

“You Work Only at the Pleasure of Your Masters” :  
Speech to the Second Annual Monster Picnic,  
Milwaukee, Wisconsin  
[excerpt]  
(July 19, 1903)

According to the divine decree, it is frequently said that a large percentage of men must go through life as drawers of water and hewers of wood. It is a ghastly lie upon nature. Every human being has a soul and has the elements within him to attain to and enjoy the beautiful and good things of the world.

Wake up! For centuries you have been robbed, enslaved, and brutalized, but the time has now come to change all this. Join a party that has the decency to recognize your wives, your daughters, and mothers as citizens. Hold communion with yourself. Hold your heads erect. For ages your master has permitted you to work upon condition that you give him 80 percent of what you produced. He gave you the remainder, which was just sufficient to keep your soul in your body and to keep you well lubricated, so that you remained a useful animal. he was able to do this because he owned the factory, the tool.

The time has come for you to work a change in the economic revolution and own the tool yourself.

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It does not make any difference about the kind of tariff we have so long as we have to live by the tools that are owned by the capitalists. It is a question of the tool. Therefore, the workingmen must stand shoulder to shoulder; they must unite on the platform of the Socialist Party,<sup>1</sup> which believes in the collective ownership of the means of production and distribution.

The scales are falling from the eyes of the child of toil. He realizes that he has certain interests which are diametrically opposed to the class which robs him of the fruit of his labor. The bird of freedom has two wings. With

trade unionism alone he is like a bird with one wing. The other wing is supplied by social democracy. No matter what the interests of workingmen may be, no matter what their color, nationality, or religion, if they toil for their daily sustenance they should stand or fall together.

You work only at the pleasure of your masters. Before you are permitted to make a dollar for yourself you must first make a dollar for your master. He doesn't work. He knows better. To get rich quick he works those who work.

Your masters take advantage of your ignorance by appealing to your prejudice. Their powers diminish or increase as you learn or become more ignorant. On the day of election you are the "horny-handed sons of toil" and ride in a carriage. The other 364 days you walk, for you are again the common wage-slave. How many of your wives have reserved seats for the horse show?

Your senators are reported as taking a much-needed vacation at the sea shore. I wish their vacations could be made perpetual. [Applause.] You workingmen have no leisure. If you have leisure you have no wages. Yet, if your toil does not bring your master profit, you are laid off and your family is robbed of your support and forced to starve. So you must make a living, not only for yourself and your family, but also for your employer. And his welfare has first consideration, because he controls the wages through which you and your family secure existence.

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Governor LaFollette<sup>2</sup> in his speech at Chautauqua, New York, yesterday [July 18, 1903] said that the vital principle upon which rests the foundation of the government is the will of the people. In that I agree with him, but I wish to say that no principle is more defied than that which the governor of your state has enunciated. The working people of the United States have no more voice in government than if they lived in Russia. On election day workingmen desert their field and go to the two interests of capitalists. There are big and little capitalists. The meanest are sometimes the little fellows. The little fellow lacks sagacity but not the will.

Carnegie is called the steel king. I accept the title, but would change the spelling of steel and make it "s-t-e-a-l." By his own labor he couldn't make enough steel for a cambric needle. He is now spending money with a lavish hand in providing libraries for those he robbed. Each of his

libraries is cemented with the blood and sweat of crucified children of toil. One word above each library would tell the whole story — “Homestead.” Carnegie has scattered \$100 million abroad, but every penny was wrought from you. He still has so much left that he is overcome.

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What does socialism mean? It means economic liberty, political equality, and social freedom. The scales have been falling from the eyes of the children of toil. They are beginning to see more and more that the working class has ties and responsibilities.

They are understanding this fundamental fact, and they have begun accordingly to organize. But two wings are necessary to raise them to complete emancipation. Many of them believe that trade unionism will do it. But that is only the one wing, and it is as incapable of accomplishing the workingman’s emancipation as one wing is able to raise a bird into the air. Workingmen are beginning to understand that they have common economic interest. No matter whether German or English, Catholic or Protestant, the interests of men who toil are identical in the social sense, and they must stand or fall together.

Emperor Wilhelm created a political cyclone in Germany the other day when he declared that the time had come to stem the march of social democracy. Bismarck in his day attempted the same thing, but it resulted in his being wrapped in his political winding sheet.<sup>3</sup> When Wilhelm is dead and damned, social democracy will still be marching on. I would have given five years of my life, and would have it cut off now, if Karl Marx could be brought back to life to see 3 million votes cast for socialism.

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<sup>1</sup> The original has “Social Democratic Party,” almost certainly a change by Frederic Heath, editor of the *Social Democratic Herald*. The name of the Wisconsin party remained unchanged as “Social Democratic Party” throughout the entire Debsian era.

<sup>2</sup> Robert M. LaFollette, Sr. (1855-1925), a progressive Republican, was elected governor of Wisconsin in November 1900. He won re-election in 1904, resigning the position in January 1906 to become a member of the US Senate. LaFollette would be the de facto nominee of the Socialist Party for president in 1924 under the banner of the Progressive Party.

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<sup>3</sup> *Burial shroud.*