

Principle Shall Prevail:
Campaign Speech in Milwaukeeⁱ
[excerpt]
(November 4, 1904)

When great principles are involved and epoch-making changes occur in history, the majority are, at first always wrong. It is the minority who are right. The minority in time prevail. Their principles are enthroned and the world applauds. The few have had convictions and moral courage. They have stood erect and defied the storms. Scorning gold and glory, they have been true to themselves, and later generations build their monuments.

We owe a debt of gratitude to our revolutionary forefathers; they were the pioneers of progress, the evangelists of civilization. They stood for self-government against the protest of the majority. They repudiated taxation without representation. They revolted against the tyranny of an infatuated king. They sounded a new note: "All men are created equal." They arose in revolution. They won, and, for the first time in all the ages, man stood forth the crowned sovereign of the land.

Our revolutionary forefathers believed they had solved the problem. For their day they had. Their age was one of small production. The workers were isolated. All worked; but each owned his tools. Benjamin Franklin recognized that man was a tool-using animal, helpless without these instruments of production. The tools were cheap and primitive; their productiveness was slight. The labor necessary to life left the worker but little time for fellowship, for literature or art; but his tools were his own, and, owning them, his shop and his materials, he owned his life.

With the first millionaire came the first thousand tramps. Both are abnormal. One has as much too much as the other has too little; one is gorged, the other famished. The one has food but no digestion; the other digestion but no food.

Development of Wage Independence

In the development of industry the simple tool came first. Invention transformed it into the machine. The machine multiplied the productive

power of the worker, but it was too costly to be owned by individual workers. The small employer became a capitalist; others became wage-workers.

Once the wage-worker saw a future. He might save and in time become a capitalist. that day is past. For the average wage-worker there is no future but wage-service.

The more your grandfather produced the better off he became. The more you produce the worse off you become. Large production means overproduction, gluts, shutdowns, discharge, beggary.

In England workers once combined to destroy the machine which had displaced them. Such efforts failed, and rightly. The machine had come to help the worker, not to harm him. It invaded one department after another. Industrial revolution began; production became a social act. Cooperative production was necessary if commodities were to become abundant.

But the immediate effect of the machine was tragic. It supplanted the skill the laborer had exercised. Skilled labor became common labor. the machine owner, to dispose of his surplus in the open market, had to under-sell. His demand was for cheap workers. The woman supplanted the man. The machine was made more perfect. Now the child supplanted the woman. Next, armies of men, women, and children competed together in the open market to sell their labor-power to the masters of industry.

Wage-Slavery

What is labor-power? It is human energy, human bone, blood, and brain. *It is the worker's life.* In selling his labor the worker sells himself into economic bondage.

As stated, our grandfathers owned their tools and the products of those tools. The modern worker owns no tools. Neither does he own his product. He makes a thousand pairs of shoes and does not own a peg. The shoes belong to the man who owns the machine.

Again, the tool owner is a buyer of labor-power; the tool user is a seller of it. The economic interests of the two are in conflict; hence results the class struggle. This struggle means strikes, lockouts, boycotts, and widespread discontent — discontent where civilization seems most highly developed.

In vain do we talk of our "freedom." There has never been a free people, never a truly civilized people. Society has always consisted of masters and slaves. In all ancient civilizations the working class have been abject

slaves. The master could rob the slave not only of the fruit of his labor, but of life itself.

In the Middle Ages laborers were serfs, attached to the land; enriching by their labor the idle barons. The one class produced all and had nothing; the other had all and produced nothing. Yet the idle parasite looked down on the toiling hind. No master respects his slave and no master has ever risen far above his slaves. Emerson declared that the other end of the chain that binds the slave binds the master.

In modern times the worker is a wage-slave; modern society is a slave society. *Till the working class are free humanity cannot be free.*

The earlier struggle was for political equality. Such equality was ridiculed as “impossible.” Society could not exist without kings. But the kings went, and, politically speaking, we have ever since governed ourselves.

The present struggle is for economic equality — without it, political equality means little or nothing. Whatever the form of government, the man who owns the means by which I live is my master; I am his slave.

