

But Two Parties and But One Issue: Speech at Riverfront Park, Chicago (June 16, 1912)

Some months ago I had a communication in the *Chicago Daily Socialist* in which I took occasion to ask, "What is the matter with Chicago?"¹ The answer you have given to that question gives me great satisfaction. I am happy, indeed, to be able to certify that there is absolutely nothing the matter with Chicago.

This is a great meeting. This vast outpouring of the workers, this tremendous and inspiring demonstration of the working class is far greater than I had expected this afternoon.² I never stand in the presence of such an enthusiastic multitude as this but that I grow stronger and stronger and feel as if I had received a fresh consecration in the cause of liberty.

Eighteen years ago in this great city of Chicago there was a great industrial battle between the railroad employees and the combined railroad corporations. Victory was within our grasp when the federal courts intervened and snatched victory from our hands. They threw me in jail. That's where I studied socialism and became a socialist. The workers of this city are beginning to realize that capitalism is doomed.

I want to give my hearty endorsement to the struggle that is going on in your city today between the locked out stereotypers, pressmen, newsboys, delivery men, etc.

I feel thrilled by this magnificent demonstration, which represents the spirit and solidarity of the working class, marching forward step by step to their emancipation.

It is only on rare occasions in delivering public speeches that I use manuscript, but having been told that this would be the opening of the campaign I concluded for obvious reasons to reduce it to writing, in order to prevent my remarks from being garbled or misrepresented by the capitalist papers.

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Friends, Comrades, and Fellow-Workers:—

We are today entering upon a national campaign of the profoundest interest to the working class and the country. In this campaign there are

but two parties and but one issue. There is no longer even the pretense of difference between the so-called Republican and the so-called Democratic parties. They are substantially one in what they stand for. They are opposed to each other on no question of principle but purely in a contest for the spoils of office.

To the workers of the country these two parties in name are one in fact. They — or rather it — stands for capitalism, for the private ownership of the means of subsistence, for the exploitation of the workers, and for wage-slavery.

Both of these old capitalist class machines are going to pieces. Having outlived their time they have become corrupt and worse than useless and now present a spectacle of political degeneracy never before witnessed in this or any other country. Both are torn by dissension and rife with disintegration. The evolution of the forces underlying them is tearing them from their foundations and sweeping them to inevitable destruction.

We have before us in this capital at this hour an exhibition of capitalist machine politics which lays bare the true inwardness of the situation in the capitalist camp. Nothing that any Socialist has ever charged in the way of corruption is to be compared with what Taft and Roosevelt have charged and proved upon one another. They are both good Republicans, just as Harmon and Bryan are both good Democrats — and they are all agreed that socialism would be the ruination of the country.

Taft and Roosevelt in the exploitation of their boasted individualism and their mad fight for official spoils have been forced to expose the whole game of capitalist class politics and reveal themselves and the whole brood of capitalist politicians in their true role before the American people. They are all the mere puppets of the ruling class. They are literally bought, paid for, and owned, body and soul, by the powers that are exploiting this nation and enslaving and robbing its toilers.

What difference is there, judged by what they stand for, between Taft, Roosevelt, LaFollette, Harmon, Wilson, Clark, and Bryan? Do they not all alike stand for the private ownership of industry and the wage-slavery of the working class? What earthly difference can it make to the millions of workers whether the Republican or Democratic political machine of capitalism is in commission?

That these two parties differ in name only and are one in fact is demonstrated beyond cavil whenever and wherever the Socialist Party constitutes a menace to their misrule. Milwaukee is a case in point and

there are many others. Confronted by the Socialists these long pretended foes are forced to drop their masks and fly into each other's arms.

The baseness, hypocrisy, and corruption of these twin political agencies of Wall Street and the ruling class cannot be expressed in words. The imagination is taxed in contemplating their crimes. There is no depth of dishonor to which they have not descended — no depth of depravity they have not sounded.

To the extent that they control elections the franchise is corrupted and the electorate debauched, and when they succeed to power, it is but to execute the will of the Wall Street interests which finance and control them. The police, the militia,³ the regular army, the courts, and all the powers lodged in class government are all freely at the service of the ruling class, especially in suppressing discontent among the slaves of the factories, mills, and mines, and keeping them safely in subjugation to their masters. How can any intelligent, self-respecting wage worker give his support to either of these corrupt capitalist parties? The emblem of a capitalist party on a workingman is the badge of his ignorance, his servility and shame.

