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## **The Coming Republic** **(May 30, 1897)**

The steady stream of earnest, anxious inquiry given rise by the recent announcement relative to the national cooperation movement proposed to be launched at Chicago next month [June 1897] indicates with unerring certainty the ardent and widespread interest in and approbation of the scheme. Thousands of struggling, suffering unemployed have hailed it as a benediction. It has revived their drooping spirits and restored some measure of their lost faith. Many professional and business people have volunteered their aid and encouragement; not a few well-to-do have expressed interest and sympathy, while others, including some of our most eminent citizens, have pledged their moral and material support.

Some opposition has, of course, been aroused. This is not only expected but is essential to success. Any project designed to alter the "existing order of things" which fails to provoke opposition must also fail to enlist support. Lack of vitality to offend in certain quarters means impotency and failure. The greatest blessings which have come to the world have had to force their way through the fiercest and most powerful opposition.

In presenting my views on this matter, it should be understood that I speak for myself alone. I have my own ideas as to what should be done in the present crisis by the approaching convention,<sup>1</sup> but what action the delegates may conclude to take cannot be foreshadowed. I am persuaded, however, from my intimate association with them that they will respond to the great and growing demand and pronounce in favor of the national cooperative commonwealth and lay deep and strong the foundations of a mighty organization designed to accomplish this seemingly herculean task.

The most popular feature of the plan, especially with the unemployed, is that proposing the colonization of some western state presenting the best advantages, securing political control under forms of law, and establishing within the limitations of the federal jurisdiction the cooperative commonwealth. A singular spectacle is presented in the malevolent opposition to this part of the movement, which comes almost wholly from those who sneer at the unemployed as "tramps and loafers" and yet are now wrought into a frenzy at the mere suggestion that this

element is to remove and sequester in some distant and uninhabited part of the country.

There are two social systems which have been in conflict since the human race began, and never more intensely so than at the present time. Under the one, the few enjoy and the many are doomed to serve as beasts of burden. The favored few, the beneficiaries of this beautiful system, honestly believe, for the most part, that it is ordained of God that a chosen few shall rule and that the masses shall toil and suffer and submit in silence, and any attempt to change or modify the situation, they regard as dangerous and wicked and resent as an assault upon the very life of society. It is scarcely required to observe that this is the system under which we now live. Under the other system, the earth and the fullness thereof become the common heritage of all the people. There are no favored classes, no special privileges, but all have equal right to help themselves to Nature's bounties and equal opportunity to enjoy the good things with which the earth abounds. This is the system that is to be, and all the evolutionary forces are pledged to achieve its triumph.

The former system is known as the competitive system and its motto is "survival of the fittest." It is a species of war which transforms mankind into a race of Ishmaelites.<sup>2</sup> The strong, keen, cunning, unscrupulous, merciless, and remorseless triumph. The weak, tender, sympathetic, conscientious, humane, and loving go to the wall. Murder, suicide, poverty, misery, prostitution, bankruptcy, fraud, insanity, and all their brood of woes tell the story of the cannibalistic conquest. Were this social state to continue forever, then, indeed, would Huxley's prayer that some stray comet might dash against this wretched earth and hurl it from existence, become "a consummation devoutly to be wished."<sup>3</sup>

Now as to the plans for establishing the new order of things. First of all, thorough organization on progressive lines will be required and this is well under way in many sections. The movement to be launched in Chicago next month contemplates the unification of all workers, organized and unorganized, and all others, regardless of sex or color, who favor a change in our social and industrial affairs and believe it can be brought about only by a complete change of our social and industrial system. A constitution, brief and to the point, will be adopted and a declaration of principles issued. A corps of competent organizers will be at once placed in the field and local branches will be instituted in every state of the union. A small admission fee will be charged and a small annual per capita tax levied, for which each member will receive a copy of the official paper of the organization, and it is proposed to make this

the very best paper of its kind issued. Experience has taught that there is nothing weaker than organized ignorance. From the very beginning, powerful educational influences will be set in operation. In connection with the paper, which, as stated, will be first class in every particular, there will be established a book and pamphlet department and placed in charge of a competent manager, and every good work and treatise upon economics and kindred subjects can be here obtained at actual cost. A modern and well equipped printing plant will be established and economic literature will be produced in cheap editions and large quantities, which will be freely distributed, especially among the poor who lack the means to buy.

The various local branches will be duly chartered and the membership will probably be limited to 500 members per branch. As members are enrolled they are given the opportunity to place opposite their names the respective amounts of the voluntary monthly contributions which they are willing to make to advance the cause. Each will be expected to contribute in proportion to his or her means, while those who are poor or out of employment will be entirely exempt. The amounts so collected will be placed in the cooperative fund and this will be in charge of a Board of five or more, careful, capable, and trustworthy persons under whose supervision it will be expended subject to such regulations as the organization may prescribe.

