

The Approaching Convention (January 12, 1901)

The special convention which meets at Chicago on the 15th [January 1901] promises to mark an important era in the progress of the party. It is called by members of the party, the “rank and file,” of whom we hear so much these days, and they will have entire control of its deliberations.¹ Every member of the party is entitled to a seat in the convention with full rights as a delegate; and if unable to attend in person he may sign the credential of some other comrade, thus being represented by a delegate of his own personal choice. This will make the convention as democratic as such a body can possibly be.

And yet it is not doubted that we will hear about “boss rule” and “hero worship.”² This sort of talk is not strange to us. We have heard it all along the route. It comes from the throat of envy and is inspired in the heart of failure.³

When you hear this cry turn your dark lantern in the direction whence it comes, and you will see — not always, but generally — a very small man, or two or three of them, in fear of losing their occupation. They are desperately opposed to “bosses” — other than themselves. They are greatly alarmed lest their own service be dispensed with, and hence their lilliputian assaults upon “leaders” and “bosses” and “hero worshipers.” Artemus Ward⁴ would probably have classed them with his “amoosin kusses,”⁵ and as such we dismiss them.⁶

The convention will be well attended, but I write to urge every comrade who can possibly do so to answer the roll call in person.

I heartily concur in the call for a national meeting at this time. Matters of great importance demand consideration and action. Delay would simply impede progress.

It is generally admitted that the party has outgrown its present form of organization. Certain changes are necessary that the party may keep pace with the progress of events.

There will be both opportunities and responsibilities for the delegates. They should and doubtless will be actuated by the loftiest motives. The

party must be made the best expression of the socialist movement. If less than this the defects must be remedied and the weak points strengthened.

There is not one who does not wish to see all factions merged into one united party, but it is time wasted to try to force a union of inharmonious elements. The growth of the movement will do the work. The unifying process will go forward with the infusion of new blood.

It is not a question of uniting two antagonistic factions, but of bringing all the socialists of the country into harmonious alliance that there may be one united party which can summon to its aid all the strength of the socialist movement in grappling with the capitalist parties for the overthrow of capitalism.

The delegates must, if true to themselves and equal to their responsibilities, take advanced ground. Great strides have been taken since the last convention⁷ and the party must be adapted to the conditions now existing, and be prepared to face the future with not only a clear comprehension of its demands and necessities, but the required ability and power to successfully meet them as they come.

Tens of thousands stand ready to join us. Our policy must be such as to appeal to them, as well as to other thousands that are being rapidly prepared for socialism by the economic development.

Wisely directed, the coming convention will pave the way from the bogs and fens of factional strife to the highland of party supremacy.

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¹ Ascribing the volition for the January Special Convention to the rank and file rather than the leadership of the Chicago SDP is disingenuous. In his letter of Nov. 9, 1900 to his brother Theodore, Debs reminded him that "we held a deliberate [national executive] board meeting and agreed to call a special convention within 30 days after election. I wrote the call and mailed it to you." (See: Constantine, *Letters of Eugene V. Debs: Vol. 1*, pp. 154-156.)

² Debs was deeply sensitive to charges made by the Springfield SDP that the Chicago SDP tended towards Debs hero-worship and that its anti-unity National Executive Board was a political machine out of touch with the actual views of the rank and file membership. In reality, both of these criticisms were more or less true.

³ This braggadocio obscures the fact that the paid membership of the Springfield organization greatly exceeded that of the Chicago organization.

⁴ Artemus Ward was the pseudonym of Charles Farrar Browne (1834-1867), a humorist writer and public speaker who was a contemporary and personal friend of Mark Twain (1835-1910).

⁵ *Amusing cusses.*

⁶ This seems to be a matter of projection, as it was the Chicago NEB, holders of position and privilege, that blocked the 1900 drive for socialist unity. For its entire existence paid positions in Debs social democracy had been dominated by the trusted old circle of American Railway Union functionaries. None would retain their positions by the end of the merger.

⁷ The first national convention of the Chicago SDP was held in Indianapolis from March 6-9, 1900.