
Competition vs. Cooperation: Speech at Central Music Hall, Chicago (September 29, 1900)

Ladies and Gentlemen:—

No words of mine can possibly express my appreciation of this beautiful testimonial of the esteem and love of my old comrades, the members of the American Railway Union.¹ I can only say that, like the rosebud under the influence of sunshine and shower, my heart opens to receive their benediction.

The only vital issue in the present campaign springs from the private ownership of the means of production, and it involves the whole question of political equality, economic freedom, and social progress. This fundamental issue has been studiously ignored by both the Republican and Democratic parties; it has been clearly stated and squarely met by the Social Democratic Party. The alleged issues of the old parties are well rooted in the existing economic system, which system they are pledged to preserve and perpetuate and which the Social Democratic party is pledged to abolish.

The contest today is for the control of government by three separate classes, with conflicting interests, into which modern society has been divided in the development of the competitive system. The capitalist class is represented by the Republican Party; the middle class is represented by the Democratic Party; the working class is represented by the Social Democratic Party. Each of these parties is committed to the economic interests of the class it represents.

The Republican platform is a self-congratulation of the dominant capitalist class. "Prosperity galore, give us four years more." The Democratic platform is the wail and cry of the perishing middle class; calamity without end. The Social Democratic platform is an indictment of the capitalist system; it is the call to class consciousness and political action of the exploited working class; and it is a ringing declaration in favor of collective ownership of all the means of production and distribution, as the clarion voice of economic freedom.

Parties, like individuals, act from motives of self-interest. The platform of a party is simply the political expression of the economic interests of the class it represents. The Democratic Party differs from the Republican Party as the small capitalist differs from the large capitalist; it is a difference in degree only. The Socialist Party differs from them both as the exploited wage worker differs from his exploiter; the difference here is not in degree but in kind. The Republican Party is in favor of expansion, the acquisition of foreign territory; a colonial policy. Why? Senator Beveridge says, "because we are the trustees of Jehovah."² But Senator Depew,³ who is a man somewhat older, may be permitted to answer. Mr. Depew says: "The markets for the products of our farms and factories accessible by the Atlantic Ocean will soon be filled, but across the Pacific are numberless opportunities. Within a distance from Manila not much greater than Havana is from New York, live 900 million people, purchasing now annually from all nations of the things which they produce to the sum of \$1 billion, of which we furnish 5%; that 5% should be 50%." The getting of the 45% constitutes "The White Man's Burden." Mr. Depew also says: "What is the tendency of the future? Why this war in South Africa? Why this hammering at the gates of Peking? Why this marching of troops from Asia to Africa? Why? It is because the surplus production of civilized countries of modern times is greater than civilization can consume; it is because this overproduction comes back to stagnation and poverty. The American people produce \$2 billion more than they can consume."

The Democratic Party is flatly opposed to this policy; it denounces it as imperialism and declares that is the paramount issue of the campaign. The difference between these two capitalist parties upon so-called paramount issues is so clear as to be self-evident. The small capitalists, represented by the Democratic Party, lack the modern economic equipment necessary in the struggle for the control of foreign markets. They have none of the surplus products which must be disposed of to avoid stagnation. Upon the other hand, the expanding markets for which the large capitalists are struggling, will extend their lease of power and greatly augment it. The vast foreign trade will develop their resources, increase their economic power, and enable them the more easily to crush out their small competitors in the middle class. This is the bone of contention between the two capitalist parties, and what is called the burning issue of the campaign.

In the Republican convention, the national convention that was held in the city of Philadelphia [June 19-21, 1900], a most remarkable address

was delivered by Senator Wolcott,⁴ the temporary chairman. Among other things, this gentleman, eminent in the council of that party, said: "There is not an idle mill in the country today." This, in the face of the fact that at that very time there were scores of idle mills in the country, and multiplied thousands of working men seeking in vain for employment. It is my judgment that the man who makes such a statement as this in the face of existing facts ought to be sentenced to serve a term in the anthracite coal region.

