

The Socialist Conflagration (June 27, 1908)

The most glowing reports which could be put in words would fail to do justice to the socialist situation in the middle and eastern states through which I recently traveled. I was astonished and delighted at every point. Four years ago the sentiment was weak and sporadic. This year it is spontaneous, widespread, and so intense that it can not be described. Within the past few months there has been a marvelous change in the entire status of the socialist movement in the United States. In places where up till now it had existed in only a lambent state, it has burst forth like a conflagration.¹

In New York, where I have often been before, I have never seen or felt such burning and consuming enthusiasm. It has a vital and thrilling spirit which hitherto had been lacking. It held one fast in its grip from the moment one came within its influence. What was equally gratifying was the spirit of comradeship among the leaders, some of whom had heretofore been the heads of belligerent factions. The harmony which now prevails in New York and in the East generally is the consummation the socialists in that section have been looking forward to these many years.

The battles of the past have always been fought under disadvantages for the reason that the militant strength was largely dissipated in factional warfare. This year it will be entirely different. Not only are these factions united but the very differences which formerly arrayed them against each other seem now to impart an element of strength which would not be possible had there always been smooth sailing. It was a scene good to look upon to see the old warriors in the movement all united and filled with the one desire to marshal all the forces against the common enemy.

The launching of the *Evening Call* in New York was an event of great importance in the movement, and marks a new era in the propaganda, which is already sowing the most excellent results.

The visit at national headquarters in Chicago could not have been more gratifying. The subcommittee delegated with authority to make the preliminary arrangements for the campaign was perfectly united and all aglow with the spirit of enthusiasm. The outlook was considered infinitely more promising than ever before, from every possible point of view. The

work before the committee was disposed of with dispatch and the general campaign outlined in a comprehensive canvas of the entire country.

The national headquarters is a veritable hive of activity. Housed with the Daily Socialist, almost the entire building is now required and all the vast floors are closely crowded with busy workers who are all vying with each other to do most for the advancement of the party's interests.

In all places covered in my journey to New York, Washington, Chicago, and other points, there is but one opinion among socialists, and that is that for the first time the Socialist Party is fairly and squarely launched as a national party and will figure as a decisive factor in the national campaign. It is wonderful to what extent this has become a conviction in the minds of socialists, and this conviction has given them fresh zeal and an air of confidence in the triumphant march of socialism which they have never had before.

In the campaign of 1900 the Socialist Party was a relatively insignificant factor.² In the campaign of 1904, the party attracted considerably more attention, and when the returns were announced a sobering expression was noticeable upon the features of capitalist politicians. Since then, the industrial collapse and the widespread discontent consequent thereupon have intensified the opposition to the existing order and the ranks of socialism have been recruited at a correspondingly rapid pace. The outlook is therefore all that even the most pessimistic could desire. The entire general situation is this year for the first time wholly in our favor. The movement has a strength and virility it has never known before. The very thought of it is an inspiration and as we look with eager, happy eyes upon the rapid spread of our conquering movement we begin to feel the first joyous thrills of the realization of our ideals.

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¹ After a hiatus of more than ten months, Debs returned to public speaking at the end of May 1908. Despite the intimation here, he did not participate in another tightly booked speaking tour at this time, but rather traveled to New York to deliver speeches at a gathering in celebration of the launch of the *New York Evening Call* on May 30 as well as an address the following evening to the National Conference of Christian Socialists at Carnegie Hall. Taking a year off from the Chautauqua circuit, Debs would also speak that summer at special events in front of 2,500 people at Oklahoma City on July 5 and as keynote speaker

at a grand Social Democratic Party picnic in Milwaukee on July 12. His all-consuming tour aboard the Red Special would begin at the end of August.

² The 1900 campaign was actually conducted by an uneasy alliance of two rival political organizations each calling themselves the Social Democratic Party of America. See *Eugene V. Debs Selected Works* vol. 3.