

Capitalism Has Nearly Reached Its Climax:
Speech in Denver Following the Joint Convention
of the WFM and the WLU
(June 8, 1902)

Ladies and Gentlemen and Comrades:—

I have said before, I wish to repeat it this evening, that it is impossible for me to understand how any sane human being can escape the logic of socialism. The economic development is so clearly toward social ownership that it is self-evident, and its culmination in the social republic is a foregone conclusion. It may be well enough to address one's self to the moral sense of man, to preach about the need of human brotherhood, but all time so spent is absolutely wasted so long as the present hard, stubborn, unyielding economic conditions exist. Only when we realize this, only when we united for the purpose of changing the economic basis of society, can we hope for improvement of social and spiritual conditions for the human race. If it were possible to arouse you all this evening by an appeal to your emotions, if all of your hearts were melted into one and you were to leave this hall in that condition and under that influence, within 24 hours after leaving here, in the hard, merciless grind of the competitive system all that influence would be dissipated. I would rather set one man thinking for himself than to arouse the maudlin sentiment of a million. (*Applause.*)

The socialist movement is essentially the movement of the working class, and allow me to say to you this evening that the heart of humanity throbs in the working class and the labor movement is the hope of the world. There are today but two classes. Some of you may imagine there are more, but you are mistaken. You are in one class or you are in the other; it is possible that you are in both — there are many men and women in the middle class who are exploiting themselves. There are but two classes, and when this competitive struggle shall have reached its climax, when the people who now constitute the middle element of society shall have been expatriated, the property of this and every other country will have gravitated into the hands of a very few. The great mass will have been totally stripped, dispossessed, propertyless, with identical class interests that will bind them together as with hooks of steel.

There is a great deal of opposition to socialism in the middle class for the reason that the man who still has a little property fears that the socialist movement is to dispossess him. Why, my friend, you are laboring under a delusion. You are fighting for a system that will strip you naked and put you and your children on the street.

Not very long ago I addressed a meeting on this subject in Terre Haute, where I reside, and a prominent merchant came forward at the close and said: "Mr. Debs, I believe you are sincere, but you are wasting your time. The world's all right. Every man has an equal chance with every other if he will only take advantage of it." I said: "Simply wait. In your present condition my logic will not penetrate your armor, but it is only a question of a short time until you will be put where you properly belong by the logic of events." About two years after that I addressed another meeting upon the same subject in the same town. At the close the same ex-merchant came forward. He had aged very considerably within two years, his hair had become white, his cheeks were sunken, the luster had left his eye, and he spoke in almost a whisper. He said: "Two years ago I told you that you were wrong. I have come forward tonight to tell you that you were right."

How did he happen to change his mind? Two years before he was where you are now, he was in business but he had some large competitors. It was an unequal struggle. He lost ground. His profits were reduced, his expenses were increased, until after a while, instead of making a little money he lost, and he lost more and more until he failed, and when he was forced into bankruptcy and the sheriff took possession of his business and put him into the street he then realized that a change of system was necessary. (*Applause.*)

So many of you who are in the middle class would, on account of your private purse, stop the march of this universe. Every proposition that presents itself to you is decided upon the basis of the probable effect it may have upon your pocketbook. Well, the time is coming when your pocketbook is to suffer, when your stock will be depleted, when you will find it impossible to make a living. The logic that fails to reach you tonight will penetrate you then, and will compel the conclusion that we have arrived at long ago, that we must have a change of system. So while the socialist movement is today necessarily the movement of the working class, in the ultimate it is the movement of all and for all humanity. The working class can only emancipate itself in one way, and this is by making the means of

production common property and this means the emancipation of the human race.

There are those who imagine that when the working class succeed to power they will at once proceed to subjugate, enslave, and exploit some other class. This has been the history of the past. It is not true of the present socialist movement and in this very important respect the present social revolution differs from every other in all past history.

Were I a sane, successful capitalist — pardon me, that is a contradiction of terms — if it were possible for me as a capitalist to amass a fortune and still remain normal, I would become a socialist from pure intellectual conviction. I would rather live in the very worst state of socialism that its bitterest enemies can charge upon it than to live in the very best state of capitalism that its warmest friends can claim for it. If I owned the earth, I could not enjoy it at the price of human slavery.

