
Eugene V. Debs' Speech at West Side Turn Hall, Cleveland, Wednesday, March 19, 1919

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Before a capacity audience of 3,000, which filled West Side Turn Hall one hour before his scheduled appearance, Debs made his farewell speech.

Debs was calm. His opening words were accorded with instantaneous silence. He said:

How true it is that there is a divinity that shapes our ends, rough-hew them how we will! It may seem strange to you, but in my plans, in my dreams, I did not think of going to the penitentiary — and I — I had a thousand times rather go there and spend my remaining days there than to betray this great cause.

So far as I am concerned it does not matter much. The margin is narrow, the years between now and the sunset are few, and the only care that I have personally is that I may preserve to the last the integrity of my own soul and my loyalty to the only cause worth living for, fighting for, and dying for.

It is so perfectly fine to me to look into your faces once more, to draw upon you for the only word I have ever had, the only word that I can ever speak for myself. I love mankind, humanity. Can you understand? I am sure you can.

We are close of kith and kin, we are human and when we get into close touch with each other we come to understand that our good depends upon the good of all humanity.

Opposed to System.

I am opposed to the system under which we live. I am opposed to the government which compels you, the great body of the American people, to pay your tribute to an insignificant few who enjoy life while the great body of the people suffer, struggle, and agonize

without ever having lived. Can you understand? I'm sure you can.

Let me get in touch with you for a while. I am going to speak to you as a Socialist, as a revolutionist, and, if you please, as a Bolshevist.

And what is the thing that the whole world is talking about? What is it that the ruling class power of the world are denouncing, upon which they are pouring a flood of all their malicious lies — what is it? It is the rise of the workers, the peasants, the soldiers, the common man, who for the first time in history said, "I have made what there is, I produced the wealth; now I want to be heard."

Now, for the first time in history, his bowed head lifted, he stands erect and is beginning in his grim strength to shake off the manacles, straighten himself in the sunlight, in his gigantic attitude, opening his eyes, beginning to see for the first time, beginning to ask why it is that he must press his rags closer to his body, that he may not touch the rich man's costly silks, that he himself produced — why it is that he must walk in alleys, while he is forbidden to enter the great palaces he has erected — why it is that he must support all the banquets of the world that he may not taste.

He is beginning to think. That is Bolshevism! That is the revolution in Russia! That is the beginning of the end of capitalism and the end of the beginning of socialism!

Earth Beginning to Shake.

And because we say this they are going to put us in jail. With every drop in my veins I despise their law and I defy them. If the Scriptures are true, Paul was sent to prison, and shortly afterward the prison doors

were opened by an earthquake.

The earth is beginning to shake beneath the feet of the profiteers.

Have they outlawed the red flag here? The red necktie? The red socks? How perfectly foolish! Have you heard about the pop in the middle ages forbidding the comets to appear? Why, the other day the chaplain in the House of Representatives asked God to grant Congress wisdom!

I am appealing to you tonight — the crowd, the mass, the common people — I do not care anything about the Supreme Court, begowned, befettered, be-whiskered old fossils, corporation lawyers, every one of them — they have not decided anything. They never have, they never will.

Sixty years ago the predecessors of the same body confirmed the validity of the fugitive slave law. They declared that a black man had no rights which his master was bound to respect. They imagined that chattel slavery was secure for all time. And within five years that infamous institution was swept from the land in a torrent of blood.

Did Not Meet Issue.

They did not dare to meet the issue. They did not decide that the Espionage Law was constitutional. They dared not put that decision upon the record. Have you read that law? The amendment to that law that makes it a crime for you to criticize crime in the United States? That makes this country take the place of old Russia under the tsar?

Have you ever read it? Know anything about it? Know that it is a gag upon your lips, fetters all your constitutional rights? That law — do I respect it? No!

How perfectly fine it is to stand tonight up and do what Wendell Phillips said: "When they pass that kind of a law, put it under your feet."

Do not say a word against the war — not one. That is treason — to the ruling classes. They make war; you do not. You never did. You paid all the bills, shed your blood, make all the sacrifices. You do not say a word. Have your limbs shot off, your eyes gouged out, gassed, come back, and then hunt for a job.