Marshaled in battle array against these corrupt capitalist parties is the young, virile, revolutionary Socialist Party, the party of the awakening working class, whose red banners, inscribed with the inspiring shibboleth of class-conscious solidarity, proclaim the coming triumph of international socialism and the emancipation of the workers of the world.

Contrast these two political forces and the parties through which these forces find concrete expression! On the one side are the trusts, the corporations, the banks, the railroads, the plutocrats, the politicians, the bribe-givers, the ballot box stuffers, the repeaters, the parasites, retainers, and job hunters of all descriptions; the corruption funds, the filth, slime, and debauchery of ruling class politics; the press and pulpit and college, all wearing capitalism's collar, and all in concert, applauding its "patriotism" and glorifying in its plundering and profligate regime.

On the other side are the workers and producers of the nation coming into consciousness of their interests and their power as a class, filled with the new born power that throbs within them; scorning further affiliation with the parties that so long used them to their own degradation and looking trustfully to themselves and to each other for relief from oppression and for emancipation from the power which has so long enslaved them.

Honest toil, useful labor, against industrial robbery and political rottenness! These are the two forces which are arrayed against each other in deadly and uncompromising hostility in the present campaign.

We are not here to play the filthy game of capitalist politics. There is the same relative difference between capitalist class politics and working class politics that there is between capitalism and socialism. Capitalism, having its foundation in the slavery and exploitation of the masses, can only rule by corrupt means and its politics are essentially the reflex of its low and debasing economic character.

The Socialist Party as the party of the working class stands squarely upon its principles in making its appeal to the workers of the nation. It is not begging for votes, nor seeking votes, nor bargaining for votes. It is not in the vote market. It wants votes but only of those who want it — those who recognized it as their party and come to it of their own free will.

If, as the Socialist candidate for president, I were seeking office and the spoils of office I would be a traitor to the Socialist Party and a disgrace to the working class. To be sure we want all the votes we can get and all that are coming to us but only as a means of developing the political power of the working class in the struggle for industrial freedom, and not that we may revel in the spoils of office.

The workers have never yet developed or made use of their political power. They have played the game of their masters for the benefit of the master class — and now many of them, disgusted with their own blind and stupid performance, are renouncing politics and refusing to see any difference between the capitalist parties financed by the ruling class to perpetuate class rule and the Socialist Party organized and financed by the workers themselves as a means of wresting the control of government and of industry from the capitalists and making the working class the ruling class of the nation and of the world.

The Socialist Party enters the campaign under conditions that could scarcely be more favorable to the cause it represents. For the first time every state in the union is now organized and represented in the national party, and every state will have a full ticket in the field; and for the first time the socialists of the United States have a party which takes its rightful place in the great revolutionary working class movement of the world.

Four years ago with a membership of scarcely 40,000 we succeeded in polling nearly half a million votes; this year when the campaign is fairly opened we shall have 150,000 dues-paying members and an orga-

nization in all regards incalculably superior to that we had in the last campaign.

We are united, militant, aggressive, enthusiastic as never before. From the eastern coast to the Pacific short and from the Canadian line to the Mexican gulf the red banner of the proletarian revolution floats unchallenged and the exultant shouts of the advancing hosts of labor are borne on all the breezes.

There is but one issue that appeals to this conquering army — the unconditional surrender of the capitalist class. To be sure this cannot be achieved in a day and in the meantime the party enforces to the extent of its power its immediate demands and presses steadily onward toward the goal. It has its constructive program by means of which it develops its power and its capacity, step by step, seizing upon every bit of vantage to advance and strengthen its position, but never for a moment mistaking reform for revolution and never losing sight of the ultimate goal.

Socialist reform must not be confounded with so-called capitalist reform. The latter is shrewdly designed to buttress capitalism; the former to overthrow it. Socialist reform vitalizes and promotes the social revolution.

The national convention of the Socialist Party recently held at Indianapolis was in all respects the greatest gathering of representative socialists ever held in the United States. The delegates there assembled demonstrated their capacity to deal efficiently with all the vital problems which confront the party. The convention was permeated in every fiber with the class-conscious, revolutionary spirit and was thoroughly representative of the working class. Every question that came before that body was considered and disposed of in accordance with the principles and program of the international movement and on the basis of its relation to and effect upon the working class.⁴

The platform adopted by the convention is a clear and cogent enunciation of the party's principles and a frank and forceful statement of the party's mission. This platform embodies labor's indictment of the capitalist system and demands the abolition of that system. It proclaims the identity of interests of all workers and appeals to the, in clarion tones to unite for their emancipation. It points out the class struggle and emphasizes the need of the economic and political unity of the workers to wage that struggle to a successful issue. It declares relentless war upon the entire capitalist regime in the name of the rising working class and demands in uncompromising terms the overthrow of wage-slavery and the inauguration of industrial democracy.

