
“Morally I Mean to Pay Them” :
Interview with the *Omaha World-Herald*
(December 21, 1898)

No, I did not attend the convention at Kansas City.¹ I am in deep sympathy with the meeting and wanted very much to go, but my lecture engagements prevented. I have been speaking every night for two weeks.

With what success?² At Boone, Iowa [Dec. 20], I had a fair audience, but usually through Iowa my audiences were not large.³ You know, the railroads and other corporations have no love for me, and it is given out cold to the men, and many of them who would attend stay away, fearful of incurring the displeasure of the powers that be. Especially is this true in railroad towns. However I cannot complain: I speak and the papers report and thus I reach the masses.

My theme? It is the old, old story — economics — the concentration of industry. The middle class of middlemen are being obliterated; they buy goods in small quantities and pay more than the department stores which buy by the carload. The department store advertises cheap goods, gets the laboring man’s cash, and the little corner grocery has the “credit” business. The small dealer is crushed: labor is pinched and suicides have increased 200 percent in the last ten years.

The tramp in this country is the victim of the present social system. Had it not been for the environments of that system there would not have been given the impetus which started that individual upon that plain of despair in which the world now sees him.

Beginning to Think.

I believe the present system so destructive to the better elements of mankind is soon to be eradicated, and that by the workingmen. They are beginning to think, and from the products of their minds is developing an economic revolution.

Toil has made this nation. Compare the workingman’s degradation with that of 100 years ago. Then this country had no tramps and no millionaires. Men today are almost as bad as the chattel slaves of the South

before the days of 1861, except the slave was always well fed, well clothed, and taken care of by his masters; he was not afraid of losing his job. There were no tramp slaves; they lived long and were not controlled by injunction. Now a man is not as valuable as the slave was to his master. The slave was sold to the highest bidder; the man is now taken by the employer who will pay the least for his labor.

Contract systems are not in vogue; machines are perfected so that one man can do the work of 20, but he does not get the pay of the 20 men he displaces, he gets just one man's pay. A man will soon have to be a tramp or a millionaire, with chances of one million to one he will be a tramp. But we are making some progress — we are on the eve of a great change.

Sees the Sunrise.

I can see the rising sun of the cooperative commonwealth. The workmen are beginning to think and they will soon begin to act, and will win, not by crime or injunction, but by a united ballot. These are, in brief, some of the themes I discuss.

My object? To pay off the debts resultant upon the great strike, which are not legally mine to pay, but morally I mean to pay them. Lawyers, courts, injunctions, and such luxuries cost money, and our brief experience painfully demonstrated the truth of that assertion.⁴

My attitude toward expansion? I am opposed to it bitterly. My reasons are many, and would fill a book. Pauper labor, open doors, open gates to the world, opportunities for plunder, large army, and hundreds of other ills follow in the wake of the annexation scheme urged by the trusts, combines, and men hunting place and power.

I lecture in Council Bluffs tonight [Dec. 21] and in Omaha Thursday night [Dec. 22]. I am under no bureau or syndicate, but out to pay debts and educate the masses on the value of the cooperative commonwealth. My engagements are made ahead until next April.

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¹ Reference is to the 18th Annual Convention of the American Federation of Labor, held in Kansas City from Dec. 12-20, 1898.

² This and subsequent questions Debs asks of himself are clearly narrative devices invented by the interviewer.

³ Debs made a lecture tour of 19 Iowa communities plus Omaha, Nebraska, from Dec. 4-24, 1898, giving speeches to paying audiences on the topic "Labor and Liberty." Debs would continue to tour the Midwest, South, and Southwest speaking on the same topic during the first half of 1899. The tour was lightly attended.

⁴ This seems to be the first public acknowledgement that Debs was lecturing on tour in pursuit of honoraria, to be dedicated to the massive legal bills which the American Railway Union incurred during the Pullman strike of 1894.