

# Eugene V. Debs: Outlook for Socialism in the United States (1900)

---

*By the end of the nineteenth century some labor activists insisted that capitalism itself must give way to a socialist system. Eugene Debs (1855-1926) was a railroad union organizer who converted to socialism during a stint in jail. He later would run as the Socialist Party candidate for president in several elections.*

---

From Eugene V. Debs, "Outlook for Socialism in the United States;" *International Socialist Review* 1 (September 1900), 129-135.

The sun of the passing century is setting upon scenes of extraordinary activity in almost every part of our capitalistic, old planet. Wars and rumors of wars are of universal prevalence ... and through all the flame and furor of the fray can be heard the savage snarlings of the Christian "dogs of war" as they fiercely glare about them, and with jealous fury threaten to fly at one another's throats to settle the question of supremacy and the spoil and plunder of conquest....

Cheerless indeed would be the contemplation of such sanguinary scenes were the light of Socialism not breaking upon mankind .... From out of the midnight of superstition, ignorance and slavery the disenthraling, emancipating sun is rising. I am not gifted with prophetic vision, and yet I see the shadows vanishing. I behold near and far prostrate men lifting their bowed forms from the dust. I see thrones in the grasp of decay; despots relaxing their hold upon scepters, and shackles falling, not only from the limbs, but also from the souls of men....

Socialists generally will agree that the past year has been marked with a propaganda of unprecedented activity and that the sentiment of the American people in respect to Socialism has undergone a most remarkable change. It would be difficult to imagine a more ignorant, bitter and unreasoning prejudice than that of the American people against Socialism during the early years of its introduction....

Socialism was cunningly associated with "anarchy and bloodshed;" and denounced as a "foul foreign importation" to pollute the fair, free soil of America, and every outrage to which the early agitators were subjected won the plaudits of the people. But they persevered in their task; they could not be silenced or suppressed. Slowly they increased in number and gradually the movement began to take root and spread over the country ....

The subject has passed entirely beyond the domain of sneer and ridicule and now commands serious treatment. Of course, Socialism is violently denounced by the capitalist press and by all the brood of subsidized contributors to magazine literature, but this only confirms the view that the advance of Socialism is very properly recognized by the capitalist class as the one cloud upon the horizon which portends an end to the system in which they have waxed fat, insolent and despotic through the exploitation of their countless wage-working slaves.

In school and college and church, in clubs and public halls everywhere, Socialism is the central theme of discussion, and its advocates, inspired by its noble principles, are to be found here, there and in all places ready to give or accept challenge to battle. In the cities the corner meetings are popular and effective. But rarely is such a gathering now molested by the "authorities;" and then only where they have just been inaugurated. They are too numerous attended by serious, intelligent and self-reliant men and women to invite interference ....

Needless is it for me to say to the thinking workingman that he has no choice between these two capitalist parties<sup>1</sup>, that they are both pledged to the same system and that whether the one or the other succeeds, he will still remain the wage-working slave he is today.

What but meaningless phrases are "imperialism;" "expansion;" "free silver;" "gold standard;" etc., to the wage-worker? The large capitalists represented by Mr. McKinley and the small capitalists represented by Mr. Bryan<sup>2</sup> are interested in these «issues;» but they do not concern the working class.

What the workingmen of the country are profoundly interested in is the private ownership of the means of production and distribution, the enslaving and degrading wage-system in which they toil for a pittance at the

---

<sup>1</sup> Republican and Democratic.

<sup>2</sup> The 1896 presidential candidates, William Jennings Bryan (1860-1925) and William McKinley (1843-1901).

pleasure of their masters and are bludgeoned, jailed or shot when they protest-this is the central, controlling, vital issue of the hour, and neither of the old party platforms has a word or even a hint about it. ...

Whether the means of production-that is to say, the land, mines, factories, machinery, etc.-are owned by a few large Republican capitalists, who organize a trust, or whether they be owned by a lot of small Democratic capitalists, who are opposed to the trust, is all the same to the working class. Let the capitalists, large and small, fight this out among themselves.

The working class must get rid of the whole brook of masters and exploiters, and put themselves in possession and control the means of production, that they may have steady employment without consulting a capitalist employer, large or small, and that they may get the wealth their labor produces, all of it, and enjoy with their families the fruits of their industry in comfortable and happy homes, abundant and wholesome food, proper clothing and all other things necessary to "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness." It is therefore a question not of "reform," the mask of fraud, but of revolution. The capitalist system must be overthrown, class-rule abolished and wage-slavery supplanted by cooperative industry.

We hear it frequently urged that the Democratic Party is the "poor man's party:" "the friend of labor:" There is but one way to relieve poverty and to free labor, and that is by making common property of the tools of labor....

The differences between the Republican and Democratic parties involve no issue, no principle in which the working class has any interest. ... For a time the Populist Party had a mission, but it is practically ended. The Democratic Party has "fused" it out of existence. The "middle-of-the-road" element will be sorely disappointed when the votes are counted, and they will probably never figure in another national campaign. Not many of them will go back to the old parties. Many of them have already come to Socialism, and the rest are sure to follow.

There is no longer any room for a Populist Party, and progressive Populists realize it, and hence the "strongholds of Populism" are becoming the "hot-beds" of Socialism.

It is simply a question of capitalism or Socialism, of despotism or democracy, and they who are not wholly with us are wholly against us .... Oh, that all the working class could and would use their eyes and see; their ears and hear; their brains and think. How soon this earth could be transformed and by the alchemy of social order made to blossom with beauty and joy.

## REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Why did Debs say that Socialists should shun both Republicans and Democrats?
2. By what means did Socialists gain power?
3. Critics then and since dismissed Socialists as utopians. Do you agree?