
Ruskin Colony's Collapse:

The Rise and Downfall of the Latest Utopian Scheme: Colonists Appealing for Fifteen Thousand Dollars.

Recent Events at Ruskin — Receiver Applied for and Lands to be Sold — Development of the Colony Idea in General — Birth of Ruskin — Wayland Starts It, and then Makes His Pile Out of It — Disreputable Policy of *The Coming Nation* — Attempts of Stockholders to Veneer the Condition of the Colony — The Founders Now Admit that Ruskin Was Never Intended to be a “Socialistic” Community — Rascality of the Whole Scheme Proven — Colonization Versus Socialism.

by Julian Pierce

Published in *The People* [New York], v. 9, no. 9 (May 28, 1899), pp. 1, 3.

The Ruskin Cooperative Association, at Ruskin, Tenn., commonly known as the “Ruskin Colony,” is about to collapse.

Its lands and houses are to be sold, and the hundred or so colonists still on the site of the colony are appealing to the utopians of the country for FIFTEEN THOUSAND DOLLARS to tide them over the “crisis.”

During the last three years, *The People* has suggested once or twice that the Ruskin Colony was rotten financially. The reply of *The Coming Nation*, the organ of the colony, has uniformly been that *The People* had but little regard for the truth, and that the colony was on the highest wave of prosperity. Of late these boasts of solvency have been louder than ever and in larger type than ever, proceeding probably from an analogy with the decay of vitality of the human body. It often happens that just before dissolution a man will secure a sudden access of strength which by the unskilled is taken as a symptom of returning life, but which to the experienced eye of the physician is naught but the premonition of the death rattle.

Thus with the Ruskin Colony. Three weeks ago, boasting in strident tones of its absolute solvency and prosperity, and while the words were flowing from the pen of the editor, legal proceedings for the sale of the property and winding up the affairs of the colony were being executed.

Colonies in General.

Should the Socialist keep a record of all the failures of schemes developed ostensibly “to rescue society from the ravenous maw of the capitalist system of production,” the clerical labor required would take most of his time; and usually it would be time thrown away.

Occasionally, however, a scheme collapse which from the very importance that has been claimed for it by its adherents, as well as the importance it has assumed in many other minds, demands obsequies of a more formal character than such fiascoes usually merit. And Ruskin Colony, claimed by its promoters to be “Socialism in practice,” is one of these schemes.

Four hundred years ago there lived in England a man named Thomas More. At that time (the forepart of the 16th Century) poverty and misery were prolific in England, as elsewhere in Europe. More's emotions were sensitive enough to be easily stirred, and his sympathies were quick enough to be easily roused. He saw the misery and the poverty and the degradation on every hand, and he may have seen the causes; but he realized his powerlessness to work any great revolution in society, and then, like all emotionalists, he took refuge in his imagination and proceeded to construct societies and governments in his mind. He was acquainted with the paradise of which St. John of Bible

lore had dreamed (which paradise is generally called "heaven") and proceeded to dream a dream himself — with modifications.

St. John located his paradise off among the stars somewhere. More located his on earth. Rather than let his imagination course through ether and at last light on a planet, as did the imagination of the Apostle, More took a voyage across boundless seas to South America, and there in the tropics, far inland, he discovers a peculiar people, who inhabit a peculiar land called Utopia.

The political and social evils of 16th Century England — and those evils were many — were all absent from the Utopians. The social life of the Utopians was molded after a rude form of communism, under which food, clothing, and shelter were produced in abundance for all, and where there was such an absence of vice and such a presence of virtue, such as absence of political inequality and such a presence of political equality, that ever since then the adjective "utopian" has been used to designate the visionary and the impracticable.

Utopia was simply an idea of More's, an ideal of More's — a community that lived, moved, and had its being within the confines of More's cerebrum and cerebellum.

Since the 16th Century other men with easily moved sympathies and vivid imaginations have seen political and social injustice, and, like More, have set their imaginations to work to IMAGINE a state in which political and social injustice would be absent; and with all of them, from More down to Bellamy, the policy advocated has been that of withdrawing from the society where this injustice reigns, going to an isolated portion of the earth, and there, with nature as raw material, build a new and model society.

