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Why I Am a Socialist



By **NORMAN THOMAS**



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WHY I AM A SOCIALIST

By
NORMAN THOMAS

THIS little pamphlet is neither a confession, a true story, nor an autobiography. There is no reason why I am a Socialist which does not apply with equal force to other men and women. I am a Socialist because I believe that in Socialism, in this day and generation lies our best, indeed our only hope of plenty, peace and freedom. Or to put the matter negatively, I am a Socialist because I believe that in Socialism lies our only escape from a long cycle of poverty, dictatorship and war.

Even today this statement which, in the light of events since 1914, seems to me obvious will doubtless seem to most of you to require proof. When I was first asked to write an article under this title by a college magazine, it was generally felt that for an American, with reasonable luck in respect to health, a job, and an education, to be a Socialist was a peculiarity which required special explanation. For that, you see, was in the gilt and tinsel days of the '20s, when the first and last commandment for thousands of Americans was "Don't sell America short," and any man with a spare five dollars was supposedly able to make a killing on Wall Street.

Those days are gone forever. One of the striking facts about our present improvement in business conditions (this is written early in 1936) is the widespread recognition, even by its beneficiaries, that "recovery" is insecure and impermanent.

Despite the present belief of our Tories that a return to the Coolidge epoch is possible and would be Paradise for them, not only

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is their hope fantastically impossible, but their Paradise was a sorry place at best. Its frantic gamblers' prosperity carried within it the seeds of the catastrophic depression which ended it, and while it lasted it was not far from hell for millions of exploited workers. At the height of our prosperity in 1929 we did not produce what we should have and we distributed what we produced with a cruel and grotesque lack of fairness or justice. As conservative a study as that of the Brookings Institution in *America's Capacity to Produce* tells us that a reasonable use of our then capacity to produce would have given us enough more to raise the annual income of every family in the United States to the \$2,000 level without cutting off any at the top. (That also would have been worth doing.) There were sixteen million four hundred thousand families with incomes below that level. A third of our people then needed to be rehoused. There were then between two and three million unemployed. And many more million of share croppers and other tenant farmers had an annual income of less than five hundred dollars for each family.

But instead of going to work to use our productive capacity more efficiently in order to banish poverty, our system went into a kind of nose-spin. From an annual earned income of about eighty-three billion dollars we dropped to an earned income of about thirty-eight billion dollars in 1932. Whatever the degree of our recovery since then, because of the New Deal or in spite of the New Deal, we have by no means regained the ground that was lost. The rate of increase of our production does not equal the rate of increase of our debt. Re-employment lags far behind the rate of increase in production since "recovery" began. There is no reason to expect the standing army of the unemployed to fall below eight million; they must be kept quiet under the most hard-boiled administration by the old prescription of bread and circuses. Nothing else is in sight except a temporary boom of wild inflation with the dreadful aftermath of depression.

Now it is important to observe that the great depression which

began in October, 1929, was not caused by any terrible natural disaster or by any new war. It was certainly not caused by any "radical" tinkering with our machinery. God, presumably, was in His Heaven, the Republicans in Washington, and the banker captains of capitalism were in full command. There was not even a New Deal for the conservatives to blame until 1933. For what happened, it is plain enough that the system itself and the captains and kings who ruled under it must bear the responsibility.

To my mind this simple statement of fact more than completes whatever might have been lacking in the proof which the Great War and the faults of the Coolidge prosperity afforded that the capitalist system was disintegrating beyond the possibility of a few simple reforms to set it right. It is easy enough in retrospect to criticize the various efforts of Mr. Roosevelt's New Deal in pursuit of "recovery and reform" from the standpoint of a sound progressivism theoretically possible under capitalism. Practically I do not believe that any reform measures *within the limitations of the American political and economic situation*, would have been feasible or successful to a greater degree than the New Deal has been. And that, even the friendly critic must agree, has brought no sense of permanence or security to masses of Americans who suffer all the pangs of poverty in the midst of potential abundance.

