

## **A Message to the Children** **(circa October 1912)**

The Socialist Party is the only party that has the children at heart; the only party that takes them into its confidence; the only party that has a message for them in a campaign year.<sup>1</sup>

In my travels about the country I have met many thousands of little children and their fresh and eager faces have always given me joy and their merry voices have filled me with delight and made me stronger for my work.

These children are not yet old enough to join the Socialist Party and have an active part in its great work, but they are old enough to understand why their parents belong to it, and why they are proud of their card of membership, and of the red button they wear, to show that they are socialists and that as socialists they are working hand in hand with thousands and thousands of others to change things so that this world may be a better, kinder, and sweeter world for us all to live in.

Now let me talk directly as I may to the more than 30 million children and young folks in our country who are less than eighteen years of age. I fancy I can see them all spread out in all directions, far as the eye can reach, and farther and farther still to the very shores of the seas and lakes and gulf that bound our western continent.

What a wonderful audience I am about to address! Not a grown person in it. Only children. Millions of them and all eager to hear the message that socialism has to offer to the child-world.

My dear little children, I am sure you will understand me when I say that in speaking to you of socialism I feel very near to all of you and I know you will believe me when I tell you that I would if I could make you all happy and keep you sweet and loving toward each other all your lives.

Most of you are the children of the poor, some of the well-to-do, and a few of the rich, but all of you are the children of the same Father and all of you are sisters and brothers in the same great family of humankind.

If any of you feel that you are better than others because you wear better clothes or live in better houses or go in what you think is "better society," it is because your young minds and hearts have been tainted by wrong example and wrong education. It is this wicked feeling that cor-

rupts the conscience and hardens the heart and begets the envy and hate of our fellow beings, instead of their love and goodwill.

When that best friend the children ever had on earth said, "Suffer little children and forbid them not, to come unto me: for such is the kingdom of heaven"<sup>2</sup> he meant all children, poor and rich, but especially the poor. He loved and pitied them because of their poverty and suffering.

He himself had been born in a manger and when he was grown up he said sorrowfully that he "hath not where to lay his head."<sup>3</sup> He did not despise little children because they were poor and neglected and shabbily dressed but he loved them all the more; and as he looked down upon them his heart melted with compassion and the tears of tenderness filled his eyes: and then he became grave and his fair brow grew dark with wrath as he thought of those who sat in rich church pews and piously thanked the Lord that they were not as other people. He denounced them as hypocrites for pretending to be religious while they robbed the poor and turned the little children into the street to suffer hunger and fall into evil ways.

Nearly twenty centuries have passed since the suffering poor heard with gladness the message of the lowly Nazarene and since he was moved to tears by the sight of the little children of the street, but the world has not yet learned the meaning of his tender and touching words, "Suffer little children, and forbid them not, to come unto me; for of such is the kingdom of heaven." If he were to walk the streets of New York or Chicago, or Lawrence, Massachusetts, or any of the cities where the mills and sweatshops are filled with child slaves as he once walked the streets of Jerusalem he would grow sick at heart as he saw the little ones he so loved, pale and wan and worn, harnessed to monstrous machines and slowly put to death to swell the profits of the greedy mill owners who sit in the rich pews of the synagogue, as did the Pharisees he scourged without mercy twenty centuries ago.

The children of the working people have always been poor because the world has never been just. For ages and ages those who have build ed the houses, cultivated the fields, raised the crops, spun the wool, woven the cloth, supplied the food we eat and the clothes we wear, and furnished the homes we live in, have been the poor and despised, while those who profited by their labor and consumed the good things they produced, have been the rich and respectable.

Jesus himself was a carpenter's son and suffered the poverty of his class and when he grew up it was not the rich and respectable, but the poor and despised who loved him, and opened their arms to receive him,

and heard gladly his tender and comforting ministrations. He was one of them in poverty and suffering and in all his loving and self-denying life he never forgot them. Had he deserted the poor from whom he sprang, had he gone over to the rich as their preacher, or their judge, or their lawyer or teacher or scribe as so many of his pretended followers have done and are still doing he never would have been crucified, nor would the world today know that he had ever lived.