The limits of this article will not permit the tracing of the development of this idea, but it undoubtedly secured its inspiration from the monastic orders of the Middle Ages, whose members, discovering that they could not practice their peculiar morals in society as it then existed, withdrew from society, and in mountain fastness and desert waste established colonies of hermits, where, remote from even the possibility of worldly temptation, they could live their whimsical lives, practice their whimsical rites, and leave the world without to hammer its way along the rough and

winding road of progress as best it might. The analogy between the monastery and the cooperative colony should not, however, be carried further. In most instances the hermits succeeded in leading the kind of life they set out to lead; with the cooperative colony the reverse is true.

For more than a hundred years the colony scheme, in its various forms, has been the heaven of the utopian. In the first years of the [19th] century, Rapp and his band of devotees established Harmony Colony in Pennsylvania. It was about to lapse when [Robert] Owen appeared, cleared up the debris, and started it over again as New Harmony Colony, and that ultimately went to the wall. Then Fourier elaborated imaginary details, and inspired thousands to enter on abortive attempts to live one form of society inside another form of social organization, and his phalanx and phalansterey cropped out in hundreds of little communities, of which Brook Farm was a type. Cabet followed with another ready-made suit for society to put on, and Icaria was born to lead a perilous career. And in the later years have come the Bellamyites to retire into the wilderness and there reform the industrial order.

The Ruskin Colony — Its Genesis and History.

And this brings us to Ruskin, which is the latest effort at colonization.

The idea of Ruskin was first revealed to J.A. Wayland, at the present time the owner and editor of *The Appeal to Reason*, an alleged Socialist paper, which he publishes in a little country town in Kansas called Girard.

In April 1893, Wayland published the first number of *The Coming Nation* at Greensburg, Indiana. Populism was then at its height, and the paper became in time the mouthpiece for the misguided who though they saw in Populism, with its absurd middle class demands, a shortcut to the Cooperative Commonwealth. Wayland was familiar with the history of colonization in all its forms from Fourierism through Cabetism to Bellamyism. He was also acquainted with the history of the failure of colonization in all its forms. A knowledge of these failures, however, did not deter him from attempting to plough the field all over again

and harrow it with a Wayland harrow.

Wayland's scheme was a fertile one, and appeared like this. Wayland owns *The Coming Nation*. You enthusiasts increase the circulation to 100,000 a year. That will leave a surplus of \$27,000 a year. This money will be Wayland's, but Wayland will be a philanthropist and use it to purchase 3,000 acres of land as a basis for the colony. Charter members were to be those who sent in 200 subscribers or paid an equivalent in money. In return, Wayland was to throw in all he had — type, press, subscription list, even Wayland himself. The whole *Coming Nation*, editor and all, was to go into the pool and serve as a nucleus around which to build the cooperative commonwealth in the midst of a capitalist nation.

In the spring of 1894 a good deal of money was on hand through the efforts of the enthusiasts, and Wayland was on the lookout for a site. In Chicago there was a land company, and that land company owned a tract of land in Tennessee. It was 3 miles from the railway station at Tennessee City. It consisted of barren rocky hills, absolutely unfit for cultivation or habitation, having neither fertile soil nor living water. Yet the land company sold 1,000 acres of it to Wayland for \$1,000, and in the spring of 1894 *The Coming Nation* issued a call for the martyrs. The fugitives from capitalism began to appear at Tennessee City, and in August [1894], 19 men applied for a charter and became charter members of the "Ruskin Cooperative Association." The charter was a rather voluminous document, the principal clause stipulating that membership in the colony could only be had by the payment of \$500. They worked on their barren land, cut railway ties from their timber, and starved on the income from *The Coming Nation* until July 1895, when a crisis was reached, or rather, the culmination of a crisis, for the colony had been in a crisis ever since Wayland made the deal with the Chicago land company.

The crisis came about in the following manner. One of the agreements made by Wayland was that he would contribute the plant of *The Coming Nation*, which he valued at \$12,000. He postponed, however, the legal surrender of the plant from time to time and seemed so loth to do things in a business manner that there grew up a suspicion that Wayland was looking out for Wayland and did not intend to surrender the

plant. In July [1895] a demand was made on him for the printing outfit, and he flatly refused to keep his promise. He demanded cash for his plant, and he got it. The printed reports of the colony do not tell how much cash he got. The only suggestion relative thereto is to be found in the statement that in October 1894 they were free from debt and had a balance on hand, while in July 1895, after Wayland had been bought out and kicked out, the colony was without money and \$3,000 in debt.