In this platform of the Socialist Party the historic development of society is clearly stated and the fact made manifest that the time has come for the workers of the world to shake off their oppressors and exploiters, put an end to their age-long servitude, and make themselves the masters of the world.

To this end the Socialist Party has been organized; to this end it is bending all its energies and taxing all its resources; to this end it makes its appeal to the workers and their sympathizers throughout the nation.

In the name of the workers the Socialist Party condemns the capitalist system. In the name of freedom it condemns wage-slavery. In the name of modern industry it condemns poverty, idleness, and famine. In the name of peace it condemns war. In the name of civilization it condemns the murder of little children. In the name of enlightenment it condemns ignorance and superstition. In the name of the future it arraigns the past at the bar of the present, and in the name of humanity it demands social justice for every man, woman, and child.

The Socialist Party knows neither color, creed, sex, or race. It knows no aliens among the oppressed and downtrodden. It is first and last the party of the workers, regardless of their nationality, proclaiming their interests, voicing their aspirations, and fighting their battles.

It matters not where the slaves of the earth lift their bowed bodies from the dust and seek to shake off their fetters, or lighten the burden that oppresses them, the Socialist Party is pledged to encourage and support them to the full extent of its power. It matters not to what union they belong, or if they belong to any union, the Socialist Party, which sprang from their struggle, their oppression, and their aspiration, is with them through good and evil report, in trial and defeat, until at last victory is inscribed upon their banner.

Whether it be in the textile mills of Lawrence and other mills of New England where men, women, and children are ground into dividends to gorge a heartless, mill-owning plutocracy; or whether it be in the lumber and railroad camps of the far Northwest where men are herded like cattle and insulted, beaten, and deported for peaceably asserting the legal right to organize; or in the conflict with the civilized savages of San Diego, where men who dare to be known as members of the Industrial Workers of the World are kidnapped, tortured, and murdered in cold blood in the name of law and order; or in the city of Chicago where that gorgon of capitalism, the newspaper trust, is bent upon crushing and exterminating the pressmen's union; or along the Harriman lines of railroad where the slaves of the shops have been driven to the alternative of strik-

ing or sacrificing the last vestige of their manhood and self-respect — in all these battles of the workers against their capitalist oppressors the Socialist Party has the most vital concern and is freely pledged to render them all the assistance in its power.

These are the battles of the workers in the war of the classes and the battles of the workers, wherever and however fought, are always and everywhere the battles of the Socialist Party.

When Moyer, Haywood, and Pettibone were seized by the brutal mine owners of the western states and by their prostitute press consigned to the gallows, the Socialist Party lost not an hour in going to the rescue, and but for its prompt and vigorous action and the resolute protest of its press another monstrous crime against the working class would have blackened the pages of American history.

In the unceasing struggle of the workers with their exploiters the truly loyal leaders are always marked for persecution. Joseph Ettor and Arturo Giovannitti would not now be in jail awaiting trial for murder had they betrayed the slaves of the Lawrence mills. They were staunch and true; their leadership made for industrial unity and victory, and for this reason alone the enraged and defeated mill owners are now bent upon sending them to the electric chair.

These fellow-workers of ours who are now on trial for murder are not one whit more guilty of the crime with which they are charged than I am. The man who committed the murder was a policeman, an officer of the law; the victim of the crime was as usual a striker, a wage-slave, a poor working girl. Ettor and Giovannitti were two miles from the scene at the time and when the news came to them they broke into tears — and these two workingmen who would have protected that poor girl's life with their own are now to be tried for her murder.

Was ever anything in all the annals of heartless persecution more monstrous than this? Have the mill owners gone stark mad? have they in their brutal rage become stone-blind? Whatever the answer may be, it is certain that the Socialist Party and organized labor in general will never see these two innocent workers murdered in cold blood, nor will their agitation and protest cease until they have been given their freedom.

In the great campaign now opening the people, especially the toilers and producers, will be far more receptive to the truths of socialism than ever before. Since the last national campaign they have had four years more of capitalism, of political corruption, industrial stagnation, low wages and high prices, and many, very many of them have come to realize that these conditions are inherent in the capitalist system and that it is

vain and foolish to hope for relief through the political parties of that system. These people have had their eyes opened in spite of themselves. They have been made to see what the present system means to them and to their children, and they have been forced to turn against it by the sheer instinct of self-preservation.

