

The Freeman's Vote

By Arnold Petersen

“Why does it [government] not cherish its wise minority? . . . Why does it not encourage its citizens to be on the alert to point out its faults, and do better than it would have them? Why does it always crucify Christ, and excommunicate Copernicus and Luther, and pronounce Washington and Franklin rebels?”

—*Thoreau, “Civil Disobedience”*

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Not lightly fall
Beyond Recall
The written scrolls a breath can float.
The crowning fact
The kingliest act
Of Freedom is the freeman's vote.

—J. G. Whittier, *"The Eve of Election."*

BALLOT, "THE FREEMAN'S VOTE," A SACRED HERITAGE

Much has been said of late concerning the "battle of the ballots" versus the "battle of the bullets," with American professional patrioteers patting themselves, and each other, on the back in unctuous self-approval for still clinging to the ballot as a means of settling social disputes. The "one hundred percenters," or the "two hundred percenters," have neither cause, nor the right, to claim any credit for the fact that the ballot, however battered and trimmed, still survives in America. The professional patrioteers are either of the propertied class, or representatives of that class, and particularly of the plutocracy. Had these gentry had their way, democracy, the ballot, and all that goes with these, would long since have ceased to exist altogether and the republic of the founding fathers, meaningless without democracy, would now be a thing of the irretrievable past. That the American democratic system of balloting still survives, after a fashion, is due, first, to the ceaseless efforts of the genuine Socialist movement to support it, and, secondly, to the fact that as yet no issue of sufficiently compelling importance has arisen to frighten the plutocracy into exerting its great power to scuttle democracy completely, as scuttle it they will eventually unless Socialist labor rises to rescue it, and to

enlarge the scope and purpose of democracy.

The ballot, “the freeman’s vote,” is, or should be, a sacred thing. It should not merely be placed beyond the reach of the power of any group to corrupt it and restrict it, but it should be maintained in such a state of health and responsiveness that on all grave questions affecting the true interests and welfare of the majority, it spontaneously presents itself as the arbiter, as the instrumentality naturally and instantly to be employed by the mass of the people who alone possess the right to pass upon all such questions and without whose exercise of such right democracy ceases to have any meaning at all. Where an entrenched power—be it a group of politicians in the guise of current government, or a group of powerful and wealthy industrialists—effects to restrict the ballot, to deny the majority of the people the use of the ballot for the settlement of unprecedented questions of paramount importance, democracy, the ballot, has been debauched, and an act of usurpation has been committed by the entrenched minority. The usurping minority may claim that its defilement of the ballot had for its purpose the saving of democracy; it may designate its act of usurpation the very essence of democracy. No matter. Usurpation it was; usurpation it remains.

During the struggle between our revolutionary forefathers and the British Crown it used to be said (as was said while the great struggle between Charles I and Parliament was developing more than 100 years earlier) that “What an English king has no right to demand, an English subject has a right to refuse.” Have not American freemen even greater cause to say: “What an elected government has no right to demand, an American citizen has a right to refuse”? And Americans ask Congress and the President: Where is your warrant for imposing on freemen, without precedent, military conscription in peace-time? If you hold the freeman’s ballot sacred, why did you deny its exercise to the sovereign power, the people, in a matter affecting them most profoundly? Does not your refusal to submit peace-time conscription to the decision at the ballot box imply contempt for the ballot, and distrust of your masters, the sovereign people? Answer, gentlemen, answer now. If you do not answer now, you will do so later when you will be held to strict accountability, if the freeman’s vote survives under your battering assaults!

RESTRICTIONS ON BALLOT

The restrictions imposed on the ballot, and the abuses and misuse of the ballot, constitute a fascinating subject for study. The restrictions are of two kinds: The restrictions effected through usurping legislation, and the restrictions (or revealed inadequacies) resulting from the process of transforming a political society into a non-political, or industrial, society. The abuses and misuse of the ballot are manifold, and some of them have formed the subject of sermonizing by reformers who ignore the truth of the old saying that he who keeps horses cannot look for clean stalls! Where there are politicians there is bound to be corruption. And politicians will be with us so long as the soil of politics is cultivated, which is to say so long as capitalism is with us.