It was because, and only because, Jesus loved and served the poor and rebuked the rich who robbed them, and threatened to array them against their rich despoilers, that he was condemned to die and that the cruel nails were driven into his hands and feet on the cross at Calvary.

Jesus taught that the earth and the air and the sea and sky and all the beauty and fulness thereof were for all the children of men; that they should all equally enjoy the riches of nature and dwell together in peace, bear one another's burdens and love one another, and that is what socialism teaches and why the rich thieves who have laid hold of the earth and its bounties would crucify the socialists as those other robbers of the poor crucified Jesus two thousand years ago.

Now let us see what message the Socialist Party has for the children and why all children should be socialists and help to speed the day when the brotherhood of socialism shall prevail throughout the earth.

But first let me say that the Socialist Party has reason to know that the children have great influence when they become interested in a given work and set their hearts on doing that work. The Socialist Party knows better than to ignore the children as if they were china dolls or stuffed teddy bears, as all the other parties do, for it knows by what they have already done that when once they get fairly started they will make the air hum like swarms of bees with the glad tidings of socialism.

The little boys and girls who have already become socialists are among the busiest workers for our party and they love so well to work for socialism that it is play to them and fills their hearts with joy. They wear the red button and they know why it is red and what its meaning is; they tack up bills and distribute dodgers advertising our meetings; they sell tickets, take up collections, act as ushers, provide the soapbox for the corner speaker, carry chairs for the women so they may sit in comfort after their day's work, go around among the neighbors and remind them of the meeting and not to forget to attend, sell socialist books, papers, and pamphlets, and do a score of other things which are just as useful in their way as the speech of the orator that wins the applause of the people.

Now the Socialist Party is the only party in the world that wants to put an end once and forever to all kinds of child labor and to have it so that all children, white and black, without a single exception, shall be allowed to grow up in the free air, with plenty of time for mirth and play; that they shall all have decent homes to live in, comfortable beds to sleep in, plenty of good food to eat, plenty of good clothes to wear and that when they reach the proper age they shall go to school and college and continue their course until they have obtained a sound and practical education. Then they will have strong, healthy bodies, trained minds and skilled hands, and not only enter cheerfully upon the duties of life, but be certain of making it a success.

If you listen to the old fogies who still belong to the parties their grandfathers did and who have not moved an inch from their grandfathers' graves, they will tell you that socialists are foolish people and that what they propose never can be done. That is what the fogies of every age have always said. They are the "wise" people who do things in the same way that their dead grandparents did before them, who never change their minds, never accept a new idea, never grow, and who are always dead long before they are buried and forgotten the day after the funeral. Whatever you may be I beg of you not to be a fogey, nor to follow a fogey's solemn advice. His brain has ceased to work if it ever did work. He is mentally stagnant and moss-covered and votes the same old ticket with no more idea of what he is voting for than a wooden Indian.<sup>4</sup>

The Socialist Party says there have got to be some changes and has set about making them, or at least getting ready to make them. It says that the world is big enough for all the people that are in it, with plenty of room to spare for groves and parks and playgrounds; that there is land enough to go around without crowding; that there are farms enough, or can be easily provided, to raise all we can eat, so that no child in all the world need to go hungry; that there is plenty of coal and iron, oil and gas, gold and silver and other minerals and metals, stored in the earth; that there are forests and mountains and water courses galore; that there are mills and mines and factories and ships and railways and telegraphs, and the power supplied free by nature to run them all; that there are millions of men and women ready to do all the work that may be required to build homes, raise crops, bake bread and cake, too, weave cloth, make clothes and everything else that is necessary for everybody, and have time enough besides to build schools and provide playgrounds for every last one of the children, with plenty of toys thrown in to make this earth a children's paradise.

Now why should not just these things come to pass and why should not you children help us speed the day when they *shall* come to pass?