Wayland gone, the barrenness of Wayland's site was more apparent than ever. The colonists had to get fertile land or starve (as matters have turned out they have nearly starved anyway) and in June 1897 they deserted the original site and ran in debt for 600 acres of fertile land a few miles from Wayland's purchase. On this 600 acres of unpaid for land the colony is now located, and when in a few days the hammer of the auctioneer knocks down their property to the highest bidder they will have been taught a lesson, rude though the teaching may be, that the time for hermitizing is gone, and that the ballot box is the place and the ballot the machine for revolutionizing society and ushering in the Cooperative Commonwealth.

From Stress to Chicanery.

Years ago Socialists demonstrated that material necessity is the motive power of human action. That is to say, that the stomach and other organs of the body are the mainsprings to action. The application of this reasoning to the history of Ruskin leads one to sentiments of pity mingled with those of anger for the misguided enthusiasts and promoters who have fought a losing battle in the woods of Tennessee — pity for the enthusiasts, anger for the promoter who have preyed upon the credulity of the "reformers."

The necessity of getting a living was what led them to Ruskin, and the continued necessity of getting a living was what led them into a great deal of the evident chicanery practiced. Their paper, *The Coming Nation*, heralded itself a Socialist paper, while its columns have ever been open to the most sickening anti-Socialist rot that has ever degraded any paper of its class. In many instances it has been worse than *The Appeal to Reason*. Any one of its subscribers was permitted to express himself in its columns, and even to-

day, with the fallacy of the anti-bank power policy thoroughly exploded, it is not unusual to see the organ of Ruskin Colony devote columns of space to Populist dribble, descriptive of the oppression resulting from the "banks," the "money power," and the "gold standard."

It is quite likely, however, that this course has been something of an economic necessity. The principal source of the colony's income has been *The Coming Nation*. Therefore every attempt has been made to increase its circulation. But the time was not ripe for a large circulation of a paper teaching clear-cut Socialism; hence to get a large circulation they were compelled to publish a lot of middle class delusion, Populist fallacy, and colonization dreamlets. The paper was the last resort for every economic freak that capitalism has produced; and it had to accept the dissertations of the freaks or so out of the newspaper business, which it was loth to do, for going out of the newspaper business meant going out of the colony business. And so the farce was kept up.

Having a fairly good printing plant, they naturally desired to get all they could out of it, and branched out into the publishing business. They began the publication of a *Telegrapher's Advocate*, which was to get the telegraphers imbibed with the colony idea. But after a few issues the *Advocate* discontinued. Then St. Louis *Labor* was having a hard row to hoe, and Sanderson persuaded the Ruskinites to take hold of it and use for its columns matter that had previously been served up to the subscribers of *The Coming Nation*. Wherever the Socialist Labor Party had a thriving organization, there *Labor* was sent by the thousands with its half-baked Socialism and its milk-and-water tactics. It was going to broaden the movement. But *Labor* soon suspended.

Then the colony began to manufacture a few small commodities such as leather suspenders, leather belts, chewing gum, and cereal coffee, raised flower seeds and bulbs, enlarged photographs, and attempted to make a few honest pennies in various other ways. They relied on the "cooperation" of their friends to secure a market for their products. This cooperation was necessary because as a general thing their tools were crude, and consequently their products were inferior to those produced by the more modern machinery of capitalist production; but the cooperation was

not sufficient to enlarge materially the business of the colony.

Early in 1897 *The Coming Nation* was back with headlines describing the "Ruskin College of the New Economy," which was to be built for the purpose of giving "Socialist education" to the youth of the land. Every Utopian in the country was appealed to for contributions. Pictures were printed of the completed building with a flag floating from the flagstaff of the cupola, a fountain playing in the park, and the sward covered with students. Roseate idealism this, but they went further and published floor plans showing the location of the classrooms, recitation rooms, laboratories, and reception rooms. The dollars and cents began to roll in as a result of this judicious exploit of the imagination. Excavations were begun, and the cornerstone laid in June 1897. Henry D. Lloyd was brought on from Chicago and spoke seven columns and a half about the auspiciousness of the occasion. The address of Lloyd was used for all it was worth, and contributions continued to flow in with a healthy regularity. Gradually, however, the enthusiasm ebbed, subscriptions became less frequent, reports of the progress of the work were intermittently printed, and on November 26, 1898, the receipt and expense account ceased altogether with the following:

| | |
|-------------------------------|-----------|
| Amount received to date | \$ 920.23 |
| Amount expended to date | 519.55 |
| | ----- |
| Balance | \$ 400.68 |