Restricting the ballot, in the sense of making it difficult, if not impossible, to start new parties that are out-and-out anti-capitalist, is a comparatively new development in American political history. It is doubtful that it antedates the present century. Of course, there were property qualifications that restricted the individual's right to vote, but that is not the kind of restriction discussed here. The restrictions making it increasingly difficult for a minority party to appear on the ballot have reached a point in certain states where they amount to an unblushing declaration by usurping politicians that no political party shall be tolerated which challenges the present capitalist society and form of government, thus reducing to mockery the claims in behalf of American democracy advanced by politicians and patrioteers generally.

In California, for instance, upward of one-third of a million signatures must be secured by a minority party in order to qualify for the ballot, a task obviously beyond its power and resources if such a minority is a working class party. California is probably the banner state of political usurpation in this respect. In other states the number of signatures required, while not so large as in California, is nevertheless so large as to levy an almost prohibitive tax on the resources of a working class party, but even where this hurdle has been cleared, there are usually a number of "hidden" bars which come into full view when the main obstacle (the excessive number of signatures) has been overcome. For instance, in such states as New York and Illinois a certain minimum number of signatures in so many counties must be secured

regardless of the excess number collected in the state as a whole. Thus in Illinois a total of 25,000 signatures must be collected, with not less than 200 signatures from each of at least 50 counties. In New York a total of 12,000 signatures must be collected, with not less than 50 from each of the 61 counties in the state. If for any reason whatever signatures should be rejected, the petitions are rejected, *though the total collected for the state as a whole may be many times the number required*. Through trickery it is a comparatively simple matter for usurping or corrupt politicians to cause the petitions from one county to fall one or more below the required number. The ticket of the minority party is then kept off the ballot, the heartbreaking work and great amount of money expended to secure the signatures having all been rendered vain.

Then there are filing fees, in some cases prohibitive, perhaps a certain percentage of the salary attached to the office for which nomination is made, the total of which often is prohibitive, certainly to a working class party. And, again, the right of a voter to sign a petition is in some states so qualified that it is virtually impossible in some communities to find enough qualified voters to sign petitions. And where even these obstacles fail to prevent a minority party from complying with requirements, mob action and official lawlessness enter the scene and make certain that the ticket of the minority party does not appear on the ballot, as witness the outrageous collusion between lawless officials and mob-leaders in certain Illinois towns recently, amounting in effect to a conspiracy to keep the Socialist Labor Party off the ballot in that state, a conspiracy which, unhappily, proved successful.

POLITICAL VOTE, AT FOUNDING OF REPUBLIC, A COMPLETE VOTE

The latter-day opponents of democracy, the contenders against the principle that majority rule must prevail if we are to have an orderly society, never tire of telling us that it is impossible, first, to have all the citizens meet in the manner of the earlier, primitive township meetings, and, secondly, that the average citizen knows nothing about affairs of state, and, knowing nothing about such, they ask why he should by his vote be given the power and right to decide questions affecting the welfare of the state and nation. Sometimes the argument is also advanced (by the more outspoken plutocratic elements) that

since the vast majority own no property, why should they be given the power to dispose of the private property of the propertied class.

These are not arguments and contentions against the ballot, or democracy. They are in reality arguments against a political society and against private ownership of socially created and socially required wealth. It is assumed, by the enemies of democracy, that there must always be a political society, and that there must always be a special, a small class which *owns* wealth, and a large class which *produces* wealth. Although the proposition is not put quite so bluntly, that is in effect the sense of the contentions against the right of the majority to decide questions in a democracy.

Now, there is nothing *natural* or inherently rightful about political society and private property. Political society is a development and private property reflects that development, and is otherwise a creature of manmade law. There was a time when there was neither a political society nor private property, and both will pass in the fulness of time. The primary question is not one of natural conditions and natural rights. Primarily the question is: Which best serves the interests of the race under particular conditions over which man has little or no immediate control? If progress decrees that a small class shall enjoy leisure and comfort (at a time when abundance is not available to all) in order to promote culture and the arts, and to prevent society from lapsing into primitive savagery, then it follows that a large class must subsist in poverty and slavery to provide the wherewithal for the class of culture and social progress. Slavery and poverty become "right" and "just" when they constitute the price to be paid for progress. Slavery and poverty become "wrong" and "unjust" when such a price need no longer be paid for social progress. At this point it may be in order to define slavery. Herbert Spencer has defined it as follows: "That which fundamentally distinguishes the slave is that he labors under coercion to satisfy another's desires." That is as satisfactory as any other definition that may be given of slavery. We shall come back to it later.

