized world.

This is an age of organization. Working men realize this in having organized pretty thoroughly upon the industrial field in pitting themselves against the organized power of their masters and their exploiters. They have yet to learn that the labor question is essentially a political question. If they find it necessary to unite upon the industrial field, to unite and strike together, how can they consistently fight each other at the ballot box?

Politics is simply the expression in political terms of the economic interests of certain groups or classes. The masters and exploiters realize this fact and they are in politics, not in non-partisan politics, but in politics.

I have heard some allusions to non-partisan political organization. That is to say, a political party that is not a political party. I know of no organization, no political organization, that is or can be non-partisan. It is a question, as we believe, mainly of the education of the working class, and here let me say that my interpretation of the working class includes all useful workers of brain and brawn, all who usefully serve society in any trade, occupation, or profession. All of these properly belong to the working class. I draw the line at the exploiters and the parasites and there I draw it sharply.

Now it has been said that the time has not yet come to organize a new party, and when, I venture to ask, will that time come?

It was my good fortune to personally know the founder and Grand Chief, the first Grand Chief of the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers, to personally know the first Grand Master of the

Brotherhood of Locomotive Fireman. How often I have heard both of them tell of their early experiences in the efforts they made to lay the foundation of the organization of their class. There were but a handful of men who organized these two great brotherhoods. They were told that the time had not come for such work and everything possible was done to discourage them, but they were of such fiber, such moral fiber, that they had the courage to stand erect, to assert themselves, and to make the beginning that resulted in these great organizations.

Every great human movement has a small beginning in every age, in every nation. There have been a few heroic souls, women and men, who have ideas in advance of their time, who have had the courage to give expression to these ideas, to stand staunchly in their advocacy and to pave their way by their heroism, by their self-sacrifice to better conditions for mankind.

It was my pleasure, as well as my honor, to be with that magnificent woman, Susan B. Anthony, almost a half century ago, when she came to the town in which I lived, in response to an invitation that I had extended to her to advocate the cause of women's rights. I remember in escorting her from the station to the hotel how she was sneered at by passersby, who felt insulted that this brazen creature had been permitted to enter that community. I recall it all so vividly as I stand here in your presence this afternoon; all of the influences surrounding her were brought to bear to prevent her from advocating the right of women to take part in the affairs of society. They declared that the time had not come for it. They declared that it was impossible. They made all sorts of arguments to discourage Susan B. Anthony, and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, these magnificent women whose names are in history, the glory of their sex. It was a small beginning they made, but they had the courage to make it, and they have written their names in indelible letters in the annals of mankind. We may not be able to make a very great beginning here, but the important thing is that we shall make a beginning.

I have said that a party is either a capitalist party or it is a labor party. I deny that any party can by any possible means serve both these classes with the same fidelity. It is absolutely impossible. If a party serves the capitalist exploiter it is at the expense of his exploited

victim, and if a party serves the exploited worker it is at the expense of his economic master.

Much has been said about wresting the power of monopoly from the hands of the few who hold sway in our affairs. Let it be understood that the economic power is always and everywhere the political ruler. How are you going to wrest this power from the hands of the autocracy, who are in the minority, unless you organize the workers and their sympathizers, who are in the majority, unless you educate and organize the masses? And build up the political power that will wrest from them the power they have to oppress and exploit the people by taking from them the private ownership of the instruments of production that make them the economic masters and the political rulers of the nation?

The question for us to consider is simply this: are or are we not in favor of this nation owning and controlling its own industries? That is the fundamental question. That is what confronts this body. As long as you permit a relative few to privately own the sources and means of wealth, the tools of production, they will be in power. You will be in servitude. You will produce the wealth and they will have it under whatever administration you may have. They will do nothing and you will have that, and that is what you have been getting under the administration of both the Republican and Democratic parties all of these years.

Now if what has been charged against these two parties by this body, by this conference, if the half of what has been charged, is true, then these parties are hopelessly corrupt and reactionary, and how can the great body of people who are oppressed and exploited and degraded, how can they hope for any relief by timidly approaching the doors of these corrupt parties and begging for some slight consideration, and be treated with contempt?

The class now in power cannot rule honestly. They must rule corruptly. They are in the minority. They have not the votes of their own to put them in power, but they have the money with which to corrupt the electorate. They have the money with which to corrupt the courts and to buy the legislators, and to debauch all our institutions. They have the power to do this because they have the money, and they have the money because they own the means of production

and distribution. The great mass of the workers depend upon them for employment. In this system no working man — we boast of every man having the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, and yet in this system that has been alternately supported by both of the capitalist parties, no man has a right to work. He can only work on conditions that the master who owns the tools he works with grants him permission to work, and the man who works by permission lives by permission, and is in no sense a free man.

Now we make the claim that the time has come for the great body of the workers and those who sympathize with them to organize a new party and to begin the work of extending the operation and activities of this party all over the country. We can make the beginning here.

We can start forth with a message. We can make the appeal that will ring all over this country, and I am satisfied that hundreds of thousands of the workers will respond to that appeal. But the great mass of the people are not articulate. They have no means of making themselves heard. If the question of organizing a new party, and that party being a labor party, if that question were submitted to the great body of the American workers, I am satisfied that a very large proportion of them would vote in favor of launching a new party.

