

What A Million Votes For the Socialist Party Will Mean (September 1908)

It is predicted that at least a million votes will be cast for the Socialist Party next November. To obtain a clear idea of what such a vote will mean it is necessary to consider the nature of the Socialist Party and take note of what it stands for.

The Socialist Party is an uncompromising working class political organization. It is fighting the battle of the wage workers of the world and stands for their welfare without qualification or evasion. Its demand is that all the means and instruments of production and distribution shall be used for the benefit of the actual producers of wealth, and that government shall be controlled by the workers and administered in their interest. Its platform is an honest and direct expression of working class demands, with a clear statement of the means proposed for their accomplishment.

Unlike the platforms of the Republican and Democratic parties, the Socialist Party platform is a plain and simple declaration of principles and policies which all may understand. It was not framed merely with a view to winning votes. Its utterances are straightforward and to the point. There is no ambiguity; no evasion of vital issues; no possibility of double construction.

There is no attempt to compromise with capitalism; no effort to throw a sop to the enemies of labor; no adherence to the miserable fiction that the interests of labor and capital are identical. The Socialist Party, in short, proposes to place the workers in possession of all the wealth they produce and to insure to every individual full and free opportunity to labor. The elector who casts his vote for its candidates may do so with the positive assurance that whenever the opportunity arises every pledge of the party platform will be carried out to the letter.

The Socialist Party does not disguise the fact that its ultimate aim is the entire abolition of rent, interest, and profit, and the collective ownership and operation of all the monopolized industries of the nation. A million votes for its candidates will, therefore, be an unmistakable challenge from the working class to capitalism. A million votes for the Socialist Party will be a notice served on capitalism that the workers are at last

united and alive to their class interests. It will mean that the working class intends to use its political power, through the machinery of popular government and free elections, to force compliance with its demands by peaceful, legal, and constitutional methods, to the end that wage slavery may be entirely abolished. The issue thus made up and clearly expressed is one that the leaders of capitalism cannot ignore. But they will be unable to meet the issue in the ordinary way and must adopt new tactics in dealing with working class demands.

As long as the votes of workingmen are divided between the Republican and Democratic parties capitalism has nothing to fear, as both these parties are its equally subservient tools. Whichever of these parties is in power capitalism has nothing to fear. As a matter of fact there is no real difference between the Republican and Democratic parties. Both are supporters of the existing competitive industrial system and it is now impossible to tell a Republican from a Democrat by any policy that he favors or opposes.

This condition is so obvious that it is admitted even by the capitalists themselves. The capitalist press has already said, "it is not going to make a vital difference to the country whether the Republicans or the Democrats win this year." Capitalism must have a party in its service that can be used as a foil to the demands of socialism, and as the usefulness of the Democratic party in that direction has departed, a million votes for the Socialist Party is bound to force a new political alignment and bring a new party, of middle class radical tendencies, into the field.

When the People's Party counted a million popular votes for Weaver¹ and Field² in 1892 capitalism became alarmed, and to guard against the possibility that the reforms demanded by the Omaha platform³ might be inaugurated a conspiracy was at once set on foot to destroy the party. This conspiracy was completely successful, and in the election of 1896 the People's Party lost its autonomy through fusion with the Democrats. A conspiracy of this nature directed against the Socialist Party cannot succeed. There will be no such thing as fusion, with any middle class reform party, as the Socialist Party is class-conscious. It accepts the gage of battle thrown down by President Roosevelt in his message of April 27. It is striving "to arouse this feeling of class consciousness in our working people," and seeks, not to reform the existing wage system, but to destroy it.

The only argument that has weight with capitalism is the argument of power. When the workers demonstrate that they have strength to compel,

capitalism will concede. Nowhere in the world have the interests of labor ever been recognized except as the result of a display of power by the workers which the ruling class dared not ignore. This is emphatically true of Germany and England, in both of which countries Socialism is a virile political force. Notwithstanding the severe repressive measures that were directed against the Socialists of Germany in 1879, their inefficacy was well recognized. The German emperor himself said that repressive laws were not sufficient to check the growth of Socialism, and that it was necessary also to do something to cure the evil from which the working classes were suffering. With the emperor's approval Bismarck inaugurated a comprehensive plan of remedial legislation; hence the compensation, liability insurance and pension laws which measurably lighten the horrors of wage slavery for the German workingman. Similar laws in England give expression to the fear of the ruling class, engendered by the remarkable show of strength which English Socialists have manifested in recent years.