He furthermore says: "There is no man who labors with his hands in all our broad domain who cannot find work, and the scale of wages was never so high in the history of our country." Another absolute falsehood. The Republican Party touches this economic question at a vital point, but as you will observe, does not attempt to grapple with it. In their platform we find this statement: "We recognize the necessity and propriety of the honest cooperation of capital to meet new business conditions, and especially to extend our rapidly increasing foreign trade, but we condemn all conspiracies and combinations intended to restrict business, to create monopolies, to limit production, or to control prices, and favor such legislation as will effectively restrain and prevent all such abuses." If the Republican Party favors legislation restricting such abuses, why has it not enacted such legislation when it has been in absolute control of every department of the government during the past three years? "Wages in every department of labor have been maintained at high rates, higher than before."

In Mr. McKinley's letter of acceptance we find this statement: "Prosperity abound everywhere throughout the republic." The worst that can be said about the President is that he has been absolutely true to the party that elected him.

Combinations of capital," he says, "which control the market in commodities necessary to the general use of the people by suppressing natural and ordinary competition, thus enhancing prices to the general consumer, are obnoxious to the common law and the public welfare. They are dangerous conspiracies against the public good, and ought to be made the subject of prohibitory or penal legislation. Publicity will be a helpful influence to check this evil.

Honest cooperation of capital is necessary to meet new business conditions and extend our rapidly increasing foreign trade, but conspiracies and combinations intended to restrict business, create monopolies, and control classes, should be effectively restrained.

Just where the line is drawn between honest combinations and vicious combinations he does not attempt to say. All combinations and monopolies privately owned and controlled by the people, in the interests of the people, are good combinations.

We find by an examination of the Democratic platform that substantially the same statements are made upon this question: "Private monopolies are indefensible and intolerable. They destroy competition." Observe that both the Republican Party and the Democratic Party are in favor of competition, the existing system. They condemn its tendencies, its fraud, but they still favor the system itself.

They destroy competition, control the price of all material and of the finished product, thus robbing both the purchaser and consumer, they lessen the employment of labor, arbitrarily fix the terms and conditions thereof, and deprive individual energy and small capital of their opportunity for betterment. They are the most efficient agent yet devised for appropriating the fruits of industry to the benefit of the few at the expense of the many. They are fostered by Republican laws and they are protected by the Republican administration in return for campaign subscriptions and political support. Corporations should be protected in all their rights, and their legitimate interests should be respected.

Corporations are organized purely for private profit; the rights of the corporations to exploit the working class and exact tribute from the people are to be respected, according to the Democratic platform.

In Mr. Bryan's letter of acceptance it is stated that "private monopoly is an outlaw," and private monopoly is built absolutely on private ownership.⁵ If Mr. Bryan is opposed to private monopoly why doesn't he propose a public monopoly in its place? A public monopoly, built upon collective ownership, which converts a curse into a blessing to society. He says: "I shall recommend such legislation as may be necessary to dissolve every private monopoly which does business outside the state of its origin." He might as well attempt by legislation to prevent a river flowing outside the country in which it has its source. "The Democratic Party does not seek to embarrass capitalists engaged in a legitimate business, but it does protest against capitalists entering politics and attempting to assume control of the instrumentalities of government."

Now, my friends, we observe after examining both these platforms that both the Republican and Democratic parties are in favor of the private ownership of the means of production and distribution. they are in favor of the existing wage system. There is absolutely no difference between them. Upon the other hand, the Social Democratic Party, standing upon a platform declaring in favor of collective ownership of the means of production, declares to the world that there is no other solution of this economic problem.

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There is an economic revolution in this and other countries in which modern industry has been developed in the past century. We have been so completely engaged in competitive labor that we are utterly oblivious of the fact. A century ago work was done by hand very largely, or with simple primitive tools. How to make a living was an easy question. A boy learned a trade, served his apprenticeship and the skill inherent in the trade secured steady employment for him at fair wages, by virtue of which he could provide for his family, educate his children, and discharge the duties of good citizenship. In that day the working man owned and controlled the tools with which he worked and was virtually his own employer. Not only this, he was the master of what his labor produced. It was a very slow age, meager of results; it required 10 to 16 hours daily labor to enable the working man to supply his material wants. It was then the machine emanated from the brain of labor; it was designed to aid the laboring man, so that he could provide for his social, moral, and intellectual improvement.