There are those present — I concede their honesty — I impugn no man's motive — there are those present who believe that a kind of middle party can be organized that will embrace so many more of the people. They indulge the illusion that it is possible to permanently unite men whose interests are in conflict. It cannot be done. It is an impossible undertaking. I venture to say that if this body in the course of its deliberations decides upon organizing a middle class party that shall be neither one thing or the other, but that shall have progress for its shibboleth, that shall be known as a progressive party — and by the way — do you know of a party that is not a progressive party? I don't.

Do you know of any man or woman in this country who will confess himself or herself a reactionary? I don't. Rockefeller is a progressive. So is Morgan. So are all the rest of them progressive, and there is not a term in our vocabulary that has been more prostituted

in the last few years than the term progressive. Now, what does it mean? Absolutely nothing.

Make your appeal broad enough to embrace small capitalists and workers and all sorts of elements, launch that party tomorrow, and I admit that it may make some little progress. I admit that it may have some small accession to its ranks, but it cannot live. Its death is a foregone conclusion. Organize a so-called progressive party combining all of these elements, more or less in conflict with each other, and they soon begin to disintegrate and they will go the way that all third parties have gone during the last fifty years.

A labor party is the only party that can be organized with any hope of making it a permanent party and achieving its historic mission.

It is a fortunate fact that the workers everywhere are beginning to open their eyes at last, beginning to realize that they have brains as well as hands, that they can think as well as work, that they are fit for something better than slavery and for cannon fodder. They are beginning to stand erect here and there and everywhere all along the line, beginning to realize that what is done for them must be done by themselves. And so they are gradually developing their self-reliance and they are making the appeal to their own solidarity.

They are still in the minority, and here let it be observed that every great movement in its inception was not only in the minority, unpopular, consisting of those who had ideas and courage, who did their work and rendered their service to humanity, these awakened and awakening and intelligent and awakening workers are still in the minority, but they are in alliance with the force of evolution, and as certain as I stand in your presence this afternoon, this minority will be converted in course of time into the triumphant majority and sweep into power and seize the reins of government in the name of the people and transfer the title deeds from the Rockefellers, Goulds, Vanderbilts, and Morgans to the people in their collective capacity, and then for the first time we will have democracy and self-government in the history of this Republic.

Ah, but this is farfetched, some of you seem to think, and possibly it is. But it is the only issue before this body that is worthy of serious consideration. This is a movement that is making progress.

Now the workers have organized to a very large extent industrially. They are beginning to realize their interests, their power, their duty, their responsibility as a class now. I know that it is not very popular in the presence of some people to talk about classes. We are supposed to be a classless country. There are no classes in the United States. We are all in the same class with Rockefeller and the rest of them, and we prove it by voting that ticket on election day.

Now, Rockefeller and Morgan and Gary and the rest of them, believe me, are class conscious. I only wish the workers were as class conscious as are these great exploiting capitalists.

The power that they have over people never can be abolished while they are in possession of the instruments that give them that power. That is the private ownership of the means of our common life. They own the railroads; they own the telegraph, the telephone; they own all these great agencies of production and distribution, the mines and the mills and the factories that have been socially produced, that are socially operated, that are socially necessary and still are held in private hands. The owners of the railroads have nothing to do with their operation. If every owner of an American railroad took a ship, an airship tonight, and left this planet, the people would never know it, for every train would come and go on time, and so with all of the great industries. Their private owners have no more to do with their management or their operation than if they lived upon Mars. Now, if the people, in their collective capacity can develop these great industries, if they can operate them socially, and if their very lives depend upon them, can't they also develop intelligence enough to make themselves the owners and the masters of these industries and operate them, not to produce multimillionaires and billionaires, but to produce wealth in abundance for all of the people?

Poverty amid plenty is it not strange that in this land of fabulous abundance there is such widespread poverty and misery that defies the power of all language to properly describe? Here in America we live in perhaps the most favored land beneath the bending skies, vast areas of the richest and most fertile soil, all of the raw materials in inexhaustible abundance, the most marvelous productive machinery on the face of the globe, and the million of workers, men and women and children, aye children, two million of them still having their

puny bodies coined into the capitalist profit, is infinitely more important than the working man's life.

Is it not strange that in this land of fabulous plenty there is still so much poverty, so many million of our people whose life consists of a long, hard, fierce struggle all the way from youth to age and at last death comes to the rescue and stills the aching heart and lulls that victim to dreamless sleep.

This all seems very strange to me, in one aspect of it, but not in another, for I have learned enough to know in my experience and observation that that very limited class that owns and controls the means of our common life not only controls the government in every department [but] has the injunctions issued under both Republican and Democratic administrations that paralyze labor unions; they not only control the government in every department, but they control all of our educational institutions, they have the power to penalize, to proscribe, to exile the workers by discharging and blacklisting the men, the best among them, for the reason they have intelligence enough and courage enough to stand up for the interests of their classes. They have the power to control the education, a large part of which consists of mis-education, the purpose of which is to keep the people in ignorance and, through their ignorance, in servitude.