And that is the last information that has been published regarding the college building and equipment fund. The work on the substructure was of course done by members of the colony, and the money contributed thus got into the colony's treasury. On December 31, 1898, shortly after Herbert N. Casson reached Ruskin, a special boom edition of *The Coming Nation* was published, but not a word appeared about the college or the college fund. The idea had been worked for all it was worth and then dropped.

Retributive Figures.

At various times after the Ruskin Colony was started, *The People* received numerous communica-

tions relative to the advisability of workingmen who had managed to save \$500 joining the colony and handing their hard-earned dollars over to the colony officials. *The People* uniformly advised against such action, and predicted that the colony would ultimately go to the wall from internal dissensions due to external competition. In July 1897, while the colony was being sued by some of the retiring members, *The People* printed an article questioning the honesty of the management, and expressed the opinion that the leading spirits in the colony were a “ring of unconscionable pirates, who are sailing the waters of the Social Movement under the false colors of ‘Socialism.’” In vehement and abusive language, *The People* was told that it was wrong, and to completely knock out *The People*, *The Coming Nation* resorted to figures as follows:

| | |
|---------------------------------------|-------------|
| Colony assets when incorporated | \$18,040.90 |
| Colony assets on Jan. 1, 1896 | 28,114.54 |
| Colony assets on Jan. 1, 1897 | 60,109.95 |

Among the persons signing this financial statement were the following:

A.S. Edwards, Paul Schneider, W. H. Lawson, J.K. Lawson, E.B. Lonsbury, M.H. Lonsbury, M.F. Rogers, J.A. Sturgis, Emma White, W.J. Ribley, J.H. Dodson, A.M. Dodson, W.H. Chatlesworth.

The editor of *The Coming Nation* and the writer of the article containing the above statement was A.S. Edwards, at present getting his living by abusing the Socialist Labor Party through the medium of the “English-speaking organ” of Mr. Debs’ “Social Democracy” [*The Social Democratic Herald*].

On January 1, 1897, the liabilities were claimed to be practically nothing, and the shareholders were but 63, making almost \$1,000 a person, while none of them had put in more than \$500 apiece, and many had been permitted to “work out” the price of their shares. This was a really good showing — nearly a doubling of individual assets. Recent developments, however, are showing that these assets are largely fictitious.

The People Indicated.

But the wheels of time roll on, and the colony

continues to “prosper.” New members are “taken in” nearly every week, the property is improved, and their prosperity becomes so great that on January 28, 1899, less than 4 months ago, Allen Fields, President of the Ruskin Cooperative Association, publishes a sworn financial statement in which the assets are given at \$94,073.19, and the liabilities practically nothing. It may here be observed that these gentlemen have never regarded the thousands of dollars they owe for the land as a liability, because, forsooth, the mortgage is not yet due. This is much like borrowing \$100 for 90 days, and then insisting it is not a liability until the last day of grace. And at the time President Allen Fields swore to that utterly misleading statement, 17 members of the colony had applied for a receivership to wind up the affairs of the Association, calling for the sale of the property and the division of the proceeds among the stockholders. The receivership was granted on April 24 [1899], but owing to legal technicalities was revoked the following day. Some of the allegations taken from the body of the complaint are unique. The object of the corporation as defined in the charter is to establish a mining and manufacturing company. The 17 persons who make the complaint, and most of whom were charter members, attack themselves and their alleged principles as follows:

Complainants charge that these bylaws [of the colony] are null and void as not being adapted for the purposes of a mining and manufacturing company, but are the basis or foundation of a Socialistic community.

Complainants show to the court that the defendants are engaged in a business of publishing a newspaper called *The Coming Nation*, and under the charter aforesaid the same is not for the purpose of advertising the legitimate business of the defendant corporation, but the same is being operated for profit as a business venture under said mining and manufacturing charter, and complainants deny the power of said officers and directors of the defendant association to publish said paper for said purposes under the charter aforesaid.