At this point an industrial revolution began. The machine, the new tool of production, passed from the control of the working man who used it into that of the newly developed class. The small employer became a capitalist, and the employed became a wage worker, and they began to grow apart. The machine was crude and imperfect at first; it increased production, it began to displace the working man, it pushed him out of the shop into the street. The working man forced into idleness became a tramp. I have said again and again that I am with the tramp, and against the system of society that made him a tramp.

The machine became more perfect day by day; it lowered the wage of the worker, but in due course of time it became so perfect that it could be operated by the unskilled labor of the woman, and she became a factor in

industry. The owners of these machines were in competition with each other for trade in the market; it was war; cheaper and cheaper production was demanded. In the march of time it became necessary to withdraw the children from school, and these machines came to be operated by the deft touch of the fingers of the child. In the first stage machine was in competition with man, in the next, man in competition with both, and in the next, the child in competition with the whole combination. Today there are more than 3 million women engaged in industrial pursuits in the United States and more than 2 million children. It is not a question of white labor or black labor, or male labor or female labor or child labor in this system; it is solely a question of cheap labor, without reference to the effect upon mankind.

The simple tool of production became an excellent machine; it necessitated the cooperation and concentration of capital. The tool of production was no longer owned and controlled by the working man who used it. It was owned by the class who didn't use it, and was used by a class who didn't own it. The owners of the machine want profit and the users of the machine want wages. Their economic interests are absolutely in conflict, diametrically opposite. What is good for one is not good for the other.

It is this conflict of interest which has given rise to the modern class struggle which finds expression in strikes, lockouts, boycotts, and deep-seated discontent. But I am not looking on the dark side of things. I am in no sense a pessimist. I am observing the trend of economic development. I realize it is only a question of time until this concentration of industry will be completed. One department after another is being monopolized in this march of concentration; the interests of the trusts are so completely international that in the near future there will be a trust of trusts. In this trust the middle class, representing the small capitalists, is being crushed and ground beneath the upper millstone of concentration of capital and the nether millstone of vanishing patronage.

The working man has been impoverished. Examining the reports I find that during the past 50 years of the age of the machine, his producing capacity has steadily increased, but upon the other hand, in the competitive pressure, his wage has steadily diminished. The more he produces the worse he is off. He cannot consume what he produces. The more he produces the more there is an overproduction based upon underconsumption. The factories close down and he finds himself out of employment and the reason suggests itself; he no longer works for himself, he works for

another, for a wage that represents but a small share of what he produces. This accounts for the fact that periodically the country is affected with overproduction; this accounts for the fact that the large capitalists are struggling to open new markets for the sale of surplus goods, the very goods our own people here at home are suffering for want of. In this great competitive system the mammoth department store is sapping the life currents of the small shopkeeper; the great bonanza farm is driving the small farmer to bankruptcy and ruin.

No power on earth can arrest this concentration. It is paving the way for a new economic system, a new social order. Socialists understand its trend; they are beginning to organize in every village and every hamlet, every town and every city, of every state and territory in the country. They are organizing their forces beneath the conquering banner of economic reality.

A century and a quarter ago this country witnessed a mighty struggle for political equality, the right of men to govern this country, and the formation of this republic was the crowning glory of the century. Today there is another struggle going forward for economic equality. If men are fit to be political equals, they are also fit to be economic equals. If they are economic equals, they will be social equals; class distinctions will disappear from human society forever.

Look over in the direction of Europe: we observe that the socialists there are organizing day by day; that before their conquering march the thrones are beginning to tremble and will, within the next few years, totter to their fall. The same movement is spreading over the United States. Its progress has not been so rapid here for the reason that we have had a new country, and until recently there has been some opportunity for individual initiative. but no country on the face of the globe has been so completely exploited within so short a space of time as the United States of America.