Shakespeare was right when he said, "There is no darkness but ignorance and there is no slavery but ignorance," and that is the trouble with the American people, and the average politician tells them that he is so proud to stand in their presence, to look in their intelligent faces, he flatters their ignorance to keep them ignorant, while upon the other hand, the Socialist agitator has made himself an undesirable citizen, despised and persecuted, because he has the courage to tell the workers that they are ignorant and that they will remain where they are so long as they are ignorant, indifferent, and unorganized. He tells them about the class struggle, not because he is in favor of classes, quite the contrary, because he is opposed to classes and wants to put an end to the class struggle.

The capitalist, upon the other hand, tries to obscure it in every way possible. He'd not have the workers realize it and that is why the great majority of them remain in the parties of their masters. Who is it that votes the Republican Party and the Democratic Party into

power? It is the working class. The capitalist doesn't vote a working class ticket, but the working class do vote the capitalist ticket, and that is why the capitalists are in power and the workers in servitude, and we want to reverse this situation and put the workers in power, and that is what will come to pass with a triumph of this great movement that I hope to see inaugurated here in the form of a new political party that stands foursquare to all the storms that blow for the working class, and those who sympathize with them in their heroic struggle for industrial emancipation, and it is coming.

As I stand here this afternoon, looking into your faces, many of whom are so familiar to me, I congratulate myself for being here. I feel all the better for being in a little nearer touch with those with whom I have disagreed and who have disagreed with me. I feel that it is so far better for us to be at least on decent human terms with each other, no matter how widely we may disagree, far better this than to be pitted against each other in hostile camps, wasting our time in abusing each other.

Now I have every respect for every one of this movement who is looking forward or who thinks he is looking forward. He is proceeding according to his light. I would do nothing under any circumstances to discourage the tendency, the progressive tendency of this movement. I would not utter a word to reflect upon any man or woman, any delegate in this body who, however reactionary they may seem to me, believe that they are looking forward and in their heart desire to be progressive.

I would encourage all of these tendencies and that is why the Socialist Party became affiliated with this Conference, not for the purpose of being absorbed or absorbing the Conference, but for the purpose of helping along, for the purpose of helping in the work of education and organization, encouraging those who don't yet see their way clear to come to the Socialist movement, and this Conference, whatever may be the outcome, my friends, is going to leave something that will have a permanent place in the annals of our nation. It is going to result in some good. We may leave here more or less disappointed. No matter. The very fact that this Conference has been possible is sufficient evidence to my mind that it is going to result in some good. It is the beginning. It will have its continuance. It is a

more or less logical development. It will lead to something else, and in the right direction, and so I am very glad I am here, and have had the privilege of meeting those [who are here], many of them with whom I have hitherto been in disagreement.

Now I believe that it is impossible to compromise a principle, and the Socialist Party is committed to a certain principle. To compromise principle is to court death and disaster. It is better to be true to a principle and to stand alone and be able to look yourself in the face without a blush, far better to be in a hopeless minority than to be in a great popular and powerful majority of the unthinking.

Do you know that all the progress in this whole world's history has been made by minorities? I have somehow been fortunately all of my life in the minority. I have thought again and again that if I ever find myself in the majority I will know that I have outlived myself. There is something magnificent about having the courage to stand with a few with and for a principle and to fight for it without fear or favor, developing all of your latent power, expanding to the proportional end, rising to your true stature, no matter whose respect you may forfeit, as long as you keep your own.

I am glad to stand with a staunch revolutionary minority, and the capitalists understand what we are and what we stand for, even if the workers don't. They don't object in the least to the organization of a third party. They know very well it will not last very long, but they are decidedly opposed to the organization of a labor party. That is what they are opposed to, and if a labor party is organized, it must expect from the very beginning to be misrepresented and ridiculed and traduced in every possible way, but if it consists of those who are the living representatives of its principles it will make progress in spite of them, and in due course of time it will sweep into triumph.

So I have learned to be patient and to bide the time. I am expecting something from this body before it adjourns. But let me say to you, whether I receive what I expect or not, I shall not leave here disappointed. Long, long ago in my life I learned how to refuse to be disappointed. No one can disappoint me but myself, and I refuse to betray myself. I can't do that. I prefer to be on speaking terms with myself, and so I stand for this principle. Make the appeal to the working class on this principle.

You workers of brain and brawn, it is you and you alone who support the government and conserve all civilization. Were it not for you, the whole social fabric would collapse in an instant. It is you who do the work, the useful work. It is you who produce the wealth, every ounce, every dollar of it, you who support the government and conserve civilization. You have but to realize this to awaken to the necessity of unifying your forces all along the line, taking counsel of yourselves, cultivating self-reliance, closing up the industrial ranks, the political ranks, striking together, standing together in every hour of conflict, every hour of strife, and in due course of time the hour will strike, your day will have come, you will sweep into power and you will issue for the first time in human history the proclamation of the emancipation of the workers and the true civilization of all mankind.

Edited by Tim Davenport

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