What are we to blame for this failure of men to use the natural resources, the machinery and the power which already are sufficient for modest abundance for all, for security and abundance rather than for insecurity and poverty? What indeed can we blame but the system itself, whether under the forms of the old deal or of the new? What is the nature of that system? For Mr. Hoover it was, curiously enough, a system of "rugged individualism." In order to justify capitalism he talked as if we lived in the age of the pioneers although, at the very time he spoke, that age had gone forever. The characteristic mark of the ownership of the means of production under Hoover, as under Roosevelt, is irresponsibility. Multitudes

of absentee owners give no thought, no effort, no direction whatsoever, to the industries from whence they derive their incomes. A lucky guess with the investment of a comparatively small sum of money may make a man a millionaire. When the guess is on the Irish sweepstakes and the reward is not in the millions Mr. Hoover and the conservative economists call it gambling; when it is on stocks, oil wells, or corner lots, they call it investment and its rewards the profits of rugged individualism. Moreover, this system before the depression was no longer regulated by competition. It was largely subject to private monopoly. The hundred largest corporations controlled fifty percent of the business wealth of America and were, in turn, controlled by less than two thousand directors, most of whom, our various investigations have discovered, did not direct.

The characteristic mark of our system is that it leaves in the hands of private owners the land, the natural resources, the great machinery, the power, necessary for our common life. And these private owners or the managers who act for them, use or fail to use what they own, solely in accordance with what they think will make for their own profit. Their profit depends upon relative scarcity. There would be no rent on land if there was not a limitation on convenient lots in the cities and a great difference in fertility and accessibility in the country. To keep up the price of bananas many a cargo boat has been partially lightened of its load in New York or New Orleans harbor. To put up the price of cotton under the New Deal we were taxed to pay great landowners not to plant cotton even though the children of the workers had no cotton for underclothes. This dependence of profit upon relative scarcity was somewhat obscured during the nineteenth and early twentieth century by the extraordinary increase in productive capacity and by the utilization of new lands in America by a rapidly increasing population. Today's technological improvement only makes more glaring our incapacity to use it for abundance under the profit system.

The New Deal did, indeed, impose various regulations and some reforms on private capitalism. It even increased the amount of government ownership. But it still clung to the principle of production for profit. To a certain extent it replaced private capitalism by state capitalism. The distinction between state capitalism and Socialism must be kept in mind. Government ownership under Socialism is for the purpose of rewarding workers for their toil and for providing abundance. Government ownership and government regulation under capitalism, in the last analysis, are for the purpose of stabilizing and perpetuating the profit system and the division of the national income under which an owning class gets the cream and the workers get the skimmed milk.

I am a Socialist because reflection on these facts makes it so plain to me that it is idle to talk about using our machinery for abundance or of planning for abundance under the profit system. The whole theory of the profit system was that it worked automatically; it made planning unnecessary. True enough, it is an impossible task to plan successfully for the social use of what individuals own. It is plain nonsense to say that we don't have to plan for abundance. How can we expect to have anything but scarcity and insecurity if, in this age of specialization and great machinery, there is no plan *by cooperative effort* to see that we get what we need, and what can be produced?

The case for Socialism arises logically and reasonably out of our examination of the development of capitalism and its present failure to use the machinery of abundance for the conquest of poverty. Socialism says: "Let us go about the business of making machinery provide abundance directly. Let us begin by asking, not what price will bring profit to private owners, but how much food, clothing and shelter do we need for the good life for men. Then let us produce for the use of men, women, and children, in order to supply them with abundance."

Clearly this requires social ownership of the principal means of

production and distribution. This not in order to abolish all private property but to give to the exploited workers, for the first time in the long history of mankind, the good things of life which labor of hand and brain, applied to the power-driven machine, can produce. We may make mistakes in social planning, but we can learn by our experience—without planning our whole economic system becomes one tragic mistake. Abundance is possible when we can set our engineers and technicians to planning for society, instead of planning, in so far as they can plan at all, for the profits of an owning class.

This Socialist proposal seems to me wholly reasonable. It is not, of course, self-executing. It is not a patent medicine which will work while we sleep. Like every other good thing the achievement of Socialism will be the result of struggle, and the successful application of Socialism requires intelligence and the capacity for cooperative effort. The collapse of capitalism is inevitable. But there is no inevitability about Socialism or shared abundance. We may have a long stretch of chaos, wars, dictatorships, and regimented poverty. This can be prevented only by men who will not accept poverty in the midst of potential abundance, and the eternal exploitation of workers with hand and brain. Not man but the electrical and other power which drives machinery must be the slave of tomorrow's world.