They look abroad and they see this fair land being rapidly converted into private preserves of a plutocracy brutal and defiant as any privileged class that ever ruled in a foreign despotism; they see machinery and misery go hand in hand; they see thousands idle and poverty stricken all about them while a few are glutted to degeneracy; they see troops of child slaves ground into luxuries for the rich while their fathers have become a drug on the labor market; they see parasites in palaces and automobiles and honest workers in hovels or tramping the ties; they see the politics of the ruling corporations dripping with corruption and putridity; they see vice and crime rampant, prostitution eating like a cancer, and insanity and disease sapping the mental and physical powers of the body social, and involuntarily they cry out in horror and protest, "*This is enough! There must be a change!*" And they turn with loathing and distrust from the Republican and Democratic parties under whose joint and several maladministration these appalling conditions have been brought upon the country.

The message of socialism, which a few years ago was spurned by these people, falls today upon eager ears and receptive minds. Their prejudice has melted away. They are now prepared to cast their fortunes with their only political party that proposes a change of system and the only party that has a right to appeal to the intelligence of the people.

The political beginning of the Socialist Party in this country is now distinctly recognized even by its most implacable enemies. A single Socialist congressman has been sufficient to arouse the whole nation to the vital issue of socialism which confronts it. Victor L. Berger as the first and until now the only representative of labor has had the power, single-handed and alone, to compel the respectful consideration of the American congress, for the first time in its history, of the rights and interests of the working class. To be sure the capitalists do not relish this and so they have consolidated the Republican and Democratic forces in Berger's district to defeat him, but the rising tide of socialism will overwhelm them both and not only triumphantly re-elect Berger but a score of others to make the next congress resound with the demands of the working class.

Now is the time for the workers of this nation to develop and assert their political as well as their economic power to demonstrate their unity

and solidarity. Back up the economic victory at Lawrence with an overwhelming victory at the ballot box! Sweep the minions of the mill owners from power and fill every office from the ranks of the workers! Deliver a crushing rebuke to the hireling officials of San Diego by a united vote of the workers that will rescue the city from the rule of the degenerates and place it forever under a working class administration.=!

The Socialist Party is the only party of the people, the only party opposed to the rule of the plutocracy, the only truly democratic party in the world. It is the only party in which women have equal rights with men, the only party which denies membership to a man who refuses to recognize women as his political equal, the only party that is pledged to strike the fetters of economic and political slavery from womanhood and pave the way for a race of free women.

The Socialist Party is the only party that stands a living protest against the monstrous crime of child labor. It is the only party whose triumph will sound once and forever the knell of child slavery.

There is no hope under the present decaying system. The worker who votes the Republican or Democratic ticket does worse than throw his vote away. He is a deserter of his class and his own worst enemy, though he may be in blissful ignorance of the fact that he is false to himself and his fellow workers and that sooner or later he must reap what he has sown.

The latest census reports, covering the year 1909, show that the 6,615,046 workers in manufactories in the United States were paid an average wage of \$519 for the year, an increase of not quite 9 percent in five years, and an increase of 21 percent in ten years; but the average cost of living increased more than 40 percent during the same time, so that in point of fact the wages of these workers have been and are being steadily reduced in the progressive development of production under the capitalist system — and this in spite of all the resistance that has been or can be brought to bear by the federated craft unions. Here we are brought face to face with the imperative need of the revolutionary industrial union, embracing all the workers and fighting every battle for increased wages, shorter hours, and better conditions with a solid and united front, while at the same time pressing steadily forward in harmonious cooperation and under the restraints of self-discipline, developing the latent abilities of the workers, increasing their knowledge, and fitting them for the mastery and control of industry when the victorious hosts of labor conquer the public powers and transfer the title deeds of the mines and mills

and factories from the idle plutocrats to the industrial workers to be operated for the common good.

If the printing trades were organized on the basis of industrial unionism the spectacle of local unions in the same craft pitted against each other to their mutual destruction would not be presented to us in the city of Chicago, and the capitalist newspaper trust would not now have its heel upon the neck of the union pressmen. For this lamentable state of affairs the craft union and William Randolph Hearst, its chief patron and promoter, are entirely responsible.