In the light of history the above allegations are remarkable. They are made largely by men who were charter members of the colony, by men who have talked loud and written long about the glorious experiment they were making “in Socialism,” and now they go before the court and swear (and remember that one of the swearers, A.S. Edwards, is today posing as a leader in Mr. Debs’ Social Democracy, while *The Coming Nation* itself has ever been tossing bouquets to Debs

and his co-delusionists) that the Ruskin Cooperative Association was never intended to be a Socialist community, that it was intended to be a corporation run for profit, and they ask the courts of the United States to come to their aid and sit down on any Socialist inclinations that may manifest themselves in the colony. When rogues fall out, then we can get a good deal of information and the present editor of *The Coming Nation* now admits all that *The People* has ever said regarding the rascality of the whole gang that started Ruskin, from J.A. Wayland down the line to A.S. Edwards. Listen to this:

The same parties have often during the past year stated in conversation that this is not and was never intended to be a Socialistic undertaking.

Here we have the disgusting spectacle of men who helped organize a "colony in the interest of Socialism" turning around and demanding a wind-up of the affairs of the Association because the business they instituted is not what they claimed it was. They have ever been appealing to Socialists for support, and now go into court and admit that they are a lot of clever rascals and never intended to put into operation any Socialist principles at all, even though it were possible to do so. W.J. Ribley, one of these men who have been appealing for the good Socialists of the country to rally around Ruskin, describes himself as an Anarchist with strong disciplinarian tendencies.

Other allegations in the bill of these gentlemen are fully as interesting. Listen to the following:

And complainants allege that this corporation WAS IMPRACTICABLE in its conception and is now manifestly incapable of execution. There are NO FUNDS IN THE TREASURY; the property owned by the defendants is yielding no income; and, if any, it is absorbed in the way pointed out in the former part of this bill.

And complainants allege that the defendants, by their mismanagement, have never paid one cent of dividend on stock and never intend to do so; but intend to divert the corporate assets to the ultra vires purposes hereinbefore mentioned.

They then give the amount the Association owes on its various tracts of land, and proceed with these words:

The defendant corporation has no money to pay off said debts and can get none, because none will buy any

more stock and because the corporation is making nothing, in fact, is losing money. * * * Premises considered, complainants pray for process, and that they be required to answer without oath, which is waived; and that the property of the Ruskin Cooperative Association be sold, the debts of the concern paid, and what remains to be divided among the stockholders. That the defendants, the directors, be enjoined by the state's writ of injunction from doing any acts not within the scope of the powers of a mining and manufacturing company, such as operating a hotel, making a weekly payment of the funds of the corporation to the members of the voluntary association, running or operating a school and lyceum at the expense of the corporation, and from building any more houses for the members at the expense of the voluntary association.

The bill of allegations thus quoted from is signed by the following 17 stockholders:

A.S. Edwards, Paul Schneider, W.H. Lawson, J.K. Lawson, E.B. Lonsbury, M.H. Lonsbury, M.F. Rogers, J.A. Sturgis, Emma White, W.J. Ribley, J.H. Dodson, A.M. Dodson, W.H. Charlesworth, Kate Rogers, Myrtle Sturgis, W.W. White, Robert Jarden.

On July 31, 1897, 14 out of the above 17 persons signed the statement in *The Coming Nation*, quoted a few paragraphs above, and denied with all the vehemence that guilt could muster that anything was the matter with Ruskin. *The People* had said the scheme was impracticable. They retorted that the colonists were doing more to demonstrate the truths of Socialism than *The People* had ever done or ever would do, and affirmed in black type that Ruskin WAS practicable. Now the persons who signed that statement go into court and make oath that "the corporation was IMPRACTICABLE," thereby admitting that the position of *The People* and the Socialist Labor Party was a correct position, and that they, themselves, were nothing but a lot of clumsy thimblerriggers.

The People offered the opinion that the colony would ultimately go to the wall from internal dissension due to external competition. In rebuttal it was stated that the colony always had prospered, was prospering, and always would prosper. And the same gentlemen who signed that statement denying the existence of any conditions justifying the position taken by *The People* now go into court, all of them, and swear that the colony has never prospered, isn't prospering, and can't get money enough to pay off the mortgage on the property.

