

Daniel De Leon

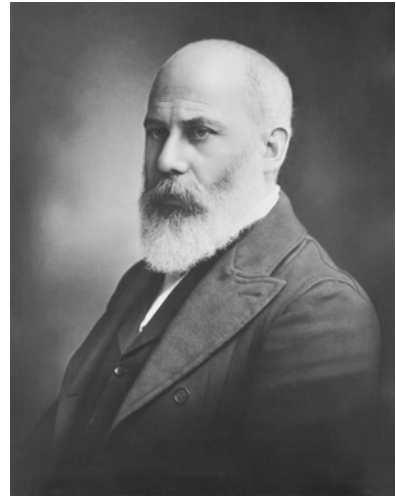
DEMOCRATS, REPUBLICANS,
PROHIBITIONISTS, SOCIALISTS!

WHICH IS RIGHT?

A Speech from the New York

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On October 20, 1903, a political debate took place in the Y.M.C.A. of Providence, R.I., between the Republican, the Democratic, the Prohibitionist and the Socialist Labor Party. George H. Utter, the Republican candidate for Lieutenant-Governor, represented the Republican party; John J. Fitzgerald, the ex-Mayor of Pawtucket, represented the Democratic party; the Rev. Ernest G. Wesley represented the Prohibitionist party; and Daniel De Leon represented the Socialist Labor Party. The speakers spoke in the order mentioned. The leading arguments of the first three appear from the context of Daniel De Leon's speech which closed the debate. He said:

MR. Chairman, Workingmen and Workingwomen of Providence:—The gentleman who just preceded me said that, if there were no Prohibition ticket in the field, he would vote for the Democratic Party. I say that, if there were no Socialist Labor Party in the field, I would vote neither the Prohibition, nor the Democratic, nor yet the Republican nor any other ticket, but would stay at home and save my shoelather. And I shall show you why you should do likewise, all other parties being worthless.

The representative of the Republican party told you, amidst invocations to Americanism, and to Lincoln that there were no classes in our land. And the representatives of the Democratic and Prohibition parties did likewise, only varying the theme with invocations of Jefferson and of humanity. A strange contradiction! What one feature typifies Americanism more than any other? It is the matchless volume of American inventions. And what does that imply? It implies a close observance of facts and respect therefor. A man may make a discovery accidentally; an invention, however, is the fruit of close observation of and strict adherence to fact. It is, accordingly, utterly un-American to observe society so loosely as to fail to perceive facts that underlie it, or,

perceiving their existence, to shut the eye to them. Of the score of more or less obvious sets of facts that go to prove the existence of the classes—the Working Class and the Capitalist Class—I shall take the most obvious for the occasion.

Language is like current coin. It passes current in the measure that it utters a truth. Take for instance the saying “as crooked as a ram’s horn.” Everybody knows what that means. Why? Because such a thing as a straight ram’s horn is unknown. The fact of the crookedness of rams’ horns is reflected in the utterance; and as the utterance has a solid fact for its foundation it becomes a luminous illustration, made and understood by all. Now, then, what social utterance is that which you will find in the mouths of ALL people? However Democrats, Republicans, Prohibitionists, Capitalists, Socialists, etc., may differ, there is one term upon which they all agree, all use, and all understand. What term is that? It is L-A-B-O-R M-A-R-K-E-T. This term, and the universality of its use tells the tale. There is no such thing as a “Capitalist Market.” The term would be meaningless. Why? Because it has no fact at its bottom. And what is that absent fact? It is the fact that the capitalist is not merchandise. Not being merchandise, he is not bought and sold; not being bought and sold there is no “market” for him. On the other hand there is a “beef market,” a “leather market,” a “pork market,” and so forth—and a LABOR MARKET, proof positive of the merchandise quality of Labor. The current language of the land brings to the surface the fact that our people are divided into two classes—one class is human and not chattel or merchandise, that is the Capitalist Class; the other class not human, but chattel and merchandise, and that is the Working Class. My opponents will excuse me if I drive the point home upon them. All the three have denied the existence of the classes and referred to themselves as workingmen. The point can be tested on the spot. Ask these three “workingmen” to what “market” they carry their own hides to sell. You will see them all three bristle up, as they have great difficulty in keeping from doing now, indignant at the bare thought of being sold in a market, consequently of being merchandise. And there stands the fact clear as a pike—the fact of the class distinctions in our land. Utterly un-American is the posture of ignoring a fact. Sublimely American is the Socialist posture of recognizing the facts in the case.

