
The Vision of the People's House

by Eugene V. Debs

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The rebound of American labor under the swift, sharp strokes of rapidly advancing militarism in the first weeks of the war brings encouragement to its friends and dismay and discomfiture to its enemies. Carrying out its long-prepared and carefully-concealed plan to mobilize the young manhood of this country for use in its cold scheme of commercial imperialism, the capitalist class has thought to take labor by surprise and demoralize its ranks by the suddenness of the attack.

Taken off their guard, because of failure to perceive clearly the inevitable trend of the economic forces of capitalism, the working men and women of America were at first ill prepared to defend their hard-won rights against the aggression of capitalism thirsting for blood and gold. But they are now rallying steadily from the first shock of the unexpected onslaught.

One of the first encouraging signs of labor's rebound was the formation of the Workmen's Council for the Maintenance of Labor's Rights. Another was the placing of *The New York Call* on a sound financial footing. A third, equally promising, is the opening of a People's House in the very heart of the American metropolis.¹ The splendid success of this hardy venture furnishes inspiring proof of the vitality of the labor movement in this country — a vitality born of intelligent understanding of its rights, its opportunities, and its own inherent strength.

That this ambitious undertaking should have been carried through to successful completion in such a period of storm and stress,

¹ The so-called "People's House," located at 7 E 15th Street in New York City, was the headquarters building for the Rand School of Social Science. It housed classrooms, a library, a book shop, offices, and a general meeting hall.

when multiple demands are draining labor's scanty purse on every hand, makes the founding of the People's House one of the notable achievements of the working class in America. We may, indeed, point with pride to this monument to the solidarity of labor, erected, not with the gracious largess of some condescending overlord, but built by the workers with the toil of their own hands; paid for out of the meager wage they are able to wring from their employers.

Those of use whose turn will soon come to pass on into the great unknown can find comfort and reassurance in the contemplation of this firmly-established center, where our successors in the ranks may find strength and wisdom to continue the relentless and uncompromising war on the alchemists of capitalism who turn the flesh and blood of toiling humanity into silver and gold and precious stones.

Cooperatively owned and managed by the workers of America to strengthen their hands in the ceaseless battle for better conditions of life and labor, to train men and women for effective leadership and service in the economic struggle, to provide a popularly-controlled center for education and culture, and a permanent home for free speech, civil and industrial liberty, and genuine democracy, the People's House meets a vital and imperative need of this critical moment in the world's history.

While the new undertaking, through its workers' university and its allied activities, will be a valuable training ground for recruits to take our places as we fall out of the ranks, it is well that those in charge of its policies have not restricted its scope to the needs of the immediate material struggle — have not forgotten that, for life to have any real meaning for men and women, it must offer them not only bread and meat, but lilies and laughter as well —

“The long reaches of the peaks of song,
The rift of dawn, the reddening of the rose.”²

May the People's House be a gathering place of the sons and daughters of the working class; not a club where they shall sit in corrupting idleness, but a warm, glowing hearth of human inspiration, where they shall find the cheer and strength that come from loyal comradeship and common devotion to the cause of the toiling masses in the long battle for life, liberty, and happiness. May the hearth fires

² This quotation is from “The Man with the Hoe,” a poem by Edwin Markham (1852-1940), first presented at a New Year's Eve party in 1898.

of labor's new home be kept ever brightly burning, with a hearty welcome for all who are earnestly enlisted in labor's struggle onward and upward towards the day where there shall be but one class, all toiling together in the true spirit of brotherly service to wipe out the ugly squalor of the present order and usher in the cooperative commonwealth which shall make possible

“The rise of beauty to her throne
When she shall make all hearts her own.”³

In that glad time the People's House, bathed in the warm rays of universal brotherhood, standing foursquare on a firm foundation of equality, will lift its noble dome to the eternal skies of liberty — an eloquent monument to the dream of Socialism, liberty, equality, fraternity for all mankind in this and every land.

Edited with footnotes by Tim Davenport

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³ A couplet by Edwin Markham from his poem “The Toiler Thinks,” dated Sept. 10, 1916.