The Workers Must Own Their Product

The system of our grandfathers was that of individual ownership and free competition. Collective ownership was not even thought of. At that stage in our development it was inappropriate.

Today the tool has become a vast social instrument, and individual ownership of the tool means enslavement of the multitudes who use it.

The worker depends for employment upon his employer. But the employer has no use for the worker unless he can extract a surplus value from his labor.

Industrial depression follows activity as night follows day. The reason is that machinery is more highly improved. Competition among the unprivileged is more free. Wages are forced lower; therefore less and less of what the worker produces he can buy back. Statistics show that as the laborer's product increases his percentage of it steadily diminishes. The worker is not permitted to absorb his product.

This means overproduction. For these overproduced goods a foreign market is sought. What should be our shame is heralded as a source of our pride. Glorious country! That wrests from its impoverished workers the goods they have produced and ships them to the antipodes. Glorious flag!

Flying from the masthead of every merchantman and over every Colorado bullpen. Ours has become “the greatest of exporting nations!”

Workingmen, you get what you vote for. You may abolish this system if you will. It cannot endure a day without your support. If you continue it it must be because you like it. As Lincoln said, “If you want that sort of thing, that is the sort of thing you want.”

But the foreign market, too, becomes glutted. Why? Because other countries as well as ours are plundering their workers and piling up surpluses that cannot be sold. the world’s market becomes overstocked. Our exported goods return to us. Panic, disaster, starvation ensue.

Our Middle Class is Doomed

Middle class men: your turn is coming. The next panic will witness the doom of many of you. Your customers will become too poor to buy. The bankruptcy court will receive you. You will sink into the wage-earning class.

Society is rapidly dividing up into two classes — the few idle rich and the many toiling poor.

You fear “dividing up.” Socialism does not want your little capital. *It wants the trusts.* It is they, not we, that are after you. When they get through with you, you will be ready for us.

The magnates of wealth have the people at their mercy. The owning class is the ruling class. The laws are made, administered, and judged by representatives of the same class. It is no accident that every judge upon the supreme bench of the United States is a trained, skilled, and disciplined corporation or trial attorney.

Government today is a class affair, pure and simple. The common people have no voice in it.

Woman suffrage is opposed lest participation in politics will contaminate the woman. Participation in capitalist politics will contaminate everyone.

Competition and Trusts

The process whereby capital is concentrating is irresistible. It can no more be stopped than the rivers can be stopped in their course to the sea. Men talk of “restoring competition!” As well talk of forcing the

Mississippi back through its tributaries and rivulets to the myriad springs from which they issue. As well talk of forcing the ripened fruit back into the blossom.

The big capitalist knows better than to want competition restored. He has had enough of it. *He wants it for the workers, not for himself.* The trusts are unpopular with the small capitalists, not with those inside.

Suppose you did destroy the trusts. In ten years every one of them would again be in full blossom. We could not destroy the trust if we would; we should not if we could. To destroy it would be cruel. It is the modern way. It means safety, economy, efficiency, peace. The trust itself is not an evil. The evil lies in its private ownership. Don't destroy it, own it — and use it for the common good.

Workers Sweat and Politicians Shine

Socialistsⁱⁱ are not responsible for the existence of classes in America nor for the resulting struggle. They are opposed to both and would end both.

In their attitude toward the working class there is not the slightest difference between the Democratic and the Republican parties. The working class has no possible interest in either, nor in their “issues.”

At about this time of year the capitalist politician appears before the workingmen and professes his delight to address himself to the “horny-handed sons of toil.” He tells you that “every drop of sweat that trickles down your forehead is dearer to his heart than the most costly gem that ever glistened in the diadem of a prince.” But he takes good care to let you do all the sweating while he does all the glistening. His salvation depends upon your ignorance, hence he flatters your “intelligence.”

Would the workers, who outnumber the capitalists a dozen to one, continue to do the work and leave the capitalists to enjoy all the leisure, wealth, and opportunity, unless the workers were ignorant? Would the workers build mansions for their masters, and themselves live in rented shacks unless they were ignorant? Would men of intelligence dress the wives and daughters of drones in silks and laces and provide their own wives and daughters with faded calicos?

