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OPEN LETTER.

TO BRO. EUGENE V. DEBS.

The Emancipation of the Working Class Requires a Social Revolution for the Clearing of Whose Path the Revolutionary Ballot is an Essential Broom.

By Daniel De Leon

Dear Sir and Brother: The *Terre Haute, Ind., Railway Times* of the 1st instant publishes a highly interesting communication over your signature, upon which the capitalist press has, with its usual flippancy and black-guardism, been commenting extensively.

It is not our purpose in this open letter to open a discussion upon the merits or demerits of the late free silver movement. Much is to be said upon the subject, and we believe both you and we have exhausted what we had to say thereon. Our purpose is to ascertain, with greater definiteness than your letter enables us to, what your present attitude is upon the tactics that should be adopted to overthrow the infamous system of capitalism that you have lashed so well and have exposed so completely. Upon ultimate aims your communication leaves no doubt: "the collective ownership of land, capital, and all the means of production and distribution," and "the Co-operative Commonwealth to take the place of wage slavery," which you declare for, is a succinct enough statement of the practical aims of socialism which the organized Socialists of the world are striving for, and which the Socialist Labor party of America, the American division of the organized international movement, is pledged to accomplish. It is on your tactics that we are left in doubt. Our doubt arises from these two passages in your communication. You say in one place:

"I confess to no hope for the toiling masses of my countrymen except by the pathways mapped out by the Socialists, the advocates of the Co-operative Commonwealth."

In another we find this:

"The ballot, however much it has been eulogized, has been beaten to the

earth by boodle wrung from unrequited toil, and as a weapon cannot be relied upon to execute the will of the people while they are in industrial bondage.”

The establishment of the Co-operative Commonwealth implies a revolution. It is nothing short of the overthrow of the capitalist class and the enthronement of the people. Such a deed presupposes the conquest of the public powers by the revolutionary forces. Now, then, there are but two weapons to this end: the ballot and the bullet.

The organized Socialists of the world entertain no illusions on the subject of the ballot. They know full well that the machinery of election is, as a matter of course, in the hands of the present usurpers, the same as all other branches of the public administration; and they also know full well that, just the same as the present usurping class runs the administration and twists the laws to suit itself, it is not likely to treat the suffrage with greater respect. This view, indeed, is amply proven by history. In our own country, the capitalist class has more than once done as it liked with the ballot; and beginning with the English Revolution of 1649 down to the revolution that here set our people free from the British Crown and the subsequent one that emancipated the chattel slave, the property-holding pirate class has each time sought to defy the verdict of the ballot, and had to be brought to order by the strong arm of the victors. Nevertheless, the organized Socialists do not reject the ballot. They do not reject it any more than a suitor would reject a Court of First Instance, however convinced he was of that court’s hostility or corruption, and take his case forthwith to the Court of Appeals, or of Last Resort. In social warfare, as in all others in our present stage of civilization, the legal procedure must be followed step by step; the last resort is resorted to only when all previous ones have been exhausted. Accordingly, the pathways mapped out by the Socialists do run via the ballot box; they are thus mapped out not only for the reasons just given, but also because the revolutionary ballot is in itself one of the most powerful means of and aids to agitation and education, without both of which no organized effort can be successfully put forth. Even admitting, for the sake of argument, that at the last election “the ballot was beaten to the earth,” yet, if it does not precede and clear the path, the revolutionary forces will be “massacred into the earth.” Illustrations on this point are too numerous to mention; they are the reason why the capitalist class has, as is well known, quite a liking for the Anarchists, despite occasional “inconveniences”; why it simply laughs at the utopian schemes of other milder reformers who also neglect the political warfare.

The shake-up you have given the old fossilized brotherhoods of railroad workers, the object lesson your Chicago strike furnished the nation on the anarchic instincts of the capitalist class combine to render you an interesting figure in the American Labor Movement, a figure that has unequalled opportunities to clarify the situation and consolidate the forces that aspire to freedom, many of which, however, not only grope in

darkness, but also insist in pulling others over to their various and devious ways, away from the pathways mapped out by experience and closely followed by the Socialist Labor parties of all nations.

At a certain stage in all movements, and we have reached that stage in America, tactics become as important an issue as ultimate aims themselves. We feel certain that the working class in the country will appreciate a fuller statement from you on this head.

Transcribed and edited by Robert Bills for the official Web site of the Socialist Labor Party of America.

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