That high priest of capitalism, Theodore Roosevelt, with greater political insight than other leaders of his class, has urged his so-called reform program for the express purpose of checking the spread of Socialism. He has pointed out that "a class grievance left too long without remedy breeds class consciousness, and, therefore, class resentment," and has plainly stated that in the measures he advocates he is "trying to steer a safe middle course, which alone can save us from a plutocratic class government on the one hand, or a socialistic class government on the other." "We are trying," said he, "to avoid alike the evils which flow from government ownership of the public utilities by which interstate commerce is chiefly carried on, and the evils which flow from the riot and chaos of unrestricted individualism." The fear to which Roosevelt gives expression is latent in the capitalist class, and a million votes for the Socialist Party will at once fan it into burning activity. The immediate effect of such a vote would probably be a demand for the enactment of repressive laws to check the growth of socialism, and it is probable that a number of idiotic and entirely futile measures of that character would be placed on the statute books. But the large and permanent result will be the enactment of remedial laws in the interest of wage workers, laws for the enactment of which the trade union representatives of the country have been vainly pleading for many years.

A million votes for the Socialist Party will mean the speedy enactment of an anti-injunction law, no matter whether the Republicans or the

Democrats win the election. It will also mean a law exempting labor unions from the penalties of the Sherman anti-trust law, as well as measures for the relief of the unemployed, municipal, state and national. Eight-hour laws, compensation and liability acts, and measures for the prevention of child labor and the supervision of mines and factories will be forthcoming; and all such laws will be upheld by court decisions declaring them valid and binding whenever they are put to the test. The judicial point of view respecting the constitutionality of labor legislation will undergo a sudden and remarkable change. Even the august Supreme Court of the United States may suddenly discover that Congress can enact laws forbidding railroad companies to discharge and blacklist their employees for belonging to labor unions without interference with the fundamental principles of this government. The effect of a million working class votes upon Congress, state legislatures, municipal councils, the courts from the highest to the lowest, as well as upon all the executive and administrative offices of government, will be immediate, and will be felt and registered in all their acts relating to organized labor and the working class. The mere announcement of such a vote will accomplish more for labor in the way of concessions than could be obtained from the ruling class by ten years of striking and pleading for justice.

Nowhere else in the world are the workers exploited so shamelessly as they are in the United States. Nowhere else in the world are the lives of wage workers so brutally sacrificed and their rights so little regarded. In no other civilized country on earth is the workingman so little protected by statute law, and nowhere else in the world are the laws designed to benefit labor so contemptuously ignored by the ruling class. Speaking of industrial conditions in the United States as he observed them during his visit to this country a few years ago, John Burns,⁴ the English labor leader, said:

America, so far as the toiler is concerned, is hell with the lid off — hell with just sufficient daylight to see that there is a way out of it.... Sooner or later every trade in America will come to realize that the same fight for existence awaits them. Unless a check is put upon them, these bloodsuckers who go on forming trusts will dominate the souls as well as the bodies of the American workmen.

Recent events have awakened the leaders of the trade union movement to the truth of what Burns observed. They have come to realize that the capitalist class already dominates the souls as well as the bodies of American workingmen. In pleading for the passage of anti-injunction and other labor laws before the judiciary committee of the House of Representatives at the last session of Congress, Samuel Gompers, President of the American Federation of Labor, said:

I know that when we attempted to make some effort along political lines to secure even the election of one man or the defeat of another, we were lampooned as if we were committing some unholy act. The mere fact that we believed in and expressed a preference for one man over another at election, and exercised our rights as American citizens to appeal to our fellows that they might assist us at the polls in the advancement of the things for the interest that we feel to be ours and in jeopardy, met with this result. Well, if to take action at the polls is improper, if it is unjust and we ought not to do it, if the strike and the boycott are made unlawful and criminal, if the very agreements that we have with our employers, brought about peaceably, brought about by mutual consent and desire, are taken as proof of the success of our conspiracy and held against us, then, I ask you, what are the American workingmen to do?

At this same meeting Mr. Gompers took occasion to threaten members of Congress with the opposition of labor at the polls. He said:

I think we are going to be heard of in the next campaign, or this impending campaign. I do not think that you, gentlemen, are going to have it all your own way. I think you will hear from us, and perhaps you may again tell us that we have got Congressmen on the unfair list.

But neither arguments nor threats had the slightest effect upon Congress. As always in the past, the demand of labor for remedial legislation was contemptuously ignored.