Everything you can possibly think of to make this earth sweet and beautiful and to make life a blessed joy for us all is within our reach. The raw materials are at our feet; the forces to fashion them into forms of beauty and use are at our fingertips. We have but to put ourselves in harmony with nature and with one another to spread far and wide the gospel of life and love and once more hear “the sons of God shout for joy.”<sup>5</sup>

Socialists not only dream of the good day coming when the world shall know that men are brothers and that women are sisters to each other, but they are at work with all their hearts and all their heads and hands to make that dream come true.

If you want to know what the plans of the Socialists are in detail read their platform, attend their lectures and study their literature. Socialism is the greatest thing in all the world today and the boys and girls of this generation who will be remembered in the next are those who are clear-eyed enough to see that socialism is coming and are at the battlefield fighting bravely to overcome the prejudice against it and to pave the way for it so that it may come soon and in peace and order.

Many of us who have been long in service will not be here when the bells peal forth the joyous tidings that socialism has triumphed and that the people are free, but the children that now are will live to see it and in the day of their rejoicing they will not forget those who toiled without recompense that they might live without dread of poverty or fear of want.

As we look about us today we see that the world is filled with suffering and despair and when we come to look into the cause of it we find that it is a reproach to us all. As I write the news comes of the fierce battle that is being fought between ten thousand hungry miners in West Virginia and the thugs and ex-convicts and murderers armed by the coal corporations to force the strikers back into their dismal and hopeless pits. The battle has already lasted two days. Many on both sides have been killed, but the capitalist papers are doing all they can to hush it up.

Long ago the miners were evicted from the company's wretched hovels. They and their wives and children live in tented fields and the brutal guards have even driven the women and children from there into the wilderness to starve that the strike may be broken and the miners compelled to go back to work at the terms of their greedy and heartless masters.

And why is this awful battle raging and human beings murdering each other as if they were wild beasts? Because a few gluttonous slave

owners like Henry Gassaway Davis and the Watsons and Elkinses who dwell in gorgeous palaces on vast estates occupying whole mountain ranges, privately own the mines and minerals which were intended for all, and consequently the thousands of miners and their wives and children are at their mercy, and when they meekly asked for five percent more wages so their families would not suffer for bread the brutal lords of the mines sent out their private army of assassins to hunt them down and kill them as if they were mad dogs.

The Socialist Party says that those mines should be owned by all the people and that is what will come to pass when the socialists get into power, and then the green hills of West Virginia and other states will no longer echo with the rifle shots of corporation assassins, nor run red with the blood of honest workingmen slain to appease the greed of their soulless masters.

In February last, four boys were hanged in Chicago. The oldest was 21, the youngest barely out of his childhood. They had held up and robbed and murdered a poor truck farmer for the little money he had on his person. Not one of these boys ever had a decent home. They were born in poverty, reared in ignorance, and surrounded by vice and filth.

This is cultivating crime and reaping the harvest. We socialists weep as we think of the cruel fate of those four poor, friendless boys who died on the gallows while they were still in their childhood, because the world has not yet learned that there is greater profit in raising children than there is in raising hogs.

The frightful stories of the little children in the mills of Lawrence and the cruel suffering they endured is still fresh in the public memory. When the poor and despairing mothers, their hearts wrung with agony and their eyes blinded with tears, attempted to save their children from starvation by placing them in the keeping of sympathizing friends, they were beaten, insulted, and with babies at their breasts thrown into jail, bleeding and stunned, by the brutal police acting under orders from the far more brutal mill owners.

The world will never know the suffering and terror these poor working people especially the women and children had to endure for daring to ask the millionaire mill owners for a pittance more in return for their labor to keep the wolf of hunger from their gloomy hovels.

When the Socialist Party gets into power those mills at Lawrence and all others like them will be taken over by the people and operated for the good of all, and then the workers will keep the wealth they produce for themselves, instead of turning it over to the greedy mill bosses ; they will

have decent homes to live in, food in plenty on their tables, and their children will go to school to be properly educated instead of to the mills to be ground into profits to gorge their idle owners.

