

Outlook for Socialism in the United States (September 1900)

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. In the Philippines our soldiers are civilizing and Christianizing the natives in the latest and most approved styles of the art, and at prices (\$13 per month) which commend the blessing to the prayerful consideration of the lowly and oppressed everywhere.

In South Africa the British legions are overwhelming the Boers with volleys of benedictions inspired by the same beautiful philanthropy in the name of the meek and lowly Nazarene; while in China the heathen hordes, fanned into frenzy by the sordid spirit of modern commercial conquest, are presenting to the world a carnival of crime almost equalling the “refined” exhibitions of the world’s “civilized” nations.

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.

The picture, lurid as a “chamber of horrors,” becomes complete in its gruesome ghastliness when robed ministers of Christ solemnly declare that it is all for the glory of God and the advancement of Christian civilization.

This, then, is the closing scene of the century as the curtain slowly descends upon the bloodstained stage — the central figure, the pious Wilhelm, Germany’s sceptered savage, issuing his imperial “spare none” decree in the sang-froid of an Apache chief — a fitting climax to the rapacious regime of the capitalist system. Cheerless indeed would be the contemplation of such sanguinary scenes were the light of socialism not breaking upon mankind. The skies of the East are even now aglow with the dawn; its coming is heralded by the dispelling of shadows, of darkness and gloom. From the first tremulous scintillation that gilds the horizon to the sublime march to meridian splendor the light increases till in mighty flood it pours upon the world.

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 from the souls of men.

It is therefore with pleasure that I respond to the invitation of the editor of the *International Socialist Review* to present my views upon the "Outlook for Socialism in the United States."¹ 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 by the propagandists from the other side. I never think of these despised and persecuted "foreign invaders" without a feeling of profound obligation, akin to reverence, for their noble work in laying the foundations deep and strong, under the most trying conditions, of the American movement. The ignorant mass, wholly incapable of grasping their splendid teachings or appreciating their lofty motives, reviled against them. The press inoculated the public sentiment with intolerance and malice which not infrequently found expression through the policeman's club when a few of the pioneers gathered to engraft the class-conscious doctrine upon their inhospitable "freeborn" American fellow citizens. 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 industrial conditions consequent upon the development of capitalist production were now making themselves felt and socialism became a fixed and increasing factor in the economic and political affairs of the nation.

The same difficulties which other countries had experienced in the process of party organization have attended the development of the movement here, but these differences, which relate mainly to tactics and methods of propaganda, are bound to disappear as the friction of the jarring factions smoothens out the rough edges and adjusts them to a concrete body — a powerful section in the great international army of militant socialism.

In the general elections of 1898 upwards of 91,000 votes were cast for the socialist candidates in the United States, an increase in this “off year” of almost 200 percent over the general elections of two years previous, the presidential year of 1896. Since the Congressional elections of 1898, and more particularly since the municipal and state elections following, which resulted in such signal victories in Massachusetts, two members of the legislature and a mayor, the first in America, being elected by decided majorities — since then, socialism has made rapid strides in all directions and the old politicians no longer reckon it as a negative quantity in making their forecasts and calculating their pluralities and majorities.

The subject has passed entirely beyond the domain of sneer and ridicule and now commands serious treatment. Of course it 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.

Agitation is followed by organization, and the increase of branches, sections and clubs goes forward with extraordinary activity in every part of the land.

In New England the agitation has resulted in quite a general organization among the states, with Massachusetts in the lead; and the indications are that, with the vigorous prosecution of the campaign already inaugurated, a tremendous increase in the vote will be polled in the approaching national elections. New York and Pennsylvania will show surprising socialist returns, while Ohio, Michigan, Indiana, Illinois, Missouri, and Kentucky will all round up with a large vote. Wisconsin has already a great vote to her credit and will increase it largely this year. In the West and Northwest, Kansas, Iowa, and Minnesota will forge to the front, and so

also will Nebraska, the Dakotas, Montana, Oregon, Washington, Idaho, and Colorado. California is expected to show an immense increase and the returns from there will not disappoint the most sanguine. In the Southwest, Texas is making a stirring campaign and several papers, heretofore Populist, will support our candidates and swell the socialist vote, which will be an eye-opener when announced.

On the whole, the situation could scarcely be more favorable and the final returns will more than justify our sanguine expectations.

It must not be overlooked, however, when calculations are made, that this is a Presidential year and that the general results will not be so favorable as if the elections were in an "off year." Both the Republican and Democratic parties will, as usual, strain every nerve to whip the "voting kings" into line and every conceivable influence will be exerted to that end. These vast machines operate with marvelous precision and the wheels are already in motion. Corruption funds, national, state, and municipal, will flow out like lava tides; promises will be as plentiful as autumn leaves; from ten thousand platforms the Columbian orator will agitate the atmosphere, while brass bands, torchlight processions, glittering uniforms and free whiskey, dispensed by the "ward-heeler," will lend their combined influence to steer the "patriots" to the capitalist chute that empties into the ballot box.

The campaign this year will be unusually spectacular. The Republican Party "points with pride" to the "prosperity" of the country, the beneficent results of the "gold standard" and the "war record" of the administration. The Democratic Party declares that "imperialism" is the "paramount" issue and that the country is certain to go to the "demnition bow-wows"² if Democratic office holders are not elected instead of the Republicans. The Democratic slogan is "The Republic vs. the Empire," accompanied in a very minor key by 16 to 1³ and "direct legislation where practical."

