

In "Why I Am a Socialist," Norman Thomas (1884-1968) explains his commitment to socialism. Following the death of Eugene Debs in 1926, Thomas emerged as the leader of the socialist movement in the United States. Between 1928 and 1948 he ran for president six times, receiving nearly one million votes in 1932; this was the year when Franklin Roosevelt was first elected President and the country was in the depths of the Great Depression.

"Why I Am a Socialist"

(Norman Thomas, "Why I Am a Socialist," League for Industrial Democracy, 1932 edition.)

I am a socialist because I believe that in our dark and troubled world, which blessed with the machinery to abolish poverty, lives in the shadow of unemployment and economic insecurity and the deeper shadow of ever threatening war, socialism—international socialism—is our only hope of averting catastrophe and establishing plenty, peace, and freedom.

In the earlier editions of this leaflet, which was originally a re-print of an article written by request for the *Princeton Alumni Weekly* [the original article was published in 1928], I did not begin on so urgent a note. Instead I began with some more or less facetious reference to the lack of anything in my birthplace, or my years at Princeton, to explain my socialism. But in the intervening years the Indian summer of capitalism, the largely illusory and wholly unsound prosperity of Wall Street's gambling orgy, has come to a bitter end. There is a general consciousness that though we may blunder out of the depths of this depression we are living in the end of an epoch. Not merely the economics of capitalism but the psychology native to an acquisitive society shows signs of the decadence of the times. Our standards are shaken, our hope is turned to profound pessimism, our whole order is sick with racketeering which is not confined to the illegal crimes of the underworld, but is natural to a society whose favorite text has been, "My son, get riches—honestly if possible." And now that riches disappear, and we are told that men starve because they have produced too much, the state of our leadership, economic and political, shows how deep seated is the paralysis of our national will. Drift in America, the newspaper headlines fairly shout, is drift to disaster not to true prosperity, to war not peace, to dictatorship not democracy.

The philosophy of muddling through, the consolation that we shall survive this crisis since we have survived others only to stumble into another some seven or eight years hence, is no comfort at all. It ignores the increasing seriousness of crisis in our complex society and the increasing danger that the same machinery, which makes possible more abundant life, will make possible wholesale death.

The wise man is tempted to one of two philosophies, either the philosophy of Spengler that this process of decay of civilizations is inevitable and the crisis of western civilization beyond hope of solution by our effort, or the philosophy of Lenin which is the philosophy of salvation under the dictatorship of a working class party, out of the inevitable catastrophe to which capitalism hurls us. Both philosophies have truth; neither has the whole, the inevitable truth for America. We near the end of an epoch but we may better emerge into

the new cooperative society in our western world by doing all that is in us to avoid and minimize catastrophe, to improve democracy rather than to embrace dictatorship. The drift to disaster has not yet brought us to inevitable cataclysm. There is still time. I am a Socialist and not a Communist.

...Yet even in the prosperous America of which men boasted when I first wrote this leaflet how far we were from the abolition of poverty! Even then we did not produce enough to do more than provide a minimum budget of wealth and decency were we to distribute what we produce by a system more equitable than that under which 1 percent of the receivers of income obtain 20 percent of the national income; 10 percent receive 40 percent of the total income, while the poorest 25 percent receive only 3½ percent.

Today with some ten million unemployed and shrinkage in the national income measured in tens of billions, the situation is infinitely worse...

I am aware that to speak of a capitalist or any other system is to invite the scorn of those who insist that in the changing process of our economic life there is no rigorous system. There is truth in the argument. Certainly Ricardo or Adam Smith would not recognize the child of their economic dogmas. Men are still trying to justify economic practices by an almost religious faith in, let us say, the "automatic working" of those markets with which they themselves spend many of their working hours successfully interfering by high tariffs, trade agreements, etc. Nevertheless we can describe the capitalist system as characterized by an emphasis upon private ownership of property for power and the operation of that ownership for the profit of the owners. This is a system that has played its part in human history—a part nowhere more sincerely eulogized than in the famous Communist Manifesto itself. But whatever the historic necessity for capitalism, it is not today giving men the bread, the security, the peace, the freedom, the brotherhood that they have a right to expect. And this was true before the depression made it tragically obvious.

Mr. Hoover's estimate of an average annual wage for American workers of \$1,280 was not only insufficient on the average to maintain the minimum budgets of health and decency which have been set forth by various authorities, but it implied a tragic amount of suffering for the large group below this average.

There is no use in repeating that threadbare capitalist boast that we have more things than ever before and that workers are better off than were ancient kings. The point is that no age has ever so tragically failed to use the machinery it had for ease and security of living. Things may have increased but so has insecurity...