In March last, Mrs. L. F. Jellson of Salem, Oregon, gave poison to each of her four little children, her own offspring, because they were starving and she was poor and had no way to get them bread. She then poisoned herself and all she asked in the note she left was that she and her darling children be buried together. This poor heartbroken soul was driven to destroy herself and her precious babes because the world as it now is would not allow them to live.<sup>6</sup>

Think for just a moment of all the food there is in the world and all there might be and then tell me if socialists are wrong and foolish and wicked for saying that the self-murder of this poor woman and the murder of her children is a terrible crime of which society is guilty and for which there is no excuse on earth or in heaven.

A recent investigation showed that in the city of St. Louis there are 16,000 young women who receive as wage-earners less than \$8 per week and over 3,000 who receive from \$3 to \$4 per week.

It is easy to see from this why so many little girls and younger women are forced to enter upon the path which leads to shame and sorrow and which seldom bears the impress of returning footsteps.

When the giant *Titanic* met her fate, fifty little bellboys went down with her to the bottom of the sea. They were ordered, according to the account, to their regular posts in the main cabin and warned by their captain not to get into the way of the escaping passengers. James Humphries, as quartermaster and eyewitness said, "throughout the first hour of confusion and terror these lads sat quietly on their benches. Not one of them attempted to enter a lifeboat. Not one of them was saved,"

Can you read this without being moved to tears? Brave, noble little lads! I almost feel as if it had been a privilege to go down with these great little souls to their watery grave.

The little boys who perished here were poor boys, many of them without fathers, and others obliged to support widowed mothers and little brothers and sisters younger than themselves.

What a lesson this touching, deeply pathetic incident teaches and what a world of meaning there is in the sad circumstances of their tragic death! Had they not been poor children, little waifs, they would not have been locked in the cabin to perish like rats. They would not, in fact, have been there at all, and had it not been for the pride and pomp, the greed

and luxury that paraded the upper deck, the *Titanic* never would have gone to the bottom of the sea.

And now, my children, I must come to a close. I have taken up much of your time, but I have only been able to trace in barest outline what the Socialist Party is organized for, what it aims to do, and will do, and why the children, above all, should vie with each other in helping it to grow and speeding the happy day of its success.

When that day comes the rejoicing people will realize that the kingdom of heaven, so long prayed for, has been set up here on earth in the social brotherhood of all mankind.

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<sup>1</sup> According to the 1916 book *Labor and Freedom*, this document was a 1912 campaign leaflet, a date and purpose indicated by internal content. However no listing for such a Debs publication can be located in the run of *Socialist Party Official Bulletin* for that year, nor does any such leaflet appear in the comprehensive OCLC WorldCat as of this writing. While not every one of the dozens of leaflets issued over the years by the Socialist Party has been cataloged by OCLC, neither can it be surely said that this manuscript was ever published in leaflet form as indicated. SPA leaflets in this period were generally produced in print runs of from 50,000 to 100,000 and their availability for distribution was publicized; the lack of such a mention in the party press is frankly puzzling.

<sup>2</sup> From Matthew 19:14. See also Mark 10:14, Luke 18:16.

<sup>3</sup> From Matthew 8:20; Luke 9:58.

<sup>4</sup> Cigar stores of this period frequently displayed wooden sculptures of Native Americans in the front of their establishments as a symbol of the tobacconist trade. This was a colorful and commercially alluring acknowledgment of the indigenous origins of tobacco smoking.

<sup>5</sup> The expression "shout for joy" is used in five Psalms of the King James Bible, none of which seem directly related to Debs's quotation here.

<sup>6</sup> Ms. Jellson, age 36, was despondent about her eldest son having recently left home and declared herself too ill to work to support the family, quitting a job in a local restaurant. She pitched a tent in front of her house where she poisoned her four children, aged 9 to 15, with potassium cyanide before killing herself. In a suicide note Jellson declared herself unwilling to see her children "starve," despite leaving \$21 in cash towards their collective burial. See: *Nebraska State Journal*, March 3, 1912, p. 10.