
Eugene Debs's Independence Day Address

BY

EUGENE DEBS

On July 4, 1901, socialist luminary and labor agitator Eugene V. Debs proclaimed in a fiery speech: "I like the Fourth of July. It breathes a spirit of revolution." We reprint the fiercely anticapitalist address here in full.

Ladies, Gentlemen, and Comrades:—

It is our good fortune, if we can boast, no other, to live in the most marvelous age of all the centuries, not contemplating the material progress of our time, which overwhelms and bewilders by its extraordinary achievements. Improvements have been accomplished as if by magic and we behold with wonder and awe the march of human conquest. The forces of nature which terrified primitive man, and before which the ancient world bent in superstition, have to a large extent been conquered and are the subject servants of man's desire. In this march of progress the brain and heart have been expanded, the one shedding light and the other life, without which civilization would turn back upon its axis. Fortunately for man, everything is subject to change, and all change tends to the development of the race and the advancement of human institutions. Institutions crumble in this march of time. All of them have their periods of gestation, of birth, of development, maturity, decline, decay, and death. All of them come in their order. They fulfill their mission, they give birth to their offspring, and they pass away.

A little over a century ago the inhabitants of this country were not citizens. They were ruled by a foreign king. They petitioned for relief. Their petitions were disregarded. They objected to taxation without representation. Their protests were scorned. Finally they revolted. They issued the Declaration of Independence and enunciated the proposition that men are created equal. But the founders of this republic had only vague conceptions of democracy. The working class as we understand it today were not represented in the Constitutional Convention. The founders of the republic in declaring that men were created equal evidently meant themselves alone. They did not include the negro, who had been brought here against his will and had been reduced to a state of abject slavery. The institution of chattel slavery was already securely established at that time. It was founded in iniquity, yet it did not seemingly disturb the consciences of the founders of the republic. This

institution was in conflict with the spirit of the Declaration, with the genius of free institutions, and yet it was incorporated in them. It steadily grew in power, and in course of time it controlled the country and the courts and the life of the people.

On this day, commemorating the 4th of July, 1776, the Declaration of Independence was issued. Thousands of orators all over this broad land will glorify the institutions under which we live. In pride they will point toward Old Glory and declare that it is a flag that waves over a free country. In these modern days we hear very much about that flag and about the institutions over which it waves. I am not of those who worship the flag. I have no respect for the stars and stripes, or for any other flag that symbolizes slavery. It does not matter to me what others may think, say, or do. I propose to preserve the integrity of my soul. I will give you a transcript of my mind and tell you precisely what I think. Not very long ago the president of the country [William McKinley], in the attitude of mock heroics, asked who would haul down the flag. I will tell him. Triumphant socialism will haul down that flag and every other that symbolizes capitalist class rule and wage slavery.

I am a patriot, but in the sense that I love all countries. I love the sentiment of William L. Garrison: "All the world is my country and all mankind are my countrymen." Thomas Jefferson once said: "Where liberty is, is my country." That is good. Thomas Paine said: "Where liberty is honored, that is my country." That is better. Where liberty is not, socialism has a mission, and, therefore, the mission of socialism is as wide as the world.

The framers of the Constitution of this country had no faith in the people. They did not suffer them to see the proceedings of the Convention. The insufferable institution of chattel slavery was compromised in the American constitution. It was at this time a perfectly legal institution, but it was founded in iniquity. It was doomed to finally disappear and the agitation against it began in a feeble way. Lovejoy was one of the pioneers of the revolt. He went to New England and then to Illinois, and with all the vigor of his intellect began to attack slavery. A committee called upon him. He said to them, "I can afford to die at my post, but I cannot afford to desert it." I take pride in paying to such a man the humble tribute of my gratitude and love. It is such men as he who have made it possible for me to enjoy some degree of liberty. I can only discharge my duty to him and to them to try to do something for those who are to come after me. In 1837 the mob took his office and destroyed it by fire, his printing press was thrown in the Mississippi River, and he was murdered.