The finest thing I know is to carry yourself as a man — face humanity, look up into the sun and not

feel ashamed of yourself; walk straight before the world, and live with it in terms of peace; look at yourself without a blush. Have you ever tried it? If you have, you are a Bolshevik.

The great world is in travail today. A great upheaval is shaking the foundation of capitalist society. The master class are driven to extremities. They are going to establish a League of Nations to preserve the peace, to prevent war. What does it mean?

Master Class Staggers.

Simply this: That the master class itself is staggered by the cost of modern war. Here are all these modern nations, great and powerful in economic and military ways, straining to harmonize their various conflicting interests. In theory it is perfectly fine; but how ridiculous it is to imagine for a moment that the interests of nations that are innately in conflict can be permanently harmonized.

What does it mean? It is the last, desperate, temporary expedient of the master class, the commercial interests, the commercial interests, the economic interests., to prolong their sovereignty. Have you any views on it?

Who is it that is making the terms of peace? Is it not strange that the great, common people who shed their blood, fought the war, made the sacrifices, should have no voice in making the terms of peace? The working class — the working class, which for 1,000 years constituted the slaves, the tragedy of history — I recall it as I speak, I can see across all the centuries, the patricians of ancient Rome in the amphitheaters, while they poured their slaves into the Coliseum to destroy them for pastime — and through the middle ages, how the serfs were killed for their profit and glory — through all that I can see the working class, that youth, the victims of the ages, the martyrs of the centuries, you who went to war when it was declared, you who were in the trenches, you who shed your blood like water, you who suffered the agony that human speech can never tell, you who had your limbs torn from your bodies — you have no voice in that peace conference, no representation there.

Just one secondhand one, Sam Gompers. The other day Sam, four-foot Sam, was banqueted by a seven-foot Russian duke, and the duke was in poor

company.

The world is in turmoil. Where is your representative; where did you elect him? What did you have to say about these terms? Not one real representative, but politicians and diplomats and thieves and liars, the tools of your masters — that is who is there.

They are going to make the world perfectly safe for democracy, and that is why I am going to the penitentiary.

World Being Remade.

You can think a bit, and I want to stir you in thought and action. We are on the eve of tremendous developments. The world before your eyes is being destroyed and recreated. Russia is making a beginning; the Soviet is just an example. They have shed some blood, they have made some mistakes, and I am glad they have. When you consider for a moment that the ruling class press of the world has been vilifying Lenin and Trotsky, you can make up your mind that they are the greatest statesmen in the modern world. In that brief space of time they have done more than all the capitalist governments have ever dared to do in constructive work. They have refused to compromise. They said to the old reactionaries: "You will not have any voice in the government until you do useful work."

In every previous revolution it was said that the working class was not ready. Russia did not know that it was ready; that is the trouble with the working class of the world.

What have they done? They have given the franchise to men and women all over the republic. They have inaugurated many beneficent changes. They have said, "We do not want the recognition of the United States, or of any capitalist government." That is fine, inspiring; I applaud it with all my heart.

In Germany the same spirit is at work today. We do not know, we cannot tell; the dispatches are meager. And so it is in Bohemia, Bulgaria, Hungary, England, France, and in the United States of America.

They are going to suppress the red flag; you may not carry a flag except under your vest. That is the level of your statesmanship. Aren't you proud of it?

In Germany — do you know what is going on there? In spite of all opposition, the Spartacans, the heroic followers of Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg,

the most magnificent and heroic figures in Europe in modern history — they are dead, but the revolution lives, and their magnificent souls go marching on.

At the beginning they said that the Bolsheviki had ruined and bankrupted the country of Russia, and in the next breath we read that they are financing the revolution everywhere. The son of Trotsky stole 50 million rubles, and Trotsky never had a son. The wife of Lenin went to Italy with trunks loaded with gold, and she never has been in Italy in her life.

Is there a life they have not told? Is there a calumny which they have not circulated about Lenin and Trotsky?