True to the American characteristic of recognizing facts, let us weigh the present fact. What follows from the class quality of the workingman? His class quality is that of

merchandise. The price of merchandise depends upon the supply and the demand. The larger the supply of pork-chops in the “pork-chop market” the lower the price. Consequently, the price of Labor (wages, as it is called) likewise depends upon the supply and the demand of the merchandise Labor in the “Labor Market.” Privately owned improved machinery, and concentration of plants, displace Labor. The Labor Market is thus steadily being overstocked, with the inevitable result that the earnings of the Working Class decline. Even the late Census attests the fact. To sum up. The Working Class lies on the shelves of the market alongside of beef, leather, cuspidors and all other merchandise, sharing the fate of merchandise in abject servility. That is the badge of Labor under the existing social system. It goes without saying that such a system works out iniquities for the country. Let me mention just a few of these iniquities.

From Census year to Census year, the Census records an increase—absolutely and relatively—in the numbers of our population that bears the badge of merchandise, with all the degradation that that implies. The representative of the Republican party invoked the memory of Lincoln; the representative of the Democratic party invoked the memory of Jefferson; the representative of the Prohibition party invoked Humanity. I ask you and ask them: Is such a national decline that for which Lincoln labored, or Jefferson toiled? Is it human? Is it humane?

Take another iniquity. Under the capitalist system Labor is even worse off than merchandise. As production is conducted by individual capitalist concerns, there are ups and downs, periods of industrial activity and of industrial depression. In order to answer the calls of trade there must be a large reserve army of Labor ready to work. At times of industrial depression, rafts of workers are laid off. A winter coat or a winter shirt may be laid off when the hot weather sets in, and either will be in condition for use when cold weather returns. The workingman is used as are such garments, but during such periods of industrial stagnation, while he is shelved, he must starve. Thus the physical and mental suffering of, as I showed, an increasing portion of our population is a necessary breath in the nostrils of capitalist society.—Is it that what Lincoln strove for or Jefferson contemplated? Is it human? Is it humane? (The Rev. Ernest G. Wesley from his seat on the platform: “No! It is not!”) Then why do you stand by it?

Take another iniquity. We are just now hearing a good deal about the removal of “dead wood” in the plants of the capitalist masters, especially in the railroad service. What does that mean? For the reasons I mentioned before, the workingman is rapidly worn out. So well known is the fact that the saying has become general: “If a workingman reaches 40 years of age take him out and shoot him; he is too used-up to be of further service, and he is too poor to take care of himself.” It is this used-up human material that is called “dead wood” and is removed. And by whom is it supplanted? By the generation of its own children! These are fiendishly puffed up with the vanity of being “hustlers,” and they are kept in ignorance of the fact that they will soon be “dead wood” themselves. Thus, puffed up with vanity, stuffed with ignorance, and de-humanized, the son “hustler” is instigated to drive off his “dead-wood” parent. (A voice: “They are doing that very thing here in Providence!”) And everywhere else, my friend.—Is it that that Lincoln strove for, or Jefferson aimed at? Is it human? Is it humane?

With the single exception of the Socialist Labor Party, all other parties—Republican, Democratic, Prohibition, or whatever other name they sail under—uphold the capitalist system of production. They either uphold it directly, or they uphold it indirectly by fusing with parties or elements that uphold Capitalism. The Socialist Labor Party alone demands the unconditional surrender of the Capitalist Class; it alone is deserving of the support of the Working Class, because it alone utters the program and pursues the tactics to the certain emancipation of Labor.

Obviously Capitalism must be overthrown. Obviously any and every political party that approves of the capitalist system must be voted down. The question is: What to vote them down with? The feature of capitalist society lies in the chattel or merchandise character that it stamps upon an increasing majority of the people; and that feature is brought about by the private ownership of the land on and the machinery with which to work. The private-owning few become masters; the masses, deprived of these essentials of work, become chattels, become merchandise. In order to emancipate themselves from the status of merchandise the Working Class must own the land and the capital. The public ownership of these essentials for work is the club with which to beat down Capitalism—and that is Socialism.