But the class struggle is going forward. It is a stern, unyielding fact. The socialist did not create this struggle. The socialist simply calls your attention to it. He points it out that you may clearly understand it, that you may note its tendency, that you may make the proper alignment. On the other hand, the capitalist who profits by this struggle seeks to cover and obscure it that it may be perpetuated. He cries out in protest against the socialist: “You are inflaming the minds of the people, you are trying to array class against class, and this is un-American and unpatriotic.” I said last night, and I want to repeat it this evening, that in the capitalist system I am a rebel and not a patriot. (*Applause.*) I am doing all I can to array the working class against the capitalist class. I want the exploited workingman to know his master. (*Applause.*)

There are many in the middle class who know him, especially in the professions — the lawyer, for example, that great factor in capitalist society, almost a hundred thousand of whom produce nothing but trouble. (*Applause.*) Ninety-nine percent of the litigation that is in progress in this country today is traceable directly or indirectly to private ownership of the means of life. I never occupied a pulpit, but I know enough of scripture to make what I conceive to be an apt quotation: “The ox knoweth his owner; the ass, his master’s crib.”¹ The difference between the lawyer and the workingman is that the workingman produces wealth; he does useful work, is necessary to society and to civilization. The lawyer is a parasite. He simply absorbs wealth. He is leech upon the workingman. (*Applause.*) And it pays far better, in the vulgar, material sense of the present day, to be

useless than it does to be useful. It is possible to get rich by being useless, but it is scarcely possible to get rich by being useful. No workingman, no matter what his wage, no matter how long he lives, no matter how economical or miserly he may be, no workingman can get rich by his labor. The man who gets rich is he who coins the sweat and blood of the working class into profit for himself. (*Applause.*)

Now in the case of feudalism, the system that immediately preceded capitalism, this was done by the act of the feudal baron owning thousands, perhaps tens of thousands of serfs. During all the dark ages all Europe constituted a feudal despotism. The feudal robbers had their palaces located among the cliffs, the ruins of which may yet be seen. They had vast landed estates and these were peopled by millions of serfs that were chained to the soil. They were the chattel property of the lords. Five days in the week they worked for their masters and one day weekly they were permitted to work for themselves, to produce just enough to keep themselves in working order.

Toward the close of the 18th century, by virtue of the ingenuity of the working man, the simple, primitive tool of production began its wonderful transformation. The inventions, the discoveries that resulted in developing machinery and the application of machinery to industry so completely changed conditions that the interest of the feudal class was in conflict with social and industrial progress. With the application of machinery to industry and the increase of the productive power of labor which resulted, a surplus was produced, and then began the struggle for the market of the world that has steadily intensified from that day to this. Owners of the machinery were in competition with each other. Cheap labor was demanded. Women were forced to leave and enter into competition with men; children were withdrawn from school to supply the demand for cheaper and cheaper labor. When finally the feudal system had outlived its usefulness, the new class, the trader, the businessman, the incipient capitalist, supported by the serfs, arose in their might, overthrew the feudal system, and feudalism was swept forever from the earth.

From that time to this the capitalist system has been steadily developing until it has almost reached its climax. Centralization and cooperation are the forces of this age. Competition has been almost extinguished. It is simply a question of days until individual initiative will be practically impossible. Production has been almost wholly socialized. When the evolution is complete it will be entirely so. We have before our eyes the modern

agencies of production in the form of syndicates and trusts. The evolution is only partial; we are just beyond the halfway point. The evolution must be pushed to its termination if civilization is to survive, and it is for this that we are organizing. At the present point of development the trust is to many a veritable curse, and if the evolution were to cease here it would be better that no labor-saving device had ever been invented; but fortunately it is not in the power of any human being, or of any class, nor of all combined, to check the evolutionary forces that have brought society to the present elevation and that are designed in the fullness of time to place all mankind upon an exalted plane of equality.

We are organizing to abolish the capitalist system, and to accomplish this object we require a certain well-defined political equipment. We must, as I have already stated, take control of the power of government. But let me call your attention to the fact that the party that succeeds to power, that seizes the reins of government, must be a class-conscious party. The present government corrupts everything it touches. It has already control of vastly too much. The present government is entirely coercive. It is simply a monumental policeman, and his chief duty consists in keeping the exploited victims of the capitalist in subjection and creating a new market for the sale of his surplus goods.

We must have socialist administration instead of capitalist government. To accomplish this we must organize. We must succeed at the ballot box. We must sweep into power in every state and in the union as a whole. When we have so succeeded we shall represent a majority of the people, those who have been expropriated during all these years. Some people ask with amazement how the people are to come in possession of the vast machinery of production. This is the simplest proposition I can imagine. How did the present owners come in possession of it? (*A voice: "Robbery."*) That is the plain term for it.

