
Plan to Redeem Toil:

Eugene V. Debs and Others Look Toward Establishing a Colony in the West that Finally Will Enfold All Labor (May 24, 1897)

Special to the *Chicago Record*.

Terre Haute, Ind., May 24 [1897].— Eugene V. Debs has returned from his trip to Utah and Colorado and finds awaiting him here N. [Norman Wallace] Lermond of Thomaston, Maine, Secretary of the Brotherhood of the Cooperative Commonwealth. Mr. Lermond has been in Tennessee and Arkansas looking for a location for a cooperative colony, but since his conference with Mr. Debs he announces that no further steps will be taken by brotherhood until after the convention, or conference, which is to be held in Chicago after the special convention of the American Railway Union, which is called for June 15. It is probable that the brotherhood, which now has 2,000 members, will be merged into the new organization, which will endeavor to get political possession of some western state and there try the experiment of a state cooperative commonwealth. Mr. Debs, himself, is opposed to the colony idea, because he believes it is not on a scale large enough to accomplish much good even if it were successful. But it is his impression that there is to be a radical change in the industrial system throughout the country, and that the successful operation of the cooperative idea in one state will cause it to be adopted everywhere.

Prepare for Chicago Conference.

The Chicago conference will be attended by delegates from labor organizations in most of the larger cities, especially in the West. There will also be present such men as Prof. [Frank] Parsons of Boston, Prof. [George D.] Herron of Iowa, and Henry D[emarest] Lloyd. Mr. Debs says that while he cannot speak for the conference his own theory is that as soon as possible 100 men should begin the work of enrolling of members of the new organization. He is confident that a membership of 1 million could be obtained in six months. These members would be asked

to contribute whatever amount they felt able to give, and the fund thus raised would be used in sending men into that Western or Southwestern state where the effort is to be made to obtain political control.

After this has been accomplished, a constitutional convention would be called, and the organic law of the state changed in such a manner as to permit of the complete introduction of the cooperative plan. The Chicago conference will determine which state is to be selected.

Kind of Men Wanted.

While Debs denies that he is to lead an army of unemployed in a march to the field of endeavor on the part of the cooperative people, still he is in favor of sending large numbers of men to the state, perhaps 1,000 at a time, and this, too, as soon as possible. They will not go as mendicants, however, nor will they be the idle and disreputable part of humanity, such as would have been called together by a rallying cry for a marching army. The manner in which they will move to the state is yet to be decided, but if they march, it will be as self-respecting men, who are backed with money to pay their way, and will not depend on the charity of the country through which they pass. Mr. Debs says that perhaps it may be determined to march not so much for the purpose of economy as to attract the attention of the country to the cooperative movement, but if it is decided to march every precaution will be taken to prevent the movement being brought into ridicule or disrepute by the character of the men or the march itself. When the army starts it will be with a public meeting, perhaps in Chicago, which will be addressed by men whose hearts are in the movement, such as B[enjamin] Fay Mills, perhaps, or Myron Reed, or Henry D. Lloyd.

Receives Much Encouragement.

Mr. Debs has received many letters about the cooperative scheme since he was interviewed on the subject a few weeks ago, and all are of an encouraging nature. Among those who have written is Dr. Rainsford, the Episcopal clergymen of New York. In New England, among the professional men and those not engaged in commercial pursuits, Mr. Lermond says there is almost a unanimous sentiment in favor of some effort to bring about a change in the industrial system, and these men are willing to assist the state cooperative commonwealth movement. Mr. Debs is confident that \$50,000 a month can be raised after a few months

of organization, and this money will be sufficient to keep the new men in the state employed until they can find a market for their product. In this respect, it is intended to have all members of the organization assist in supporting the movement by buying from [their] own producers. In the larger cities stores will be established where the products of the cooperative industries will be on sale. [The intimation] is that the cities of Chicago, St. Louis, and Milwaukee will furnish much assistance to the movement, both in membership and in the purchase of products. It is also true that there are thousands in those cities who will join an army to go anywhere.

Mr. Debs has been informed that some persons in Chicago want to hold meetings of the unemployed, but he has urgently requested that this be not done. He knows the temper of the idle men, and also fears the effect of what some excitable speaker might say on the cooperative movement. He says that while he has the utmost sympathy for the unemployed men, no matter how far they have slipped away from self-respecting manhood in their idleness, still care must be taken not to do anything that would lose the support of all people who desire a change in the condition of the industrial element in the country.

Mr. Debs' Trip to the West.

Mr. Debs says that while in Utah he made close investigation of the workings of the original cooperative scheme of the Mormons. He found that it was perfect until the spirit of commercialism came upon the leaders of the church. He thinks that the work of the Mormons in building up Utah out of a desert has not been fully understood, because the public knows Mormonism only by its upholding of polygamy. The details of the cooperative scheme of the Mormons, however, show that it was perfect. When asked if the church discipline did not have a great deal to do with making the Mormons prosperous and content with their lot, he said it undoubtedly did, but that in the new cooperative movement there would be equally as strong influences in the belief of those who undertake it in the doctrine of cooperation. Only such men as believe in the doctrine as devout Christians believe in their religion would take part in the movement. There are thousands of men who are now believers in the doctrine who a few years ago would not give it a thought. These men have come to see that there is no hope for the relief they have been counting upon from trade unions or from political parties. Trade unions are utterly unable to stop the constantly lowering of wages simply

because these reductions are part of a natural law and are inevitable. The grinding process is the natural result of the rule of capitalism, and no organization of men can uphold wages when the heartless strife for gain is ruling all industry and commerce. Workingmen cannot be held in line, he says, for trade unionism when they see the futility of these organizations. They want something which gives promise of results, and the cooperative scheme appeals to them strongly now as it never did before.

Further Wage Reductions.

While in the West Mr. Debs learned that there is to be a reduction of wages all along the line in mining, railroad service, and in all industries within the next 90 days, and he does not see how it can be prevented. The miners, whose convention he has just attended,¹ fought the Leadville strike at a cost of \$1.5 million and lost. Those men know there must now be a new plan of operations, and they are going into cooperative mining as fast as they can do so. They are in an ugly temper, though, and when President [Edward] Boyce made the following recommendation in his annual address he was cheered to the echo, and the recommendation was adopted.

I strongly advise you to devise ways and means to provide every member with the latest improved rifle which can be obtained from the factory at a nominal price. I entreat you to take action on this important question so that in two years we can hear the inspiring music of the martial tread of 25,000 armed men in the ranks of labor.

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¹ Debs and his wife were the guests of the Western Federation of Miners, who held their 5th Annual Convention in Salt Lake City.