But to the greatest and noblest figure among those early pioneers was reserved the final act which culminated in the rule in which the institution of slavery disappeared from American soil. I need only mention his name, and although it is a very common one, you will at once recognize it — John Brown. He was educated in no college, he graduated from no university — he was simply a child of the people. He knew that his part in that struggle required the sacrifice of his life, and with a dozen men he attacked the so-called Commonwealth of Virginia. He struck the immortal blow. He was dragged through a mob trial, he was sentenced to death. On his way to the gallows he begged for a negro child and pressed a kiss upon its black face.

He was strangled to death. His soul went its way to that bourne from which no traveler returns. John Brown was branded a traitor, a scoundrel, and a monster of iniquity. The whole country applauded the crime. In just ten years, with the mellowing wings of time, John Brown was the hero of the people; enshrined in their hearts — he had won immortality.

Chattel slavery disappeared because in the development of machinery an improved form of slavery was required, and this new slavery must not be confined to the black race alone, but must embrace within its mighty folds all of the toiling children of men. Slavery in that form only became extinct and the people as such only rose against it when it became impossible; and just here it is in order to say that the

development in every form is dependent upon economic conditions.

We live today under a system that has the best code of morals and the best instruments of production and distribution. It has also the most destructive weapons of warfare. Commercialism not only requires the cheapest possible production, but it also requires the most murderous instruments of death, and in the full development of this system the world pays its highest tribute to that man who can devise ways and means that can murder the most men in the smallest space of time. If you go to the city of Washington tomorrow with some device that will enable you to kill one million human beings in the twinkling of an eye, your name will become famous.

When the [Civil] war closed, modern machinery was developing very rapidly, the small workshop was beginning to disappear, being supplanted by the larger factory. The individual worked no longer by himself, for his tool had been touched by the magic of industrial evolution; the shop began to expand and the modern industrial revolution was on. Up to this time production was carried on largely for use in separate communities. There was no demand for a foreign market because there was no surplus production, and the worker's ability to consume was equal to his producing capacity. But with the advent of machinery, conditions were changed. If the workers had had intelligence enough to have retained the ownership and control of the tool — that is to say, of the means of production, there would have been no such problems as now confront us.

The women were formerly the queens of the homes, and the children were being sent to school and equipped for the battle of life. When labor began to supply so abundantly and the machine could be operated by the finger of a little child, we had an intensification of the struggle — women competing with men and the child competing with all. No workingman is given employment that he may provide for himself and his family. It is only on condition that a profit can be extracted from his labor. If there is no profit he is discharged. His wife may suffer, his children may be on the street, no matter what the results, he cannot work.

I have said again and again in this system there is nothing quite so cheap as human flesh and blood. It is in the power of a single individual sitting in New York to press a button that will send a message over the wire that will doom fifty thousand willing men, women, and children. Concentration and cooperation are the master forces of this age. In the conflict that is going forward among the capitalists, the capital of the country is held in the hands of a few, and these few, though untitled and uncrowned, wield greater power than crowned kings and despots. The owners of the means of production are the real rulers of the American people and of all other people of other nations. Those who control the means of production, land, and capital, control all human institutions.

Now, there are a great many men who believe that they have a voice in government. You workingmen have as much to do with the control of this government as if you inhabited Mars or some other planet. You regularly deposit your ballot and suppose it to be counted. The will of the people is supposed to be registered. But what your votes register is the will of the capitalist class. The capitalist class rules absolutely in every department of our government. It controls every legislature. It controls both branches of Congress and the Supreme Court is simply its convenience. Why, it is not possible for a lawyer, whatever his attainments, to find his way to the bench of the Supreme Court unless he has given overwhelming evidence of his capacity to serve the capitalist class and his willingness to crook the pregnant hinges of the knee that thrift may follow fawning. Every judge who sits on the bench of the

Supreme Court today is a tool of the capitalist class. I had an experience. I think it was a good thing. I ought to have known better. The working class have no rights.

