
Manifesto of the Social Democracy of America to the American People (circa June 15, 1898)

We entertain no such unphilosophic notion as that the past may become the future without an intervening present.¹ We are aware that even so radical a change as socialism can be nothing else than the existing social order transformed. We seek no abrupt break with a state of things hoary with the passing of 60 centuries. We seek only the climax to which all history has tended. We come to proclaim the sublime hope of the world, to proclaim it to all classes, to proclaim it not in hatred, but in love. By holding up a lofty ideal we shall seek to win our fellow countrymen to a nobler and happier life. While fully aware of the international character of the socialist movement and while in the fullest accord with the socialist organizations of other lands, we are Americans, and we shall adopt methods consonant with American habits of thought and of action and with the genius of American institutions.

The Social Democracy of America will proceed by three routes to a common destination. It will work for socialism along economic, educational, and political lines, thus using all the means of progress at once.

By the introduction of labor saving machinery the existing industrial system renders millions of men superfluous and denies them all opportunity to earn their bread and then turns them over to the care of the penal laws or of overburdened private charity. We shall begin with the unemployed and shall seek by colonization to build the new social order within the old and help the present to glide naturally and imperceptibly into the future while we lessen the misery of multitudes whose eyes must close in death before greeting the dawn of the glad new day.

At the same time we shall vigorously prosecute the work of education to the end that the people may understand socialism and yearn to see it prevail. This work will be prosecuted on the principle that so noble an aspiration deserves the assistance of the loftiest efforts of eloquence and of literature. We shall not degrade our ideal by advocating it repulsively or coarsely, but speakers will be sent forth whose utterances shall be worthy their mission and from the splendid literature in which genius has placed its heaven-sent gifts upon the altar of

socialism we shall cull the choicest gems to put within the reach of the millions.

In politics we shall keep ever in mind that all political organizations, including our own, are but means which deserve and should receive neither loyal devotion nor hostile criticism on their own account.

We shall not engage in conflicts for spoils. We are not wedded to party means and we care not by whom nor in what name good may be done, but where in any state or locality no leading party shows an honest purpose to take practical steps toward socialism we shall enter the field as a distinct political party. In short, we propose to use for the noblest of purposes the same sagacity politicians employ for evil ones.

We shall be the friend and ally — not the antagonist — of organized labor. We recognized that the present transitional period is one of industrial war and that for its immediate protection against oppression labor cannot wait for the ballot, but must resent on the instant the oppressor's threatened blow. We recognize that multitudes of wage-workers are disfranchised by being compelled to be distant from their homes on election days and that many for other reasons cannot vote. It is not true that by their own votes alone workingmen can overthrow the existing industrial order, and to tell the laborer, threatened with starvation in midsummer, to be patient till fall and then vote against his master is cruel mockery. The worker must resort to such means as he can use today, hoping for a time when he need use them no longer.

We cannot take Utopia by force;
But better, almost, be at work in sin
Than in a brute inaction browse and sleep ²

While a proud monument glorifies as heroes the embattled farmers who fell at Bunker Hill, how can any American, with true American impulses, urge men trampled beneath the brutal hoof of power to be patient and submit to die in cowardly silence? They have rights who dare maintain them, and when haughty wealth, backed by judges and executives who are strangers to the love of liberty, wages unjust and merciless war upon men for demanding but the right to work and to receive in exchange sufficient to make them physically able to work, we refuse to say that in the conflict the dead should be coffined beneath humble roofs alone.

Until the change we hope and strive for shall have come, organized labor must use organized labor's weapons — the boycott and the strike — and their use will be blamable only when those who use them treat the present state of industrial war as normal and eternal and refuse to devote their energies to the hastening of the happy era of industrial peace, to bring about which we are pledged to work and to attain which all events and all agencies of these times inevitably tend.

While a federal judge may, at his capricious and biased will, strike down every department of the government in a sovereign state, farmers and laborers alike must seek in vain to secure relief from oppression by enacting laws. Not a single state law in the interest of farmers or laborers is permitted by the federal courts to live an hour, while at the same time these small allies of capitalism declare that, because of its limited powers, Congress can grant no effective relief. Were the inferior federal courts abolished by the repeal of the acts of Congress under which alone they exist and were the federal Supreme Court denied the power to override the decisions of the state courts whose members are elected by the people and are amenable to them, then, when farmers and laborers secured control of a state government, they would be the masters of those against whose oppression they now struggle in vain, and capitalism would be compelled to obey the laws or to court the consequences of armed revolt against a sovereign people's will. Recognizing the utter impossibility of radical social or political changes of any kind until this now invincible barrier — the federal judiciary — shall have been removed, we shall make its removal our single political aim in national politics until the federal courts shall have been destroyed and the power of each state to regulate its own internal affairs shall have been thereby restored. Abolition of the federal judiciary will be the exclusive political demand of the Social Democracy of America in all congressional and presidential campaigns, and we shall refuse to divert our energies from the achievement of this first indispensable reform. On this national issue we ask the cooperation of all enemies of oppression, all foes to a despotism in judicial guise, and all lovers of American liberty, regardless of their views concerning our ultimate aim.

¹ This document was composed and released by the nine member Executive Council of the Social Democracy of America elected after the split of the political actionists split the organization to form the Social Democratic Party of America. These were: James Hogan, Utah; W.P. Borland, Michigan; Roy M. Goodwin, Illinois; John F. Lloyd, Illinois; L.L. Hopkins, New Jersey, I. Frank, New York; Cyrus Field Willard, Colorado; Richard J. Hinton, District of Columbia; R.G. Clemens, Kansas.

² From "New Men for New Times" by James Russell Lowell (1819-1891).