They are fighting for your liberty, for you, if you only know it, and I am only too glad to pay my tribute to those men I love. Along this line Congress is making an investigation. The Overman Committee has discovered that there is some Bolshevist agitation in the United States. It is to be ended by deporting, without trial, without hearing, 46 of our working people.

How perfectly brutal and infamous and disgusting an example of how capitalism treats its working men. Compare the hard, horny palms of those who are to be deported with the lily-white hands of the deporters. You can see the difference. The deported were the producers. If they are to be sent abroad, I want to go with them!

What you and all of us need in this hour of trial and travail is working class solidarity.

Appeals for Solidarity.

We need to unite. We need to get together. We need to feel the common touch. We need to recognize our kinship. The world is against us if we are not for ourselves. Through the history of the ages you have been oppressed, you have been exploited, you have been degraded. When you go for a job to the master class, you work under conditions they prescribe. You depend upon them for tools, you work for their benefit. Do you like this? This is capitalism.

The system in which you enrich your master and impoverish yourselves, the system under which 5 percent of the people own the wealth of the country and the great body of the people struggle through all their years for an existence and pass away without ever having enjoyed one hour of real life. How pathetic and

tragic it is that in our land, with its boundless resources and treasures, its machinery, its workers, everything for production for every man, we have in the midst of all these benefits the great body of the people struggling for existence.

How foolish it is to vote for the perpetuation of such a system. Yet that is exactly what you do when you vote the Republican or the Democratic ticket, or any ticket except the Socialist. While you are doing this the master class looks upon you with sovereign contempt.

You who produce everything, you who really create, you who are conserving civilization — is it not humiliating to think that you are the bottom class, the lower order? That is the system that you support or help to destroy by your vote.

I appeal to you just once to stand perfectly erect in the majesty of your humanity. You own it to yourself.

Washington was Denounced.

Look into the eyes of your brother and see the new light that is shining for the working class. We have been oppressed, we have suffered, we have agonized, and now let us unite and stand together against capitalism. That is the plea I am making tonight.

I do not desire to make any glowing periods, I wish I could read your hearts tonight, your attitude of soul.

Let us unite industrially. If Germany had been organized industrially, this great calamity would have never come.

These crimson flowers that have just been presented to me represent the springtime, the springtime of revolution. I have faith in it and in humanity; I have faith in the Man of Galilee. Twenty centuries ago he spoke to the common people and they heard him gladly. He was brought before the scribes and the Pharisees and the priests and the doctors and the lawyers and the judges. They said, "He is preaching dangerous doctrines. He is a Bolshevist." They hung him on a cross near Jerusalem as a warning to the centuries.

But ever since there have been men and women of moral courage who dared to speak the truth as they saw it, who have been maligned and persecuted; they have been stoned and burned at the stake, their ashes scattered to the four winds. These men are remembered, and it is to them that we owe our progress.

Remember that George Washington was denounced as an unprincipled scoundrel; Jefferson was said to be a violent fanatic; Samuel Adams a dangerous character; Patrick Henry was an incendiary.

A little later there was a group of abolitionists who fought against an institution which had existed for 250 years in this country. Abolitionism was the Bolshevism of that day. Those men were ridiculed. Today they are honored, while the smug, respectable people of their day lie buried and forgotten.

The great working class movement will similarly triumph. Its emancipation from the ruling class must come soon.

Rush to Shake Debs' Hand.

The conclusion of Debs' speech was dramatic. From the slow, rhythmic, laborious articulation which marks his speeches, he had suddenly wrought himself to a pitch of tumultuous haste. His speech ended sooner than was expected.

The audience took no heed of Chairman Ruthenberg's introductory admonition to remain in their seats. When Debs turned to sit down, a thousand people rushed for the platform with outstretched hands. Debs shook hands with all those proximately permitted the greeting. Some of the women rushed to kiss him.

During a pause in his speech members of Local Cleveland had presented Debs with a basket of red roses and carnations. Debs regarded the floral tribute with smiling eyes and remarked, "Is it not timely, however, blasphemous, to ask if an ordinance has been passed to prohibit their color. I am richer than John D. Rockefeller. He never enjoyed a gift so pure in loveliness, so deep in meaning. I deplore his poverty."

Edited by Tim Davenport.

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