The People averred that the colony had not been

started to make any experiments in Socialism, but rather that it had been started, and was being run, by a lot of clever rascals whose only object was to prey on the unwary and rope in the credulous. With an earnestness born of despair they declaimed with a loud voice that they were all patriots, that "Ruskin Socialism" was the only Socialism, and that they were doing more to lead people toward the Cooperative Commonwealth than all the Socialist Labor Party of the country.

Now these same persons go into court and swear that the incorporators of the Ruskin Cooperative Association never intended to found a "Socialistic" community, and that every attempt on the part of any members of the colony to do so is in violation of the express stipulations of the charter. And the rascality of the whole scheme is more apparent when it is remembered that the 17 members now making oath to these statements were nearly all of them with the colony during the period of its organization, and thus shaped the management of the colony. They, themselves, boomed the school; they, themselves, boomed the "neat little cottages"; they, themselves, boomed *The Coming Nation*; they, themselves, were constantly telling people how virtuous Ruskinites were; and now they, themselves, go into court and swear that the whole business was nothing more than a sham and a fraud. In July 1897 they signed a statement that the colony was getting along swimmingly. Since then, according to the sworn statements of the officials of the colony, more than \$30,000 have been added to the assets, and now in spite of all this "adding," the recalcitrants make oath that the colony is bankrupt, and the nonrecalcitrants admit that it is bankrupt by issuing an appeal for FIFTEEN THOUSAND DOLLARS to help them over their present "crisis." And this appeal leads us to the conclusion that the present management are move by no higher ethical motives than are the "kickers" who are praying for dividends. In the issue of *The Coming Nation* for May 6, 1899, it is contended in bold-faced type that the colony is still prospering, while in the issue for May 20, comes the statement that they are in deep financial distress and must have \$15,000 or go to the wall.

Ninety-four thousand dollars in assets.

No liabilities.

And yet are going to be sold unless they can se-

cure \$15,000 from the skies!

Verily, the bookkeeper at Ruskin must be an acrobat on figures and a juggler with dollar-marks.

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The history of one colony is the history of all. The rise and the collapse of Ruskin is a type of the rise and the collapse of all other utopian schemes to revolutionize modern society on a small scale and behind its back. We have no objection to gentlemen forming a partnership for private profit, but we have serious objections to their labelling that partnership "Socialism," and appealing to Socialists to support them in their efforts either to live up to a social principle or to secure for themselves a competence.

Colonization has never been a principle of Socialism. The International Movement has not only never endorsed it, but has, on the contrary, at all times and in all cases and places, proclaimed its fallacies. The reason is evident. In the first place a cooperative colony of the Ruskin type differs but little from other business undertakings. If 10 persons put in \$500 apiece and start a paper, 2 doing the editing, 2 the reporting, and 6 the other work, with the agreement that after each has received enough of the proceeds to pay his living expenses, the profit, if there be any, shall be devoted to enlarging the business so that the company can make more profit, would that company be an experiment in Socialism? Certainly not — no more than would be any other partnership. Yet when ten or a dozen people migrate to the backwoods somewhere and start exactly the same kind of a business, that business is labeled Socialism by the calumniators of Socialism. Ruskin has never been anything else but a manufacturing concern. They have conducted a manufacturing business on a small scale, and have competed in the market for the sale of their products on just the same principles as any other corporation competes. They have bought where they could buy the cheapest, and have sold where they could sell the dearest.

Socialism is that social condition of society that will exist when we have the collective ownership and cooperative operation of all the means of production by all the people, and for all the people, with complete political control of the same from the municipi-

pality to the nation. The cooperative colony is the collective ownership by a few people of a few of the means of production and none of the means of distribution. It is without economic power to hold its own in the field of competition, and without political power to enforce its decrees.

The cooperative colony is not Socialism, it is not even an experiment in Socialism, IT IS A DENIAL OF SOCIALISM, and with but few exceptions, where the members have been held together by religious ties, it has been driven out of existence by the superior economic force of private capitalist production.

Socialism is broader than a colony. It is broader than a municipality. It is broader than a state. The nation itself is the smallest unit for the proper development of the Cooperative Commonwealth; for the nation is supreme. Even though a municipality be controlled by the Socialists, that state is still under the domination of a capitalist nation. But when the political power of the nation is controlled by the Socialists, Socialism is supreme. The nation has no superior. It is sovereign, and it, and it alone, is the instrument whereby the Cooperative Commonwealth can be realized.

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Edited by Tim Davenport.

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