Would any but ignorant men support a government which oppresses and suppresses them? Would they produce wealth and ship it beyond the seas while they perish with hunger? Would they pay judges to paralyze

them with injunctions? Would they feed, shelter, and arm a military to blow their souls from their bodies?

The Bitter Cost of Competition

The present system does not appeal to the noble qualities in man. We do not trust each other. Men fail because too big-hearted to succeed. A merchant pities the sorrows of a penniless, starving widow. He trust her; she is unable to pay; he fails. His callous-hearted competitor who insists that "business is business" turns down such cases and succeeds.

Competition is war. There is no peace, no civilization while it lasts.

Honesty is impossible under the present system. General success is impossible. The success of one necessitates the failure of many.

The present system breeds millionaires and tramps — but the millionaire is poor. He does not know that true riches are of the heart and soul and a life given to grasping and overreaching is a failure.

What we need is not a change of party but a change of system.

The Republican Party does not propose to change this system; neither does the Democratic. A vote for either one is a vote to continue the present order.

Roosevelt a Labor Hater

A short time since, the Republicans met in national convention in Chicago. Every private car in the United States stood just outside. All the capitalist magnates in America, or their representatives, were on hand in force. The workers were conspicuous in their absence.

The national platform included a "labor plank." This plank contained but 62 words. It did not deserve the name of "plank." It was a splinter. There was not enough of it to make a toothpick.

Brief as it was, it was divided between capital and labor. The plank speaks of "justice for capital and labor." Justice would give to the working class all the product of their labor and leave the capitalists out. Republicanism does not mean this. Its object is to deceive.

Against the four candidates of the two leading capitalist parties in their individual capacities I have nothing to say. They are respectable, worthy citizens. I oppose them in their public capacities. I oppose the policies for which they stand and which they are pledged to support.

The capitalists made no mistake in nominating Theodore Roosevelt for president. They know him to be one of themselves. They know that his instincts, associations, tastes, and desires are with them and that he has nothing in common with the working class. While Roosevelt was governor of New York the workers on the Croton Dam struck to secure the enforcement of the eight-hour law. Roosevelt promptly sent the militia to shoot the strikers into submission.

When Ex-President Grover Cleveland violated the constitution and outraged justice by seizing the state of Illinois by the throat and handcuffing her civil administration at the behest of the crime-stained trusts and corporations, Theodore Roosevelt was among his most ardent admirers and enthusiastic supporters. He wrote in hearty commendation of the atrocious act, pronounced it most exalted patriotism, and said he would have done the same thing himself had he been president.

And so he would and so he will!

How impressive to see the Rough Rider embrace the Smooth Statesman! Oyster Bay and Buzzard's Bay! "Two souls with but a single thought; two hearts that beat as one."

In direct terms and plain words, Mr. Roosevelt denounces all those who opposed "government by injunction" as cannibals, barbarians, and anarchists; and this violent and sweeping stigma embraces the whole organized movement of labor — every man, woman, and child that wears the badge of union labor in the United States.

It is not strange in light of these facts, that the national Congress, under President Roosevelt's administration, suppresses anti-injunction and eight-hour bills and all other measures favored by labor and resisted by capital.

When the railroad corporations were beaten in the ARU strike they appealed to Cleveland. He responded and Roosevelt applauded and said he would have done as Cleveland did.

When the strikers were being beaten in Colorado, Theodore Roosevelt was appealed to. He replied that he had no power to interfere. It makes a difference who is winning.

In disposing of the Navy portfolio,ⁱⁱⁱ Roosevelt again displayed sympathy with capitalism. He appointed Paul Morton.^{iv} Who is Morton? Go ask the brotherhood men who were driven from the CB&Q and the striking union machinists of the Santa Fe to give you the pedigree of Mr. Morton and you will learn that his hate for union men is equaled only by his love

for the scabs who take their places. Paul Morton is a notorious union hater and union wrecker. His appointment was an open insult to every trade unionist in the country; they who lack the self-respect to resent it at the polls may wear the badge, but they lack the spirit and principles of union men.