But this is only part of the reason why I am a Socialist. It is not merely plenty that we want, but peace. Everybody knows that machinery which can conquer poverty also makes war incredibly disastrous. Yet war is more appropriate to the strife and hate and exploitation of our capitalist-nationalist system than is peace. You will observe that I have added to *capitalist* the word *nationalist* as a more comprehensive description of our disintegrating system. Men are divided not only into economic classes but into nations. And nations as well as men are divided into the Houses of Have and Have-not. We live in an interdependent world where not even the capitalist nations with the most resources, the United States, the

British and French empires, are fully self-sufficient. Yet each nation claims absolute sovereignty, absolute sway over its citizens, and blindly sees its economic prosperity, not in cooperation, but in shutting out its neighbors from its own markets. Meanwhile it seeks aggressively to capture the markets of the world, to obtain sources of raw materials outside its borders, and a place for its capitalists to invest more profitably than at home the surplus wealth they have acquired by the successful exploitation of the workers who are their own fellow countrymen.

Modern wars arise out of the clash of nations for power and profit. The heady wine of an emotional patriotism makes men blind and drunk so that they cannot see that out of this struggle for power and profit there can be neither true prosperity nor true peace. Some things indeed we may do now to make our participation in war less likely. We cannot make peace secure or glorious under the loyalties of the institutions of capitalist-nationalism. It was my conviction of this truth which finally made me a Socialist during the Great War of 1914-1918. It is a conviction which has ever deepened. The hardest task for Socialism, as recent history shows, is to bring about a real unity of workers with hand and brain across the lines of nation, race and creed. Yet it is only in the federation of cooperative commonwealths, to which, alas, even Socialists have been more loyal in word than in deed, that there is hope of lasting peace.

The third reason that I have already suggested for my faith in Socialism is that I want a world of freedom. This we do not have and cannot have under the shadow of war and the bondage of capitalist exploitation. Diogenes, with his lantern, might find an honest man in our present society, but it would take a strong searchlight to find a free man. Of course in all generations there is a sense in which freedom is something which must be won. It is also, if it is to be real, something which must be shared. None of us is free in a country where Tom Mooney and Warren K. Billings are

still in jail; where a Governor like McNutt of Indiana can arbitrarily proclaim military law superseding the ordinary civil law for purposes of keeping labor in order; where the hideous floggings of Florida and the terror of night riding in Arkansas and Alabama are used to keep workers in subjection. All workers live more or less in fear of those who control their jobs or the tools without which they have no jobs. There is, for a great many of us, a kind of haunting fear of a jobless tomorrow or an unwanted and unrecompensed old age. These things can be ended. They can be ended with the end of exploitation which a proper control of a machine age makes possible. They can be ended by a society of comrades. The Tree of Freedom today has feeble roots for itself except as it may grow in the soil of shared abundance.

But it is just at this point that Socialism is most often challenged. It is asserted that Socialism is an end to freedom, not the beginning of a larger liberty. Those who make that assertion very often are people like the members of the present Liberty League in America to whom freedom means only the right to grab all you can and keep all you have grabbed. This is not true freedom at all. The freedom we seek is the freedom which guarantees to the individual, justice even from those who do not wish to be just to him; which assures to him to the right "to know, to utter, and to argue freely according to conscience"—in short that noble company of rights: free speech, free press, free assemblage, free association, for which man has so long struggled. It is true enough that under the circumstances of a machine age which make some collectivism imperative we cannot have the freedom of Daniel Boone or one of the pioneers whose ideal was to live so far from his neighbors that he could not hear his neighbor's hound dog bark. The price of our freedom is freedom in fellowship or in cooperation. Moreover it is true that there is a discipline which the struggle against tyranny requires which may sometimes compel a subordination of individual "rights" in the essential struggle to change the system.

Nevertheless I am a Socialist and not a Communist largely because I believe that even in a transition period we must maintain civil and religious liberty for the individual. Very great things have been accomplished in Russia. The most disquieting fact about Russia is that there is so little sign that the dictatorship is withering away. That dictatorship still imposes a rigid regimentation and at times prostitutes justice to terrorism. When Kirov was assassinated by a former Communist it was a terrible crime. But when the Russian government thereupon put to death more than a hundred persons on its blacklist and increased the bitterness of imprisonment or surveillance for unknown hundreds it was a greater crime. It was a crime not excused by the exigencies of a revolutionary crisis. It was a crime directly derived from the Communist theory that justice is to be understood *only* in terms of the safety of that abstraction, the "working masses," which safety is infallibly interpreted by the dictatorship of the one party in power. In this sort of justice lies neither security nor liberty for the new society. They are to be found only in realizing true democracy. This must be more than nose counting if it is to have power or value. Those who really desire to maintain democracy will prove it by their understanding of civil liberty. This fact organized Socialism has accepted to a degree that Communism has not. Loyalty to the idea of justice and civil liberty for the individual may sometimes prove difficult in the hour of struggle. It is the only loyalty which can prevent the gradual degeneration of men under the new society to the level of a community of more or less well fed and well tended cows.