John D. Rockefeller owns all, or practically all, of the oil fields, oil refineries, sugar refineries, a vast portion of the railroads, telegraph, and telephone — and the Chicago Standard Oil University.² (*Laughter.*) What part of all this and these did he ever produce? Andrew Carnegie is scattering capitalist libraries abroad with a prodigal hand. He is hailed as the greatest benefactor of modern times. I want to concur very heartily with what our Comrade Wise has said in respect to the philanthropist: "Good Lord, save us from the philanthropist." The system in which the philanthropist flourishes is that which makes philanthropy a necessity. Andrew

Carnegie, with all the millions he is scattering abroad, erecting monuments to his vanity, cannot spend the money as fast as it rushes in upon him from a thousand sources of exploitation. Carnegie is worth, as the capitalists put it, hundreds of millions of dollars. He accumulated this tremendous fortune, in the presence of which we stand bewildered, in the production of steel and in gaining control of steel markets of the world. Now if a resident of Mars or Venus, buy some modern appliance, were to wing his flight to earth and land in Denver, and you were to tell him about Carnegie, the wonderful steel magnate, he would at once infer that Carnegie was a manufacturer of steel; but instead of this he is simply a stealer of manufacturing. (*Applause.*) Carnegie could not, if his soul depended upon it, make enough steel out of which to make a needle. Rockefeller, if his salvation were at stake, could not produce oil enough to grease a gimlet. (*Laughter.*)

Here is a vast deposit of coal, not the result of human labor, but of thousands of years of action of sunlight and heat upon decaying vegetable matter. The socialist declares that this coal, this deposit of the natural forces that ministers to the wants and needs of the children of men, should be, ought to be, the common property of all. If an individual had the right to take possession of this part of the earth, this storehouse of nature; if he has the right to place himself at the door and say: "All of you who want coal must pay tribute to me;" if he has the right to do this, he has the right to own the entire earth. He has the right to monopolize the sun, if he can, and he would very promptly claim it if he could reach it, and if he could reach it, within a week there would be a meter on every sunbeam. Here are a hundred men who set to work; they develop a mine and produce 100 tons of coal. What part of this coal, in your judgment, are they entitled to? (*A voice: "All of it."*) Certainly, and if they are not entitled to all of it I would like to have you tell me what part anyone else is entitled to. If these hundred men are entitled to 100 percent of the product of their labor, it follows, logically, and there is no escape from the conclusion, that the working class at large are entitled to the full product of their toil.

Now do you know what percent they are actually getting? The working class can today, with the aid of modern machinery, produce from 20 to 50 times as much as they could 60 years ago, but the very instrument of production, the machine, which has increased the productive capacity, has also, privately owned, increased the competition among the workers and lowered their wages. It used to require some years to learn a trade. The skill of the trade places the workingman above the level of indiscriminate

competition. He then received practically the product of his toil. If he was a shoemaker and did not get the equivalent of his labor, he could quite the service of his employer. He could invest the \$50 that he had saved in the few tools of his trade, the lapstone, hammer, knife, and a few pegs, rent a shop, and commence making shoes on his own account. This was true of the carpenter, the tailor, and other skilled workers. There were certain well-defined crafts and when a man had mastered his trade the tools were simple and cheap and he could buy these and set to work and he was the master of what his labor produced.

In that day there was no overproduction. Now, as I have said, the machine has increased the productive capacity to a marvelous degree. Why does not the worker have from 20 to 50 times as much of everything as he had 50 or 60 years ago? I will tell you: When the machine came it absorbed the skill of the trade; that is to say, as the machine became more perfect it could be operated by unskilled labor. The capitalist must have cheap labor to control the market. Here is a woman — the wage of her husband has gone down; he can no longer support his family; the woman must leave home and become a factor in industry. Millions of women are so employed and millions of children are in competition with them. As a result, the wage steadily declines. The workingman produces in abundance, but he only consumes up to the point of the wage he receives. What is the wage he now receives? You have been told over and over again that the wage is higher today than it ever was, an untruth on the face of it, and I challenge contradiction. The wage of the worker in proportion to the production is smaller today than it ever was in the history of our country.

Let us get down to actual figures. In 1890 out of every \$10 worth of finished product, the workingman received \$2.22, according to the census reports. After a lapse of ten years we find that instead of \$2.22 he received but \$1.77 in 1900, or a fraction over 17 percent of what his labor produced. As the machine multiplies, as the competition sharpens between men, women, and children, his wage diminishes in inverse ratio as his product increases.