Socialists are organizing for the purpose of securing control of the government. Having conquered the political power upon the platform that declares in favor of collective ownership in the name of the people, they will take possession of industry. It will already have been organized to meet cooperation, that is to say, self-operation, in the development of the capitalistic system. Industry will be rescued from cupidity; it will be cooperative in every department of human industry. The badge of labor will no longer be the badge of servitude. Every man will gladly do his share of the world's useful work. Every man can then honestly enjoy his share of

the world's blessings. Every machine will be a blessing to mankind because it will serve to reduce the number of hours constituting a day's work, and the workday will be shortened in exact proportion to the progress of invention. Labor will no longer be bought and sold in the markets of the world. We will not make things for sale, but will make things to use. We will fill the world with wealth and every man can have all that he can rationally use. Rent, interest, and profit, three forces of exploitation, will disappear forever.

Every man will have the same inherent right to work that he has to live; he will receive the full product of his labor. The soul will no longer be dominated by the stomach. Men and women will be economically free; life will no longer be a struggle for bread; then the children of men can begin the march to the highest type of civilization that this world has ever known.

The abolishing of the capitalistic system does not merely mean the emancipation of the working class, but of all society. It will level upward to higher and nobler elevation. This earth for the first time since it was flung into space, will be a habitable globe; it will be fit for good men and good women to live in.

The existing system is unspeakably cruel; the life currents of old age and childhood are the tributaries of the bottomless reservoir of private profit. The face of capitalist society is blotched with the effects of a diseased organism. What is the state of Christendom today? We boast of our civilization and yet every Christian nation on the face of the globe is armed to the teeth. Against whom? Against heathens, barbarians, savages? No, against other Christian nations. And the world pays its highest tribute in that form of ingenuity that enables us to destroy the most human lives in the shortest space of time. Go to the city of Washington today with a device that will enable you to destroy 100,000 lives in a second, and your fame and your fortune are made. Is that civilization in the proper sense of the term? We must bear in mind, my friends, that competition is war; that war is the normal state of capitalism.

If there were no gold in the Transvaal, there would be no British soldiers there. If there were no prospect of acquiring material wealth in the Philippines, we would not worry ourselves into premature graves because the Filipinos lack capacity for self-government. Those wars were declared by the spirit of commercial conquest. They are necessary to the

development of the capitalist system. With the end of capitalism comes the end of war, and the inauguration of peace.

In the march of invention space has almost been annihilated; the nations of the earth are being drawn into closer relations with each other. In the new social order, each nation will have its place in the sisterhood of nations, just as every man will have his place in the brotherhood of men.

I will do what little I can to hasten to coming of the day when war shall curse this earth no more. I am not a patriot in the sense in which that term is defined in the lexicon of capitalism. I have no ambition to kill my fellow man, and I am quite certain that I have no ambition to be killed. When I think of a cold, glittering steel bayonet being pushed into the soft, white, quivering flesh of a human body, I recoil with horror.

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All hail to socialism! You may retard it, you can hasten its coming by your actions; but you cannot defeat it; you cannot prevent it. It is coming just as certain as the rivers find their way to the sea. It is not yet a popular institution. It is right. A half century ago the institution of chattel slavery was very popular in the United States. It was doomed to disappear. There were thousands who believed that it was criminal and unjust; that it ought to be overthrown; but they did not have the courage of their convictions; they dared not speak out. There were a few, however, who stood erect. They were agitators to their day and they were covered with odium. William Lloyd Garrison was one of them. Not a great while ago in Newberry Park in Massachusetts, I saw a little church where the bells rung to assemble a mob to attack him when he attempted to make a speech against slavery. Wendell Phillips was another. Elijah Lovejoy was another. In 1837, in Alton, Ill., Elijah Lovejoy published the Alton Observer; a committee of friends called on him and said: "You will have to stop these attacks on slavery; our people believe in it." Mr. Lovejoy said: "I have sworn eternal opposition to it, and I will not turn back." They called on him again. He said: "I can die at my post, but I will not desert." His printing office was attacked and he was mobbed and murdered. The state of Illinois applauded the crime. Sixty years after the grandchildren of the men who murdered him erected a monument above his self-sacrificed dust in memory of his name. These men were great men, because they dared to be true to themselves and to their convictions of right and duty. They didn't ask, "Is it

popular, can I afford it, does it pay?" They simply asked: "Is it right?" and satisfying themselves that it was right, they stood by it without fear of consequences.