Why this attitude? Simply because it makes little difference to capitalism which one of its henchmen is elected to office. As long as labor confines its political activity voting for the candidates of capitalist parties capitalism is safe, and the mere fact that one candidate may be defeated and another one elected makes no difference in the general result. The working class will obtain no relief through defeating Republicans simply to elect Democrats or independents in their stead. Yet this is the only, sort

of political action that has been proposed by the trade union leaders, and workingmen have been treated to the humiliating spectacle of Mr. Gompers, as the representative of labor, fresh from his decisive defeat before Congress, knocking at the doors of both the Republican and Democratic conventions and imploring first one and then the other to place in its platform an insincere promise to do what Congress has absolutely refused to do for fourteen years past, although the request has been continuously before it during all that time, and always supported by just such arguments and threats as those presented by Mr. Gompers at the last session of Congress.

Is it any wonder that capitalism treats labor with contempt and ignores its demands for relief?

A million votes for the Socialist Party will change this attitude of indifference and contempt to one of respect and consideration. Such a vote will mean that the capitalists no longer own the franchise of their wage slaves, and the edict will at once go forth that concessions must be made to labor in order that the menace of Socialism may be removed. The trade unionist who is really anxious to perform a service for labor will cast his vote for the Socialist Party. Such a vote will not be wasted; on the contrary, the Socialist Party vote next November is the only vote that will bring results, and the larger it is the more it will accomplish. The million votes that will surely be counted will force the demands of labor into prominence and compel their recognition, and just to the extent that the million is increased will emphasis be added to the determination of the working class to emancipate itself from the thralldom of wage slavery.

Future contests between the capitalist class and the working class will be waged upon the political as well as the industrial field. To a far greater extent than in the past will the battle be fought at the polls than through the medium of strikes, lockouts and boycotts, and every accession to the Socialist Party vote, demonstrating increased unity and power in the working class, will be followed by concessions from capitalism. It is a fight to the death between the two classes as to which shall dominate and control the functions and administration of government.

A million votes for the Socialist Party will indicate that the working class has arrived at such a stage of progress in its campaign for political power that all of the fake issues of capitalism must be abandoned, and a united front made against the one and only dominating and supreme issue that threatens the very existence of the capitalist system itself — *socialism*.

The different warring wings of the capitalist political parties will get together and harmonize their differences. The conservatives and radicals will separate into different parties, but both will stand opposed to the menace of socialism as typified by the rise of the Socialist Party and its bid for power. The contest on the political field will therefore be between *socialism* and *capital*.

A million votes for the Socialist Party will bring hope and joy to Socialists throughout the world. It will nerve the arms of our comrades in the United States and give them courage and renewed strength to go forth and labor in the crusade for working class emancipation. It will solidify the movement and render it strong to resist oppression as well as aggressive to extend the bounds of its activity. It will mean the rise of Socialism as the dominant political force in the United States and the beginning of the end of capitalist rule. It will mean joy to the friends of labor; consternation and dismay to the enemies of the working class. A million votes for the Socialist Party will be a sure indication that the reign of capitalism is nearing its end, and that an era of justice, freedom, and brotherly love is soon to dawn upon the world.

Published in Joseph Medill Patterson (ed.), *Socialist Campaign Book*. Chicago: National Headquarters, Socialist Party, [Oct.] 1908; pp. 5-10.

¹ James Baird Weaver (1833-1912) was an anti-slavery Republican newspaper publisher who joined the Greenback Labor party after the Panic of 1873. He was first elected to Congress in 1878 on a Greenback-Democratic fusion ticket and returned again for the first of two more terms in 1884. In 1892 Weaver was the nominee of the People's Party for president of the United States, collecting more than a million votes and 22 electoral votes in the November election.

² James G. Field (1826-1901) lost a leg fighting for the Confederate States of America in the Civil War. He later served five years as attorney general of Virginia. He came out of a decade of political retirement to run for vice-president of the United States atop the People's Party ticket in 1892.

³ The Omaha platform was adopted at the foundation convention of the People's Party on July 4, 1892. It called for the unity of labor forces, the free and unlimited coinage of silver, adoption of a graduated income tax, government ownership of the telegraph and telephone systems, reclamation of unused land deeded to railroads, abolition of the Pinkerton system, adoption of the initiative and referendum, and opposition to corporate subsidies for any purpose, among other things.

⁴ John Burns (1858-1943) was a venerable British labor leader, active in the Social Democratic Federation from 1881. He was active in the London Dock Strike in the summer of 1889 and first elected to Parliament as a Liberal in 1892. Although socialistically inclined he

never joined the Independent Labour Party, remaining affiliated with the Liberals. He became more conservative in his declining years.