The representative of the Democratic party had much to say about Republican

political tyranny in Rhode Island, and how the Democratic party here will abolish such tyranny. The gentleman spoke as if Rhode Island were the only State in the Union. There are forty odd other States. Many of them are Democratic. How is it there? Look at the South. Need I narrate the harrowing tale of Labor's suffering in that region and of Democratic political tyranny? And in my own, almost contiguous State of New York, how is it there? We have had Republican and Democratic administrations alternatively. For the life of us we can not tell the difference. He who seeks political freedom intelligently, must seek it via economic freedom. Not all the declarations in favor of political freedom made by the Democratic party amount to anything in view of the party's capitalist industrial foundation, which it shares with the Republican party. I have shown you the fruits, some of the fruits, of the capitalist system. That system breeds industrial or economic servitude. Upon such a basis, political freedom is a snare and a delusion. We enjoy to-day all the political freedom that is needed to enable us to overthrow the capitalist system. What is wanted is the requisite economic knowledge to give direction and precision to our blows. The Democratic party, by talking "political freedom," draws attention away from the real issue; it contributes with the Republican and other parties to prolong the ignorance of the masses on that great, the economic issue; and it induces the workers to aim their blows in the air.

The representative of the Republican party declared he cared to argue only with men who proceeded upon the lines that the country had moved on. "If I want to travel to Westerly," said he, "it is useless discussing with men who propose to travel in the opposite direction"—a typical posture of the capitalist mind. Westerly lies at the border of this State. The State may be said to end there. The attitude of the capitalist mind is that civilization ends or culminates in capitalism, as Rhode Island ends at Westerly. Now, this is false. Beyond Westerly lie vast domains. And so do vast domains of social growth lie beyond capitalism. The race has traveled up to capitalism. We are all at that Westerly. The capitalist would have us stop there. The Socialist recognizes that we can not, and he urges the further move towards Socialism. Capitalism has led society up to the point of realizing the productivity of co-operative labor. But seeing that Capitalism halts at the matter of possession, Socialism urges society to march onward so as to square the possession of the requisites for work with the system of work. The system of

work has become collective; collective accordingly, must also be the system of ownership of the requisites to work. The capitalist mind would leave the country in the tortures of the present dislocated social system—collective labor and private ownership of land and capital. The Socialist sees beyond—beyond Westerly. His horizon is not bounded by the present.

The representative of the Prohibition party deplored the vast quantities of corn that was being turned into whiskey, and he declared that if it was turned into loaves of bread there would be more to eat. I ask, FOR WHOM TO EAT? We have in the gentleman's declaration another evidence of the fallacy of the capitalist mind and its parties. More loaves of bread by no means implies more food for the workers. There are to-day more trousers, shoes, coats, houses, etc., etc., but the workingman does not get the increase. Under the capitalist system the workingman is a merchandise. Consequently what he gets is determined, not by the quantity of good things, but by his price in the Labor Market, and that price I have shown you is and must be a declining one. Bake more loaves of bread, and the workingman will have not one more loaf. It is no longer a question of PRODUCTION; it is now a question of DISTRIBUTION.

Whether the capitalist knows the fact or not, it makes no difference; nor does it make any difference whether he resists the progress of civilization out of ignorance or out of class interests. The important fact is that he does so resist. Production is to-day phenomenal. Under such conditions the continued crucifixion of the working class is no longer a "social necessity." If every able-bodied male adult worked but four hours a day for 200 days in the year he could produce an amount of wealth equal to what it would to-day take \$10,000 to purchase. But this is impossible under a system of private ownership of the means of production and the resulting system of production for sale and not for use.

The abolition of that system is proposed and systematically pursued only by the Socialist Labor Party. For this reason am I a Socialist. For this reason do I recommend and urge all workingmen to turn their backs to all other parties, and to plump their votes for the Socialist Labor Party.

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The Providence, R.I., *Journal* of October 21, 1903, reporting the meeting said: "Mr.

De Leon's remarks were received with a tumult of approbation, and he was greeted with the greatest kind of applause as he finished. If the debate had been subject to a decision by the audience, the Socialist Labor Party would have won out hands down, judging by the enthusiastic racket that was made."

Transcribed and edited by Robert Bills for the official Web site of the Socialist Labor Party of America.
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