Men like these and Sherman Bell, the military ferret of the Colorado mine owners, are the ideal patriots and personal chums of Mr. Roosevelt; and by honoring these he dishonors himself and should be repudiated by the ballot of every workingman in the nation.

Mr. Fairbanks, the Republican candidate for vice-president, is a corporation attorney of the first class and a plutocrat in good and regular standing. He is in every respect a fit and proper representative of his party and his class, and every millionaire in the land may safely support him.

Wall Street Buys Democratic Party

The Democrats met in convention at St. Louis. The same private cars were there and the same plutocrats. There was simply a different set of politicians. The radical Democrats were promptly suppressed and Wall Street took control.

The Democrats also formulated a labor plank. It contained six words less than the Republican plank. It said nothing and meant the same.

Straws show the direction of the wind. Here is one: Two thousand chairs were reserved for the Business Men's League of St. Louis, an organization hostile to organized labor, but not a chair was tendered to those whose labor had built the convention hall, had clothed, transported, fed, and wine-d the delegates, and whose votes are counted on as if they were so many dumb, driven cattle, to pull the ticket through in November.

Another straw: Lieutenant Richmond Hobson, hero of the *Merrimac*, and the merry smack, addressed the convention. He dramatically declared that President Cleveland was the only president who had ever been patriotic enough to use the federal troops to crush union labor; and the trust agents, lobbyists, tools, and claquers screamed with delight and the convention shook with applause.

Who is Parker, the Democratic nominee? He was brought out by Senator Patrick McCarren. Thomas W. Lawson, the Boston millionaire, charges that McCarren is on the payroll of the Standard Oil Company as political master mechanic at \$20,000 a year, and that Parker was the

chosen tool of the Standard Oil Co. Mr. Lawson offers Senator McCarren \$100,000 for the Democratic campaign fund if he will disprove the charge.

Said Lawson: "Parker is the personal choice of Rockefeller." Judge Parker declared the eight-hour law unconstitutional. "Eureka!" exclaimed the plutocrats, "we have found the Moses." And how came they to find him? The vehicle in which they pursued their search was lubricated with Standard Oil.

William Jennings Bryan denounced Judge Parker as a tool of Wall Street before he was nominated and declared that no self-respecting Democrat could vote for him. And after his nomination he charged that it had been dictated by the trusts and secured by "crooked and indefensible methods." Mr. Bryan also said that labor had been betrayed in the convention and need look for nothing from the Democratic Party.

Can you afford to vote for Parker, the Wall Street candidate; or for Roosevelt, the rich man's representative? If you are a great capitalist, your interests are safe with either. If you are a workingman, no, for both these candidates are against you.

Henry G. Davis, Democratic candidate for vice-president, was a slave-driver in early life and he is a slave-driver still. Once he exploited a few black slaves; now he exploits an army of white ones. he denies the right of labor to organize. he fully believes in the virtue of the injunction, as applied to workingmen. I have learned this by personal experience.

The Party of the Masses

The Socialist Party met in convention at Chicago. No private cars and no millionaires were present. The convention was composed of workers. It adopted a platform. That platform contains one plank — a labor plank. It announces the ending of the present and the ushering of the new system. It appeals to the working class and to humanity.

If the workers understood what socialism stands for, they would flock by regiments and brigades into the Socialist Party. The capitalists know they must vote for their interests. The workers do not know this as yet. But they are learning from their masters.

Socialism does not stand for "collective ownership of all property." It stands for collective ownership of the socially necessary means of production. As an individual, you will receive your socially due share. you may own your own home, your furniture, books, pictures, carriage, and other

articles of use and convenience. These will be your private property and in their possession you will be secure. But socialism will end private ownership of those things upon which the lives of others depend.

You have been deceived both as to the objects and effects of socialism. You are told that “incentives will be destroyed.” What incentive have you now when your reward is the pay of the slave? Would it destroy labor’s incentive if the robbery were ended and labor received its entire fruits?