Ah, my friends, this movement of socialism will be popular in the next few years. It is moving forward in all directions; every man, woman, and child in the land is vitally interested in it. Such a meeting as this is immensely suggestive, immensely significant; it bears testimony to the fact that men and women are thinking upon this great question as they have never thought before; they realize that the world is trembling on the verge of the greatest organic change in human history. And the socialists realize that the next ruling class of the world will be the working class. So they are pressing forward step by step until the minority they represent becomes the majority, and seizes the reins of government and inaugurates the system of the cooperative commonwealth. If you believe in these conquering principles we ask you to join the new crusade and stand side by side with us, and cast your lot with socialism and cast your votes for the Social Democratic Party and hasten the day of its triumph.

I would address a few words to those who are in sympathy with the Social Democratic Party, but who hesitate to vote for it for fear they may lose their votes. Let me say to you: It is infinitely better to vote for freedom and fail than to vote for slavery and succeed. The Social Democratic Party also appeals to the considerate judgment and the common sense of the middle class of the country. This class is doomed to disappear in the march of the capitalist system; it is only a question of a short time until the middle class will be in the working class. And the sooner the better. For the middle class the best investment of the little capital that still remains for you is to put it into socialistic propaganda. It is possible that you may reach your journey's end in safety, but how will it be with your son? You have a boy 12 or 13 or 14 years of age; if you have that solicitude for him a good parent should have for his child, this question can cause you no little concern. He can no longer learn a trade; there is not a trade but that is crowded to overflowing. If he spends three or four years learning a trade he will find that a machine has arrived there in advance of him. He has no capital. He has simply his bare hands that represent his labor-power. He cannot buy a factor; he is compelled from the very nature of the situation to offer his labor-power, that is to say himself, for sale. If he is fortunate he becomes a wage slave. But even the privilege of selling himself into bondage may be denied him, and he may become a tramp. We cannot tell, for in

this system everything is insecure, in doubt, uncertain; you may be worth \$40,000 or \$50,000 today and a bankrupt next week or next month, and in the very sunset of your life the poorhouse looms in your vision.

Is it not possible to improve upon such a condition as this? Yes, by the intelligent application of the principles of socialism. We live in the most favored land beneath the bending sky. We have all the raw materials and the most marvelous machinery; millions of eager inhabitants seeking employment. Nothing is so easily produced as wealth, and no man should suffer for the need of it; and in a rational economic system poverty will be a horror of the past; the penitentiaries will be depopulated, and the shadow of the gallows will no longer fall upon the land. Cooperative industry carried forward in the interest of all the people — that is the foundation of the new social order; economic freedom for every human being on earth; no man compelled to depend on the arbitrary will of another for the right or opportunity to create enough to supply his material wants. There will still be competition among men; but it will not be for bread, it will be to excel in good works. Every man will work for the society in which he lives, and society will work in the interests of those who compose it.

I look into the future with absolute confidence. When I strain my vision the slightest I can see the first rising rays of the sun of the cooperative commonwealth; it will look down on a nation in which men and women — I say men and women, because in the new social order, women will stand side by side with men, the badge of inferiority will be taken from her brow — and we will enjoy the enraptured vision of a land without a master, a land without a slave.

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¹ Debs was given a bouquet of roses at the start of his speech.

² Albert J. Beveridge (1862-1927) was a progressive Republican from Indiana who served in the US Senate from 1899 to 1911.

³ Debs’s old nemesis Chauncey Depew (1834-1928), head of the New York Central Railroad, was elected to the first of two terms in the US Senate in 1898.

⁴ Edward O. Wolcott (1848-1905) of Colorado was first elected to the US Senate in 1888. He was not renominated by the Republicans in 1900, effectively ending his political career.

⁵ William Jennings Bryan (1860-1925) was again nominated by the Democratic Party as its candidate for President of the United States in 1900.