Both these capitalist parties are fiercely opposed to trusts, though what they propose to do with them is not of sufficient importance to require even a hint in their platforms.

Needless is it for me to say to the thinking working man that he has no choice between these two capitalist parties, 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 are interested in these "issues," but they do not concern the working class. What the workmen 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 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.

As a rule, large capitalists are Republicans and small capitalists are Democrats, but workmen must remember that they are all capitalists and that the many small ones, like the fewer large ones, are all politically supporting their class interests, and this is always and everywhere the capitalist class.

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 brood of masters and exploiters, and put themselves in possession and control of 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, every bit 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.

Is the Democratic Party, which we are assured has "strong socialistic tendencies," in favor of collective ownership of the means of production? Is it opposed to the wage system, from which flows in a ceaseless stream the poverty, misery and wretchedness of the children of toil? If the Democratic Party is the "friend of labor" any more than the Republican party,

why is its platform dumb in the presence of Coeur d'Alene?⁴ It knows the truth about these shocking outrages — crimes upon workingmen, their wives and children, which would blacken the pages of Siberia — why does it not speak out?

What has the Democratic Party to say about the “property and educational qualification” in North Carolina and Louisiana, and the proposed general disfranchisement of the negro race in the Southern states?

The differences between the Republican and Democratic parties involve no issue, no principle in which the working class have any interest, and whether the spoils be distributed by Hanna and Platt,⁵ or by Croker and Tammany Hall is all the same to them.

Between these parties socialists have no choice, no preference. They are one in their opposition to socialism, that is to say, the emancipation of the working class from wage-slavery, and every workingman who has intelligence enough to understand the interest of his class and the nature of the struggle in which it is involved, will once and for all time sever his relations with them both; and recognizing the class struggle which is being waged between producing workers and non-producing capitalists, cast his lot with the class-conscious, revolutionary, socialist party, which is pledged to abolish the capitalist system, class rule, and wage-slavery — a party which does not compromise or fuse, but, preserving inviolate the principles which quickened it into life and now give it vitality and force, moves forward with dauntless determination to the goal of economic freedom.

The political trend is steadily toward socialism. The old parties are held together only by the cohesive power of spoils, and in spite of this they are steadily disintegrating. Again and again they have been tried with the same results, and thousands upon thousands, awake to their duplicity, are deserting them and turning toward socialism as the only refuge and security. Republicans, Democrats, Populists, Prohibitionists, Single Taxers are having their eyes opened to the true nature of the struggle and they are beginning to

Come as the winds come, when
Forests are rended;
Come as the waves come, when
Navies are stranded. ⁶

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 “hotbeds” 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.

Another source of strength to socialism, steadily increasing, is the trade union movement. The spread of socialist doctrine among the labor organizations of the country during the past year exceeds the most extravagant estimates. No one has had better opportunities than the writer to note the transition to socialism among trade unionists, and the approaching election will abundantly verify it.

Promising, indeed, is the outlook for socialism in the United States. The very contemplation of the prospect is a wellspring of inspiration.

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.

No sane man can be satisfied with the present system. If a poor man is happy, said Victor Hugo, he is the pickpocket of happiness. Only the rich and noble are happy by right. The rich man is he who, being young, has the rights of old age; being old, the lucky chances of youth; vicious, the respect of good people; a coward, the command of the stout-hearted; doing nothing, the fruits of labor.⁷

The great Frenchman also propounded this interrogatory which every workingman will do well to contemplate: “Can you fancy a city directed by the men who built it?”

With pride and joy we watch each advancing step of our comrades in socialism in all other lands. Our hearts are with them in their varying fortunes as the battle proceeds, and we applaud each telling blow delivered and cheer each victory achieved.

The wire has just brought the tidings of Liebknecht’s death. The hearts of American socialists will be touched and shocked by the calamity. The

brave old warrior succumbed at last, but not until he heard the tramp of international socialism, for which he labored with all his loving, loyal heart; not until he saw the thrones of Europe, one by one, begin to totter, not until he had achieved a glorious immortality.

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¹ The *International Socialist Review*, edited by Chicago Socialist Labor Party dissident A.M. Simons (1870-1950), was launched in July 1900 by publisher Charles H. Kerr (1860-1944). It followed a pro-SDP unity political line.

² *Damned dogs*. The unusual phrasing is lifted from *Nicholas Nickleby* (1839), by Charles Dickens (1812-1870).

³ Allusion to the free coinage of silver at the value ratio of 16:1 to gold.

⁴ The Coeur d'Alene strike of 1899 pitted hard rock miners affiliated with the Western Federation of Miners and mine operators intent upon rolling back wages and terminating union miners. The battle was a violent one, including gun battles, the dynamiting of a mill, intervention of federal troops, and the confinement of 1,000 miners in a crude temporary prison called "the bullpen." Several years later Democratic Governor of Idaho, Frank Steunenberg, was assassinated in a bombing, for which WFM officials were blamed.

⁵ Thomas C. Platt (1833-1910) was a United States Senator from New York and a recognized kingmaker within the Republican Party establishment.

⁶ From "Gathering Song of Donald the Black," by Walter Scott (1771-1832).

⁷ From an appeal to the poor made by Victor Hugo shortly before his death in 1885.