I am a Socialist, then, because I believe in freedom, peace, and plenty and know that they cannot be realized in my generation, or my children's or for many which may follow hereafter, unless they are realized promptly in a cooperative commonwealth or rather in a Federation of Cooperative Commonwealths which will embrace the world.

But, I am often asked—indeed, I sometimes ask myself—is this

great goal of the Federation of Cooperative Commonwealths practicable? This little pamphlet is not the place to give a full or adequate answer. It is not even my business in this personal statement to recite a carefully thought-out platform for American Socialism. Negatively let me point out that if Socialism is not practicable then there is no hope for us. Certainly there is no hope in a disintegrating capitalism, with the practical certainty of a new cycle of wars and tyranny. Positively, let me point out that the goal of abundance in a society of free men who harness for life rather than death the machinery which can produce abundance is so desirable that it ought to compel men to move heaven and earth to make it practicable.

But there are reasons other than these for believing in the practicability of Socialism. There has been encouraging progress made in the cooperation of men in the management of their own affairs. I ask you to consider with me the history of labor unionism. It is a magnificent record of the onward march of exploited workers. I ask you to consider what consumers' cooperatives have accomplished. They have shown the capacity of plain men and women to manage in voluntary association the distribution of goods on another principle than the principle of private profit. I ask you to examine the success of a great deal of public ownership—roads, schools, waterworks, etc.—even under the handicap of capitalist institutions and the profit system. The record is far better than a press belonging to big business would lead you to believe. Finally, I ask you to ponder with me the record that Socialists have made. It is not a perfect record. They have made mistakes. They have met defeat. But even in our own country the best governed city over the longest period of time is Milwaukee, Wisconsin, and the leader in that good government is the Socialist Party which has kept Mayor Hoan continuously in office for almost twenty years. Then look at the enormous progress already made toward socialism under the Communist Party in Russia. That progress has been made out

of the pit of Czarist tyranny, war, revolution and attempted counter-revolution. Consider also the substantial progress, without domestic or foreign war, in the Scandinavian countries toward a new society under the political initiative of Socialist parties. I am a Socialist because examination of these achievements convinces me that Socialism is practicable.

Furthermore, reflection on all these things and upon the logic of the system persuades me that we need not look forward in America to a Socialism frustrated and corrupted by the lordship of an almighty political state. We can have industrial democracy. Socialized railroads and coal mines can be administered under directorates representing consumers and producers. Our general strategy in the holy war against poverty can be laid down by a council of war, an economic planning council, representative of agriculture as well as industry.

While we work out this change we can take better, not worse care of the unemployed, the old and the children. The change to the new order can take account of immediate demands of workers. They need not be fed only with the bread of hope in a better tomorrow. In proportion to the number of workers who awake and organize for themselves and their children the struggle can be carried on in orderly and peaceful fashion. Separate an owning class from its dupes and its resistance will be weak. The more peaceful the revolution the more priceless its boon. This does not imply passivism or faith in romantic parliamentarianism. The Socialism in which I believe must have the courage to stand out against tyrants and their dupes in face of war and fascism. We dare not stop with merely asking vested privilege and an owning class to grant us as a concession what is ours by right.

In this struggle the appeal is big enough for mankind. There is no man in the world who would not be better off with the menace of war and poverty and insecurity banished. There are few men in the world who would not, as individuals, be better off economically

under the abundance of planned production for use. The appeal which moves me is an appeal to men and women of goodwill to bring in this Socialist society. But the very nature of our predatory society makes the appeal of Socialism strongest to workers. The term includes all who do the necessary, honorable and useful tasks of the world, who create its material or cultural wealth. We shall never have a true cooperative commonwealth until men think of their reward as workers who create all wealth and not any longer of their reward as owners of property which enables them to exploit other men's labor. That is one of the reasons why our great Socialist appeal must be always to the workers with hand and brain, in city and country. It is they who have so long been exploited. It is they who can and must be free.

It is on this note of hope that I end this statement of my reasons for being a Socialist. It is not a hope which "creates of its own wreck the thing it contemplates." It is not a private and personal hope. It is a hope that must be shared, that must be expressed in organization of labor unions, farmers' unions, consumers' cooperatives, a political party of farmers and workers. It is only by such organization, inspired by Socialist principles, that we can fulfill the dreams and hopes of the prophets, the patriots, and the saints down through the ages. Ours is a great responsibility. To us has been given the mechanical power to conquer poverty and release men from immemorial bondage. Let us harness that power for life, not death.

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