Socialism means liberty, leisure, literature, art, fellowship, life itself.

Society must have a new economic basis. Special privilege must give place to equal privileges. The class conflict and political corruption must end.

Capitalism is red with the blood of workers. For profit it hurls them against each other in war and sends their naked souls to the bar of eternity. Bonaparte declared that “War is the trade of barbarians;”^v Douglas Jerrold^{vi} called it “murder in uniform;” yet “Christian” nations stand ready to desolate and crush other Christian nations in the struggle for markets.

Socialism will end war by ending the war-producing system.

Socialism will enfranchise women. Till this is done we are not civilized. Republican and Democratic politicians should be ashamed to look their wives in the face. Today, as of old, woman is the property of man. Too often she must sell herself to live. Socialism will end this atrocity.

Socialism will erase the blot of child labor from our industrial system.

Socialism will plan not to make a small class rich, but to afford to all opportunity to live a complete life.

The Socialist campaign fund is a penny collection — a contribution of one half-day’s wages. Socialists offer no whiskey for votes. They provide no carriages for workers on election day while these workers may walk 364 days. It is left for the capitalists to debauch the workers with trust funds and recover these funds after election by class legislation.

Socialists, stand by your colors! Let your light shine! Sow the seed! Your children’s children will erect monuments to your memories and will plant flowers where you sleep.

Where Adams, Jefferson, Henry, Lovejoy, and John Brown stand in history today, you will stand tomorrow, while the respectable majority that opposes you will be forgotten.

Say with Lovejoy: “If the whole world is against me, I am against the whole world; I can afford to die at my post but I cannot afford to desert it.”^{vii}

Say with Lincoln at the slave block: “If I ever get a chance to hit that thing, I’ll hit it hard!”^{viii}

The West produced one hero; uncultivated, unschooled, he possessed convictions and the courage of them. He struck at the dragon of slavery, and his body swung from the gallows. At the time almost the whole country applauded the execution. One clarion note from Europe, that of Victor Hugo, rebuked the “Republic” which could “murder a liberator.”

Ten years later John Brown had developed from a criminal into a “fanatic.” Ten years later he was only “misguided.” In recent years New York state has bought the John Brown homestead, and public officials have declared his burial ground “the most sacred soil in the commonwealth.”

Let socialists ponder the lesson. We know our cause is just and that it must prevail.

With faith and hope and courage we hold our heads erect, and with dauntless spirit marshal the working class for the march from Capitalism to Social Democracy, from Slavery to Freedom, from Barbarism to Civilization.

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ⁱ This was one of the final speeches of the 1904 campaign by Debs, delivered to a packed house at West Side Turner Hall, the largest venue in Milwaukee.

ⁱⁱ The published version reads “Social Democrats,” presumably owing to editorial liberties taken by *Social Democratic Herald* editor Frederic Heath. The Socialist Party continued to be known as the Social Democratic Party in the state of Wisconsin owing to ballot regulations.

ⁱⁱⁱ Roosevelt was appointed Assistant Secretary of the Navy by President William McKinley during his first term of office, serving in that capacity until resigning in April 1898 to help found the 1st US Volunteer Cavalry Regiment, the so-called “Rough Riders,” which saw action in the Spanish-American War.

^{iv} As president, Theodore Roosevelt appointed Paul Morton (1857-1911) as Secretary of the Navy on July 1, 1904. Morton, a former vice-president of the Santa Fe Railroad, would remain in that capacity for one year.

^v The original widely quoted epigram by Napoleon Bonaparte (1769-1821) was: “War — the trade of barbarians, and the art of bringing the greatest physical force to bear on a single point.”

^{vi} Douglas Jerrold (1803-1857) was an English journalist and playwright.

^{vii} This quotation, ascribed by Debs to abolitionist Owen Lovejoy (1811-1864) has not been successfully traced back to an original source.

^{viii} This quotation, ascribed to Lincoln during a visit to New Orleans by his cousin John Hanks (1802-1889) is regarded by many Lincoln scholars as apocryphal.