Now, when the work was done by hand, the workingman, who is the consumer as well as the producer, furnished a market for what his labor produced. Everything was done by the slow and tedious process of hand labor. It took three or four days to make a suit of clothes, and now you can make one in a few minutes. Then men were, as a rule, well dressed; now thousands are in rags because we can make clothes too easy. When it took

a long time to make a suit of clothes the worker absorbed a good deal of the product of others while making the clothes. The workers also wore hats and clothes and shoes. They simply exchanged with each other and every community supplied for its own wants. Overproduction and the struggle for a foreign market was practically unknown. but today the machine operated by a child produces these articles in abundance, but the machine does not wear hats and clothes and shoes. Do you see the point? The machine, in other words, does not provided the market for what it produces; and for many years we have produced not more than we can use, but more than we can sell, for the great body of the workers can only buy a small share of what they produce.

Now the capitalist class cannot absorb the surplus, and that is why our soldiers are in the Philippine Islands today. That is why it is patriotic for man to murder man. That is why it is necessary to transform this fair earth into a slaughterhouse. We are compelled to commit murder upon a gigantic scale to dispose of the surplus products that our own people here at home are suffering for the want of. I am not asking you to change this anarchistic, this utterly brutal system, from any merely moral consideration. I am making the deliberate statement here tonight that whether you will or not, this system will be changed. (*Cheers.*) In the eternal march of the race one state of society follows another. The social organism, like the units that compose it, is subject to the inexorable laws of evolution. We are on the verge of a worldwide change. If you are unconscious of it, if you cannot see it, I advise you to consult an oculist; and if you see it and still withhold your support from the socialist movement, it is because you are an imaginary beneficiary of the slaughter, or because you are an intellectual coward. I say "imaginary" because the system has no real beneficiary. John Rockefeller serves as a warning, not an example. He succeeded at the price of imbecility and death. you can succeed if you are willing to pay the price, but you cannot succeed unless you are, and if you think you can, you are deceiving no one more than yourself. you will be obliged to settle by the books.

We come into this world without a dollar, we leave it the same way. Death is no respecter of persons; not even a multimillionaire can bribe him, nor can a federal judge enjoin him. (*Applause.*)

Just consider Rockefeller for a moment. The reason there is a big Rockefeller is because there are so many little Rockefellers. So many have the capitalist spirit, the ambition, and lack only the capacity and power.

Rockefeller lives on the 8th or 10th floor of some office building. When you approach his office you will find that you are halted by a guard. There is a lifesaving service station there. Just imagine yourself having to have yourself guarded against your fellow Christians. Rockefeller, like the Denver miner in this system, is a prisoner for life, like the miner, he has a keeper; like the miner, there is no pardoning power for him. The difference is he occupies a gilded cell. He does not enjoy the life. He does not dare to reveal his identity when he appears upon the thoroughfares of New York; he is in dread of the flash of the dagger, the crack of the murderous pistol. He is in truth in fear of himself. He cowers before the specters in his vision. He knows that his vast fortune represents the skulls and bones of thousands and tens of thousands of his slaughtered victims, and when at night you are refreshing yourselves with slumber, he hears the wails of the victims far away, his brain reels, his nervous system is strained, his vitality is sapped, his constitution is undermined, he becomes a perverted human being. You may talk to him about Shakespeare — he may have heard of him — he has no more conception of this genius than the man who works in the ditch. He has a magnificent library, but examine the books; you will find the leaves uncut,³ for the man who is engaged in accumulating a fortune has no time to nurture the intellect, no time to cultivate the heart, no time for the inspiration of his soul. He may sit in his palatial residence, surrounded by the luxuries of all climes; there may be music and dancing, but the festivities are never quite sufficient to drown the lamentations a few blocks from there in the wretched hovels, mingled with the despairing cry: “O God, that the bread should be so dear, and flesh and blood so cheap.”

There is a collapse of his nervous organization and the most skilled specialists are hastily summoned. They make a careful examination of the patient and they find that all of their skill is fruitless, for the mark of death is already on him who so long unconsciously courted it. And after a while the silent messenger enters there, as he does the hovel, with noiseless tread, and swiftly finds his way to the couch of pain, where the capitalist is drawing his last breath. In a twinkling he is brought to a level with the victims of his cupidity.

He who enslaves his fellow beings simply forges fetters for himself. The master is as much less a man as his slave; and as much in need of emancipation.

it is coming as certain as I stand in your presence, and the magnificent speeches that were made in advance of my own effort have made it clear to all.

We ask you, in justice to yourself, hold aloof no longer; come forward now, enroll your name and take your place side by side with your comrades in this conquering movement.

Take your place with us and in the years to come, when at last the socialist movement has triumphed, your name will be inscribed upon the roll of the immortals.

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¹ From *Isaiah* chapter 1, verse 3.

² The University of Chicago.

³ Many books were formerly made with large folded sheets bound into covers without being mechanically cut into individual pages, leaving the purchaser to "open" the individual leaves with a sharp device at the time of first reading.