What do the socialists propose to do about this situation? In Socialism as in every great historic movement there are divergences of opinion and ideas. There is the sharp division between Socialists and Communists, principally on the important question of methods and tactics. In general, however, Socialists propose to bring about as rapidly as possible the social ownership of land, natural resources and the principal means of production, thereby abolishing the possibility of the existence of any class on an income derived not from work but from ownership. This does not necessarily mean that no man will have a home that he

can call his own. His right will rest on use and not on a title deed. The rental value of land belongs to society and not to the individual. Socialism would end the monstrous and absurd injustice under which generations of men and women can live in luxury without useful labor of any sort because they were wise enough to pick an ancestor who in his day had been clever enough to pick, let us say, a farm in New York City on or near which some six million people now have to live. This is a criticism not of individuals but of the social system, which heretofore we have collectively tolerated. Socialists...object not merely to economic dynasties founded on ownership of land and natural resources but to similar dynasties founded on the ownership of stocks and bonds passed from generation to generation by inheritance. They do not expect to abolish them with the stroke of the pen or the sword. They do not expect to abolish them at all without struggle.

...Our principal means by which we expect to make progress include the organization of labor industrially through labor unions, of the power of consumers through consumers' cooperatives, and of citizens through a labor party. The reliance of Socialism is upon the working class, not because of the peculiar virtues possessed by the working class but because it is peculiarly in its interest to end exploitation and waste. The class struggle may not be as simple or clear-cut as some Socialist agitators have supposed. It is, nevertheless, a fact of history, and a fact plain to be seen in our present line up on questions of unemployment relief, justice to workers and the methods of our strikes. But it is also a fact of history that very valuable sympathy and leadership have been given to the exploited classes down through the ages by men of more favored groups to whom justice and the ultimate good of society are dearer than any immediate class interest of their own. The hope of peaceful and intelligent progress depends in no small degree upon increasing the number of these men and women who thus transcend class lines.

...This leaflet is not a Socialist platform of immediate proposals. But one reason I am a Socialist is that excellent proposals do exist. All proposals for alleviating unemployment and protecting old age, and for other social legislation had their origin or impetus from socialism. If the Socialist unemployment proposals of 1928 had been adopted then how much suffering would have been relieved! If after the depression came our supplementary demand for direct federal aid and for an immense housing program directed against slums and shacks had been adopted, we should not face now the probability that men must steal, starve or fight.

...No sound system of taxation can ignore the Socialist contention that beside...land taxation..., income and inheritance taxation is not only the just, practical and equitable form of taxation but of itself an aid in the redistribution of wealth and the socialization of industry which Socialism seeks.

...Socialism will earnestly and vigorously seek to put in operation a progressive system for the acquisition and democratic or functional control of natural monopolies and basic industries, including banking. ...All industry should...be subject to the general guidance of an economic planning board.

At this point I can almost hear the usual shouts of protest, "What, do you want a lot of

politicians to run our industries? How about graft and inefficiency in government service?" Etc., etc. I have not space to answer these questions in detail but to answer them in principle is relatively easy. No modern Socialist of any stripe wants bureaucratic political government of industries through a set of postmaster generals or their equivalent. We propose to have public ownership with title vested in the nation, state or municipality, but control under a public authority representing so far as may be possible the genuine and permanent interests not of profit seeking private owners but of producers in the particular industry and consumers of its products and services. There will have to be a considerable variety in structure to meet the needs of coalmines, railroads, etc. In every case we shall try to put a premium on efficiency through the intelligent application of the merit system. We shall temper bureaucracy, moreover, by a recognition of the union and a direct sanctioning of collective bargaining. And, of course, we recognize that with socialized industries will or should go along a development of consumers' cooperation in the distribution of goods and in other lines like housing.

Even now the case for the honesty and efficiency of private as against government business is grossly overstated. Indeed the chief source of graft in government arises from the efforts of private business to get special privileges and perpetual right to what belongs to the people. It was the oil industry that sought to corrupt the government, not the government the oil industry. Again in private industry there is an immense deal of nepotism, favoritism and graft which is accepted as a matter of course, though it is challenged in the public service...

...Socialism is more than the sum total of specific changes however sweeping they are. It is a way of life and loyalty. It lives by its vision of what lies beyond today's achievement. Out of this loyalty and vision new honesties and abilities will emerge and new leaders as in other great periods of hope, will arise.

The task before us outruns the life of one generation or the functions of any political party. The party or the movement that undertakes it will often falter and fail. Socialism as an organized movement here and abroad is a movement of men, not supermen. It has its disappointments and failures, but nowhere except in the Socialist movement do I find any heartening answer to that great challenge of our day and generation: how shall we, men of all nations and races, forced by the development of our machine civilization into dependence upon one another, work our destiny in terms of worldwide fellowship instead of exploitation and strife.