
Speech to the First Annual Convention of the Social Democracy of America, June 9, 1898 — excerpt.

by Eugene V. Debs

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During the course of his speech at the convention Comrade Debs gave utterance to the following:

“At one time I thought that if a man could not pay 15 cents per month [SD of A dues] he was not worth having. But I have found that thousands of men in this country have not got 15 cents, and in many cases they have not got 15 cents because they are men. I have it on good authority that there is not 10 cents in the South, wages being paid in merchandise. We must make Social Democracy broad enough to reach these men. The problem that confronts the world today is the economic problem. The Southern people are rapidly being disfranchised. They are being robbed of the power of the ballot. If we are equal to the trust imposed in us, we can carry on the economic action in harmony with the political action. The economic situation in the United States appeals to the stomach, heart, and brain.

“I give the SLP great credit for what it has done, but it is too narrow to appeal to the great broad spirit of American Socialists. When they find a downtrodden toiler that has just enough conscience left to realize that he belongs to the working class, down comes the class-conscious club and knocks him into unconsciousness entirely.

“The great difficulty is that the working men are cowards; their courage has been crushed out, and unionism has done more than anything else to awaken them to class-consciousness or a realization that the producers’ interests are identical the world over.

“The mission of Social Democracy is to awaken the producer to a consciousness that he is a Socialist and to give him courage by changing his conditions. I have not changed in regard to our procedure. Give me 10,000 men, aye, 1,000 in a western state, with access to the sources of production, and we will change the economic conditions and we will convince the people of that state, win their hearts and their intelligence. We will lay hold upon the reins of government, and plant the flag of Socialism on the state house. The state government in this offers us an advantage that is not found in any European country. We can take possession of one state, and not wait until we get the whole United States. We must get one state at a time. In a movement such as this there is always some friction. We are in the birth throes of a new movement, the most responsible movement the world ever saw, and it demands the most careful consideration of honest men and women.

“We may wreck Social Democracy today, but the movement is evolutionary. If there is a Judas among us, like Judas of old, he will hang himself. Don’t deceive yourselves. I don’t fear the man that says I don’t agree with you. The only thing in this world that I fear is ignorance. I am mortally afraid of an ignorant supporter. I have faith that this body will obliterate those dividing lines before we adjourn. Thing for yourself, would be my last word. If you oppose and defeat me I have infinitely more respect for you than if you support me without thinking for yourself.”

Edited by Tim Davenport.

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