
Interview with Charles A. Thompson, Workingmen's Party Candidate for Mayor of Cincinnati, March 3, 1877

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A reporter for the *Enquirer* yesterday interviewed Mr. Charles A. Thompson, the candidate of the Workingmen's Party in this city for Mayor.¹ Mr. Thompson is a young man, 29 years of age. He is a pleasant, affable gentleman, an entertaining conversationalist, and a most companionable person. He always dresses in good style, and may be considered a rather handsome person. He is a member of the firm of Jaffras, Seeley & Co., having grown up with the house from boyhood.² He has an intimate knowledge of the business, knows all the customers of the house, and is in many respects the mainstay and prop. He is a thorough-going businessman. He has pronounced views on social topics. The interview between our representative and Mr. T. will afford the public a clear idea of the aims and methods of the organization which Mr. Thompson has the honor of leading.

Reporter:— *What do you think of the chances of the Workingmen's ticket?*

¹ The Workingmen's Party originated in 1874 as the Social-Democratic Workingmen's Party of North America. It merged with other small groups in Philadelphia in July 1876 to form the Workingmen's Party of the United States. This group changed its name at a convention held at the end of December 1877 to the Socialistic Labor Party of America, emerging as the mainline Marxist political organization in America prior to formation of the Social Democratic Party in 1897..

² In another short news article the firm is described as a "wholesale women's furnishings house."

Mr. Thompson:— The ticket may not be elected, but that our vote will be a large one, and sufficiently large to justify the belief in our ability to carry the county next fall, as well as to encourage the party at large to make a grand charge all along the line throughout the country, I have no doubt. It should be remembered that this is not merely a local and temporary uprising to assist either of the old parties, or to further the personal aspirations of any candidate in the coming municipal contest, but that the movement has a thorough and powerful national organization, directing the agitation in nearly all the large towns and cities in the country.

Reporter:— *But we learn but little of the movement at other points from our exchange?*

Mr. Thompson:— The reason of that is quite apparent. Elsewhere, as in Cincinnati, the press have neglected to mention this agitation until it has assumed the form of *political action*, when, as a matter of news, they can no longer ignore it. This is proven by the course of the *Commercial*, as well as by your present visit in behalf of the *Enquirer*. Mr. Halstead personally has always been afraid of the *people*, and consequently hates this movement as the devil does holy water.³ So in answer to the known desire of the readers to hear something of it, he misrepresents its aims and methods, as if they were children who knew less of the subject than he does.

Reporter:— *In what particular does the organization known as the Workingmen's Party of the United States differ from previous political efforts of and in behalf of the workingmen?*

Mr. Thompson:— This is the first *political* effort ever made in this country, organized or directed in any way by the people themselves, and based on a clear-cut denial of the right of private title to the ownership of the *means* by which labor is performed. Strikes and other kindred means by which the working class have heretofore sought to enforce their rights have proved abortive, because the wrangle between the individual employer and his employees as to the *rate* of wages has involved the admission on the part of the latter that labor was a commodity to be bought and sold like any other thing in the market. Negro slavery in the South met its downfall because the people were so radical and incendiary as to reject the title by which a man held as property

³ **Murat Halstead** (1829-1908), was the Republican editor and publisher of the Cincinnati *Commercial*, later the *Commercial Gazette*.

his fellow-man, although the right to do so was clearly recognized by our Constitution and laws as is at present the title to landed estates. We follow this *now* generally popular idea to its logical conclusion, and declare that there is no *practical* difference between the ownership of the laborer and the ownership of his *means* of labor — that *political* freedom without *economic* emancipation “is but an empty phrase.”

Reporter:— *But how is it practicable to free labor from the bondage of which you speak?*

Mr. Thompson:— Theories have but little use unless they contain within themselves some idea of relief naturally suggested by the *cause* of difficulty. Governmental aid in the establishment of industrial cooperation would effectually relieve the laborer from the necessity of paying a tribute to capital equal to five-sixths (or nine-tenths, as it will be at the end of another decade according to the ratio of the last 50 years) of his production, and will cost the government much less and will be much safer than the loans, subsidies, and chartered privileges heretofore granted to great monopolies under the Titmousean promise that they were “to do everything for everybody.”

Reporter:— *But how can your idea be carried into practice in the City Government?*

Mr. Thompson:— As easy here as in the General Government. Had the 20 or 25 millions which the Southern Railroad will cost the city been expended in developing mechanical cooperation here, the returns to the people of this city in the way of substantial prosperity would be greater than can be secured from the building of a dozen such roads. True, that by the former the beneficent results would be shared in by the whole people rather than confined to the exceptional few, as will be the case in building the road — but that is no objection in my eyes.

Reporter:— *How are the people to be protected from public plunderings and corruption in such undertakings?*

Mr. Thompson:— In my opinion all the corruption with which we are cursed is attributable to the absence of the principle of Socialism and the refusal to recognize economic considerations in our political methods. But little money is directly stolen from the city funds in comparison with the amount annually filched from the pockets of both rich and poor by the great monopolies in our midst, whose greed tempts and whose moneyed power enables

them to corrupt the Municipal Government. Need our “substantial citizens” be shocked at the contemplation of the sale of an Alderman when they *know* that the large dividends *they* have been receiving as stockholders of the Gas Company, Consolidated Street Railroad Company, and other kindred monopolies could only have been secured by bribery of persons holding official trusts? Need we look for an honest administration of our city affairs while a gas company, either old or new, exists, and the men whose pockets swell with the dividends procured by corruption and bribery are recognized as the “better class,” whose approval only is supposed to be needed by our legislative bodies?

Reporter:— *How long do you expect your party to hold its own against the organization and money which the old parties can bring into the field?*

Mr. Thompson:— We depend largely on the strength of the reforms contemplated. As for money we need but little — only for printer’s ink and small expenses for public meetings. We buy no votes, set up no kegs of beer for the boys, and do the work ourselves. The campaign fund is contributed by all the members, from 10 cents up. The candidates are not assessed, nor are they expected to contribute anything for the distinction of being on the ticket. As for organization, that matter will be so well attended to that neither of our opponents will have reason to congratulate themselves that we have neglected our business. All the wards are being thoroughly organized and canvassed, and a thousand intelligent, law-abiding, and organized men, moving to the polls on the morning of the election for all-day work can hardly be ridiculed or driven from the work they have undertaken.

Reporter:— *Will the Workingmen’s Party contest the state election next fall?*

Mr. Thompson:— After the city election next month [April 1877], no matter what the result, the party will be rapidly organized throughout the state, and doubtless an early campaign will be inaugurated.

Reporter:— *How came you, a merchant and a manufacturer, to be so largely identified with this movement?*

Mr. Thompson:— Because it is not so much a class movement as the rather inappropriate name given to the party would indicate. The movement is thoroughly *socialistic*, and, like our young giant brother in Germany, must finally bring to its ranks thoughtful

and just men without regard to occupation. The daily increasing uncertainties of business are but the inevitable result of the unnatural pauperism of the producers, who must also be the consumers. I would make times good by securing to the people who work a decent proportion of the product of their industry and skill, that they may use more, and thus prevent the melancholy spectacle now before us of a country literally choked up with the abundance of life's comforts perishing for want of use, while the toilers who created it and their families suffer as though the plague and famine had devastated the earth.

Edited with footnotes by Tim Davenport

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