The Socialist Party presents the farm workers as well as the industrial workers with a platform and program which must appeal to their intelligence and command their support. It points out to them clearly why their situation is hopeless under capitalism, how they are robbed and exploited, and why they are bound to make common cause with the industrial workers in the mills and factories of the cities, along the railways, and in the mines in the struggle for emancipation.

The education, organization, and cooperation of the workers, the entire body of them, is the conscious aim and the self-imposed task of the Socialist Party. Persistently, unceasingly, and enthusiastically this great work is being accomplished. It is the working class coming into consciousness of itself, and no power on earth can prevail against it in the hour of its complete awakening.

The laws of evolution have decreed the downfall of the capitalist system. The handwriting is upon the wall in letters of fire. The trusts are transforming industry and next will come the transformation of the trusts by the people. Socialism is inevitable. Capitalism is breaking down and the new order evolving from it is clearly the Socialist Commonwealth.

The present evolution can only culminate in industrial and social democracy, and in alliance therewith and preparing the way for the peaceable reception of the new order is the socialist movement, arousing the workers and educating and fitting them to take possession of their own when at last the struggle of the centuries has been crowned with triumph.

In the coming social order, based upon the social ownership of the means of production of wealth for the use of all instead of the private profit of the few, for which the Socialist Party stands in this and every other campaign, peace will prevail and plenty for all will abound in the land. The brute struggle for existence will have ended and the millions of exploited poor will be rescued from the skeleton clutches of poverty and famine. Prostitution and the white slave traffic, fostered and protected

under the old order, will be a horror of the past. The social conscience and the social spirit will prevail. Society will have a new birth and the race a new destiny. There will be work for all, leisure for all, and the joys of life for all.

Competition there will be, not in the struggle for existence, but to excel in good work and in social service. Every child will then have an equal chance to grow up in health and vigor of body and mind and an equal chance to rise to its full stature and achieve success in life.

These are the ideals of the Socialist Party and to these ideals it has consecrated all its energies and all its powers. The members of the Socialist Party *are* the party and their collective will is the supreme law. The Socialist Party is organized and ruled from the bottom up. There is no boss and there never can be unless the party deserts its principles and ceases to be a socialist party.

The party is supported by a dues-paying membership. It is the only political party that is so supported. Each member has not only an equal voice but is urged to take an active part in all the party councils. Each local meeting place is an educational center. The party relies wholly upon the power of education, knowledge, and mutual understanding. It buys no votes and it makes no canvass in the red light districts.

The press of the party is the most vital factor in its educational propaganda and the workers are everywhere being aroused to the necessity of building up a working class press to champion their cause and to discuss current issues from their point of view for the enlightenment of the masses.

Comrades and friends, the campaign before us gives us our supreme opportunity to reach the American people. They have but to know the true meaning of socialism to accept its philosophy and the true mission of the Socialist Party to give it their support. Let us all unite as we never have before to place the issue of socialism squarely before the masses. For years they have been deceived, misled, and betrayed and they are now hungering for the true gospel of relief and the true message of emancipation.

This is our year in the United States! Socialism is in the very air we breathe. It is the grandest shibboleth that ever inspired men and women to action in this world. In the horizon of labor it shines as a new risen sun and it is the hope of all humanity.

Onward, comrades, onward in the struggle, until triumphant socialism proclaims an emancipated race and a new world!

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¹ “What’s Wrong with Chicago?” this volume. The article by Debs, sharply critical of the Chicago socialist movement, drew a lengthy editorial response in the August 22, 1911 issue in which it was published as well as a rejoinder by Debs, very nearly withdrawn in a fit of pique before finally being published September 8. See: “The Chicago Movement,” this volume. Debs is thus here reminding his listeners of the old controversy and dismissing his former criticism of the Chicago movement for underperformance.

² A promotional advertisement in the *Chicago Tribune*, making use of hyperbole, declared “We look for 300,000 people at today’s Socialists’ picnic.” Ticket takers indicated a paid attendance of 30,000 to the Debs speech, which was held at a popular amusement park on 74 acres. The Riverfront Park extravaganza hosted by the Cook County Socialists also featured a band playing dance tunes, motorcycle races, and a bicycle stuntman who raced down a 103-foot ramp and jumped into a shallow pool of water. Although only reaching ten percent of the alleged target, the crowd was regarded as one of the largest ever assembled in Chicago and was perhaps the greatest crowd addressed by Debs in his life.

³ That is, the national guard.

⁴ Debs did not attend the 1912 Indianapolis convention, of which he speaks here so authoritatively.