I am not fond of denouncing the capitalist class. I am more inclined to find fault with the working class. Now, do you know that for every capitalist, large and small, in the United States there are about ten workingmen? That is to say, you workingmen are in the majority, are in the clear majority of ten to one, and as long as you suffer the capitalist class to rule, you do not deserve to fare better. As Lincoln said: "If that is what you want, that is what you want," and as long as you are satisfied with the capitalist rule or misrule, you will have to submit to it.

Now, a few workingmen realize that the old parties are simply two wings of the same capitalist vulture, and that every reform party is a straggling tail feather in that same bird. Socialism is after that bird, and if you look at it you can see the light between the wings. Some of that light is beginning to reach gradually the working class. They are beginning to realize, first, that their interests as workingmen are absolutely identical, that what is good for one is good for all, what is equal for one is equal for all. They are beginning to realize that there are trade unions in the year 1901 which fall short of requirements; that while organization is a necessity upon the economic field, it is vastly more important on the political field. There was a time when there was some efficiency in the strike. What difference does it make to you to go out on strike, even if you win a raise in your wages of 15, 20, or 25 cents per day, if the same class that employs and pays your wages has also the power to raise the cost of the commodities?

In the wage system you and your children, and your children's children, if capitalism shall prevail until they are born, are condemned to slavery and there is no possible hope unless by throwing over the capitalist and voting for socialism. Now, what you want to do is quit every capitalist party of every name whatsoever. What you want to do is to organize your class and assert your class interests as capitalists do the interests of the class that is robbing you. It will not do for you to go to the polls and vote for some good men on some of the tickets and expect relief in that way. What can a good man do if he should happen to get to Congress? What could he do? Why, he simply would be polluted or helpless, or both. What we want is not to reform the capitalist system. We want to get rid of it.

Now, it is a curious thing to me that a great many workingmen will vote for a thing that will do them no good, a thing that they do not want, because they are dead sure of getting it; and they will vote against the thing they need, against the thing they want, because they reason that if they all vote for it they might get it. Every workingman in every community should assert himself on election day, totally regardless of what others do.

Suppose you are the only socialist in the community. Now, that might require a little more courage on your part, and if you lack it we cannot win. But if you have a little more courage and if you cast a socialist vote, you will give some evidence of the final redemption of your community. If you cast that vote, someday you and your children will be proud of it; you will make a beginning and you will soon have company. Now, I would rather vote my convictions and vote alone than to vote against my convictions and be with the majority. What good is it to be with the majority of cowards, anyway? As a matter of fact, in the history of great principles, men everywhere have been wrong outside the minority. All of these great changes depend upon minorities, and in the march of time a minority becomes a majority and everyone applauds. In ten years from now it will be very difficult in the city of Chicago to find a man who was not a socialist twenty-five years ago.

There has never been any democracy in the world. Political democracy in the United States, so called, is a myth. A single capitalist, upon whom twenty-five workingmen depend, has political power more than equal to the slaves in his employ, simply because he owns and controls the means upon which their lives depend, without which they are doomed to idleness and starvation. What good would it do if it were in my power to shut off the supply of life and heat; you would all vote my ticket, would you not? Your lives depend upon the control and ownership of the means of production and distribution.

The owner of the slaves had to provide for them, he had to feed them, and he had to care for them in a way. It is not necessary to own slaves bodily today in order to exploit their labor. You simply have to own the tool, then they are completely at your mercy. To begin with, a slave cannot buy the modern tool. They are gigantic machines of great cost. The great mass of workingmen cannot buy them. They are compelled to present themselves at the door of the giant and humbly petition him for the privilege of using the tools they made for a share of what their labor produces. They are at his mercy, and not only this, but in the regular periods of depression that always follow periods of activity, it is even a privilege to be a slave, and thousands of so-called free Americans are denied that privilege. (Cheers.) If they go on voting the Republican ticket and the Democratic ticket, either party perpetuates the system that keeps them in fetters and their wives in rags and their children in hunger.