Before adjourning, the convention will name a Board whose duty is shall be to examine into the matter of selecting a state in which to begin operations. This Board will make a thorough examination of the advantages presented by each state, as well as the objections, visiting the capital cities of the various states for the purpose and there holding meetings from day to day and hearing reports and testimony until a full and exhaustive showing has been made. That strong inducements will be offered by a number of Western states is assured by the voluminous correspondence already on file. At the close of its investigation the Board will report to the Executive Board of the organization and the two Boards in joint session will decide upon the state in which the beginning is to be made.

At the adjournment of the convention, or shortly afterward, a recruiting office will be established in connection with the general offices of the organization, and here will be recruited the bodies of men who, in such detachments as may be decided upon, will proceed to the state selected for their reception. The first of these pioneers will, no doubt, be required to march, but this will be done under perfect order and

discipline. First of all, each applicant for enlistment must be examined and accepted by the recruiting officers. Only such will be accepted as comprehend fully the nature of the undertaking, the purpose sought to be accomplished, and whose hearts are thoroughly in the movement. Respect for discipline and obedience to regulations will be exacted. The advance bodies will probably consist wholly of unmarried men or men without families. That they may have to endure some privations is altogether probable, but they will be men of such fiber, and the conviction that they are the progenitors of a new humanity will burn and glow in their breasts with such intensity that come what may, they will have the courage and fidelity to stand and withstand until success is achieved. With these men there will be something more than a principle involved. They will be animated by a fervor akin to religious zeal. The cause in which they enlist and to which they pledge devotion will be to them as sacred a cause as ever prompted men to action.

Those unduly excited persons who fear that there is to be an exodus of “bums and beats” may possess their souls in patience. Parenthetically, it may be here remarked that they who go into spasms at the mere mention of the Ragged Army of the Republic are the very ones who are responsible for its existence. Without pauperism there could be no plutocracy and yet plutocracy has a horror of pauperism.

The men who will start west as the pioneers in the new movement will be neither mendicants nor highwaymen. They will be men, self-reliant and self-respecting; men “who know their rights, and knowing, dare to maintain them;” men, poor though they be, infinitely superior in heart and soul and conscience to the miserable creatures who at so much per line make them the subjects of stupid jokes, and attempt by falsehood and misrepresentation to surround them with odium and doom them to failure and disappointment. Such hirelings of corporate capital may do their worst, but they will never stay the march of this emancipating movement.

The question is now asked, how are these men to be supported? The answer is, from funds of the general organization, and only such members will be started as can be provided for until they are able to provide for themselves. The general organization should, and doubtless will, soon number 100,000 contributing members and this number will steadily and rapidly increase. With such a membership there will be no trouble in raising at least \$25,000 per month. With this amount the pioneers can be provided for, lands can be secured, agricultural machinery purchased, factories erected, and such productive enterprises

established as the state may be best adapted to. All of this will be well under way prior to the next following state election. At the proper time a complete ticket of cooperators will be placed in the field and all the leaders of the movement will unite in a thorough canvass of the state. After achieving success at the polls, the legislature will be convened and a constitutional convention called. A new constitution compatible with the cooperative commonwealth will be adopted. This will be supplemented by suitable legislation. The public will acquire ownership and control of all the means of production and distribution and there will be one state beneath the American flag in which a man, willing to work, will be able to secure employment. The work of developing the resources of the state, organizing industrial enterprises, building roads, canals, schoolhouses, public buildings, etc., will be vigorously prosecuted. The money question will be solved by the labor exchange system. The labor check will relegate the legal tender to the limbo of the obsolete.

The hours of labor will be shortened in proportion to the inventive progress and the number of able-bodied workers. There will be no idlers. They who will not work may not eat. All men will engage in useful occupation and each will secure the full product of his toil.

All this will, of course, have to be carried forward within the limitations of the federal constitution. But in the meantime, the work of organizing will be carried forward with unabated energy in every part of the country. Other states will fall into line, for the success of the first will inspire others to emulation. In the national campaign of 1900 the new movement will be a factor in the election. Its political principles will be those of the Socialist Labor Party and its political battles will, doubtless, be fought under the banner of that party. In that election two million votes should be polled, and in the national campaign following, in 1904, the great cooperative party, the party of equal rights and equal opportunities for all the people, should carry the country, and then the Cooperative Commonwealth will be fully established. Gaunt famine and the specter of failure will be remembered only as hideous nightmares. Humanity will then be emancipated from the horrible thralldoms which a soulless money oligarchy has forced upon it, and a free and happy people will march forward with majestic strides towards a diviner civilization.

*Eugene V. Debs.*

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<sup>1</sup> The American Railway Union had earlier called a special convention to be held in Chicago on June 15, 1897.

<sup>2</sup> The term derives from *Genesis*, chapter 16, with Ishmael being the son of Abraham and the slave Hagar who in turn sired a great tribe. In this context: *outcasts at war with society*.

<sup>3</sup> From *Hamlet*, Act III, Scene 1 (c. 1600) by William Shakespeare (1564-1616)