Arouse, ye slaves! Declare war, not on the capitalist, but on the capitalist system, and if it should be your fate or your fortune to suffer in years to come, that suffering will not be the result of your own deliberate act. I am for the freedom of the working class. Though my heart yearns for the freedom of men, I am powerless. Only the working class itself can achieve its emancipation. The workingman who is not yet awakened, who has not yet realized all his class interests, is a blind tool, the willing instrument of his own degradation, and thousands of them on the 4th of July, when reference is made to the capitalist flag that symbolizes the triumph of capitalism only, thousands of these wage slaves will applaud their own degradation. What is wanted is not a reform of the capitalist system, but its entire abolition.

Notwithstanding the boast that is often made that this is an era of prosperity, notwithstanding the statement that is made by capitalist politicians that the wages of workingmen are higher than ever in the history of the country, I do not hesitate to declare, and I challenge refutation, that there never was a time when wages were so small in proportion to the products as now. Politicians assure us that we are extremely prosperous because our exports exceed the exports of all other nations of the world. What have you got to do with the exports? I think if you held a little interview with your stomach, you are more interested with import than export. Much money goes into the pockets of the capitalist class out of the product of your labor. You never receive notice from the government to get your share of the dividends, and as a matter of fact, in this system the more you produce the worse you are off. If you could produce as much tomorrow as you could in the next six months, you would be out of a job the day after tomorrow.

I wonder how many of the workingmen of Chicago are enjoying today at the sea coast this summer, or how many of them are toying with icicles in the arctic region, and next September how many will go down to Florida and stop at the Palmetto Hotel? Not many of them. Only the man can afford these luxuries, can afford these enjoyments, who has nothing to do with the production of them. No man that has anything to do with building a Pullman car can ride in it. You show me a man who has to make a Pullman car, and I will show you a man who walks when he travels.

If you have calloused hands, I will show you precisely what degree you mark on the social thermometer. I will locate you close to the zero point.

A man has to be a master or a slave. He will have to either wield a lash or hold the plow. Socialism

proposes to free them both and level them both up to the plane of manhood. Whatever walk of life, constant struggle is going forward, man is arrayed against man, nation against nation, and all due to the capitalist system. The survival of the fittest is a survival of cunning over conscience. Business means doing somebody else, and in the struggle the middle class loses in economic power. Men are driven to dishonesty in the system; they suspect each other, not because they do not know each other, but because they do. It is a mock civilization. Socialism will give humanity a new world.

Businessmen attend the same prayer meeting, but they keep a business eye on each other. Business is business, and each one knows that the other is trying to do him. In the capitalist system we cannot give expression to the noblest sentiments of humanity; all success is born of failure and he who achieves the largest success succeeds in destroying the largest number of his fellow men.

The revolution is under way, but, like all revolutions, it is totally blind. It is in the nature of great social forces that they sometimes sweep humanity down. Let us work so that this revolution may come in peace. Socialists are organized to pave the way for its peaceful culmination.

We appeal first to the working class to come together in one class-conscious solidarity. We likewise appeal to the middle class who will day by day be forced down in the crowded ranks of the working class. We are asking them to open their eyes and see the new light. Their class is doomed and this debauched civilization is doomed to disappear with them. If I were in the middle class today, I would be a socialist. I would be a socialist from a perfectly selfish motive. I would say to myself: "My class is to be crowded out, and my only hope is in the new social order; and although I may not live to see it, I may be doomed to die a slave, I will cast my lot with the man that proposes to make it possible for my children and the children of my children to enjoy life."

But there are a great many who say that is all well enough, but we will not see it in our time. When a man talks so to me, I am inclined to think that there is something seriously wrong with him. Very often the case is that it is impossible to reach the intellect of such a man as this. It is questionable whether he has a thing that we can properly call by that name.

So far as I am concerned it does not matter in the slightest whether it comes next year or next century, or in a thousand centuries — that is not a question that concerns me. I simply know that the change is bound to come sometime and I know that it is my duty to do all I can to hasten its coming; and although I feel and indeed, I know, that I will be here to help celebrate its coming, to ratify its triumph, whether I am or not is a matter of the slightest consequence. I simply say that the capitalist system has almost fulfilled its mission. On every hand we behold the signs of change. It is disintegrating. It is to dissolve and pass away and you can prolong it if you wish and that is what you are doing if you war supporting the old parties.

There are two fundamental principles that are in conflict with each other — individualism and cooperation. Now there is perfect individualism among the beasts of the jungle. They do not cooperate, they compete, and the stronger competitor devours the weaker. You see a girl in the sweatshop only able to earn enough to keep her wretched soul within her shrunken body. Her pulled cheeks, her sunken eyes, her emaciated body testify to the poverty and horror of the competitive system. Hail the coming of socialism!

But in every nation, in every civilized nation, men and women are massing beneath the banner of

socialism, men and women, for in socialism woman stands side by side with man, she has all the rights that he enjoys.

We declare then, that the time has come when working men should open their eyes to the economic struggle, when they should have an intelligent understanding of socialism and pave the way for its triumph and the abolishment of capitalism from the face of the world.

Now I have a right to get rich if I can in this system. I scorn to get rich. I could get rich only by making someone else poor. Suppose I have sharper claws and keener fangs than some of the rest of you, am I justified in using them to prey upon your vitals? If I have any ability whatever, I can only prove it by using it for the benefit of my fellow man. John Rockefeller is as completely a slave as any coal miner in the anthracite region of Pennsylvania. He lives in a gilded cell, but he is serving a life sentence. He does not mingle with his fellow men, he does not enjoy the fellowship of the class he robs. He rules by the power of private ownership and he tries to ease the pangs of conscience by endowing universities. We do not want educational institutions in that way and when socialism supplants capitalism, and when the wealth that is created is in the possession of the men who created it, when every man has not only plenty of what is required to supply his physical wants, but has leisure to enjoy, we will fill this country with educational institutions, we will make education universal; not only that, we will rescue industry from its cupidity. Then man shall stand erect in touch with his fellow man. He will be the monarch of his work. It will not be possible for one man to enslave another without forging fetters for himself. There is no release, there is no relief on any other line. It is socialism or capitalism; as capitalism declines, socialism follows it, so it is only a question of time.

I like the 4th of July. It breathes a spirit of revolution. On this day we reaffirm the ultimate triumph of socialism. It is coming as certain as I stand in your presence. Trials are not to be regretted. They are a part and a necessary part of the development. We may disagree. We may divide. It is possible that we shall quarrel and still be perfectly honest. The development demands it all. We are all subscribers to the same fundamental principles. We all stand upon the same uncompromising platform. We all have our faces turned toward the economic dawn. We are battling for the triumph of the producers of the world. We are in touch with the International Socialists of the world — with our ears turned down, we can hear the thrones totter before the great march of the international hosts of socialism.

So do not be discouraged for a single instant. If you have the courage of your convictions you can face the universe. So far as I am concerned, if there were a million, I would be one of the million. If they should be reduced to a thousand, I would be one of a thousand; if reduced to a hundred, I would be one of the hundred; if a single one survive, I would be that one against the world. I want every one of you to be that one and if you find that you are not so constituted that you can be that one against the world, you have no place in the Socialist movement, but go to the old parties and stay there until you get ripe.

We are educating, we are agitating, we are organizing, that is to say we are preparing for the inevitable. It is only a question of time when socialists will be in the majority. They will succeed on a platform declaring for the social ownership of the means of production and distribution. Then the factory will no longer be a dismal den thronged with industrial convicts. Then for a' that and a' that, man to man the world o'er, shall brothers be for a' that.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Eugene V. Debs (1855-1926) was a union leader and socialist.

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