At this point, however, we are concerned with such restrictions or inadequacies of the ballot (i.e., the right of the majority to decide questions affecting all) as result from social changes in property relations, and in the economic basis of society itself. Confining ourselves to America, we point out that when the Republic (or American democracy) was founded, ownership of

private property was general, however uneven, or the acquisition of property was within reach of all able-bodied adults. Hence, there was no conflict between basic political rights and essential economic equality (barring chattel slavery, of course). Hence, further, the political ballot, insofar as it was reasonably unrestricted, served the needs of the average citizen, and his exercise of the rights of the ballot amounted in fact to an exercise of his right to dispose of his property as he pleased, and to order his society in such ways as to protect his economic rights. The ballot under such conditions was in fact a *complete*, a *whole*, ballot. It had meaning and substance to the citizen, because it logically related, in the main, to his economic status, and corresponded generally to the economic basis of his society. But it follows, then, that in the measure that the ballot ceases to correspond to, or reflect, the individual's economic status and economic requirements, in that measure it ceases to be a *whole*, a *complete*, ballot—in that measure, to that degree, it ceases to be a “freeman's vote.”

In the earlier days the citizen, within the limits imposed by nature, was his own economic master. He was, generally speaking, monarch of all that he surveyed. In so far as he had to work, he was master, or owner, of his work, of his “job.” Except for conditions imposed by nature, he could determine his own hours of labor, he could decide when to quit, what to do, and how to do it. Only in his relation to the outside world, that is, in his relation to fellow citizens who in the main were similarly situated, was it necessary to submit questions to a majority decision (or sometimes to arbitration) and, of course, in matters concerning his and fellow citizens' relations to the commonwealth, or the government. The political vote was inclusive—it was a *complete* vote, unrestricted by his economic conditions, chiefly to protect and safeguard him in the enjoyment of his material possessions.

How stand matters today? Is the average citizen economically independent, economically free? The question need not be pondered at length—he is not economically free, he is not economically independent. The mass of the people stand today practically stripped of private property. For the mass of the people of this country (and the same is true generally throughout the world of capitalism) private property rights have virtually been abolished. This is no longer, as in the days of our fathers, a system of society based on property rights. It is a system of society based on the denial of property rights to all but

a few. According to the Federal Trade Commission (1926), 87 per cent of the people own only 8 per cent of the country's wealth, while 13 per cent of the "people" own 92 per cent of the wealth in America. The propertiless work for the owners of wealth, the owners of industry. They are, in a very real sense, slaves—slaves in the economic sense, and that is the sense which really determines slavery. Let us go back to Spencer's definition of slavery:

"What is essential to the idea of a slave? We primarily think of him as one owned by another. To be more than nominal, however, the ownership must be shown by control of the slave's action—*a control which is habitually to the benefit of the controller*. That which fundamentally distinguishes the slave is that he labors under coercion to satisfy another's desires. The relation admits of sundry gradations. Remembering that originally the slave is a prisoner whose life is at the mercy of his captor, it suffices here to note that there is a harsh form of slavery in which, treated as an animal, he has to expend his entire effort for his owner's advantage. Under a system less harsh, though occupied chiefly in working for his owner, he is allowed a short time in which to work for himself, and some ground on which to grow extra food. A further amelioration gives him power to sell the produce of his plot and keep the proceeds. Then we come to the still more moderated form which commonly arises where, having been a free man working on his own land, conquest turns him into what we distinguish as a serf, and he has to give to his owner each year a fixed amount of labor or produce, or both: retaining the rest himself. Finally, in some cases, as in Russia until recently, he is allowed to leave his owner's estate and work or trade for himself elsewhere, under the condition that he shall pay an annual sum. . . . *The essential question is—How much is he compelled to labor for other benefit than his own, and how much can he labor for his own benefit? The degree of his slavery varies according to the ratio between that which he is forced to yield up and that which he is allowed to retain; and it matters not whether his master is a single person or a society.*" (*The Coming Slavery*)

The part quoted in italics may well be accepted as Spencer's definition of wage slavery, though he does not name it so. The workers, toiling in the industrial treadmills, "yield up" to their masters, the employers and owners of industry, the bulk of the wealth they produce. According to U.S. Census Bureau figures for 1932, the workers in the manufacturing industries produced

\$49,000,000,000 worth of wealth, of which they received \$7,000,000,000 in wages, or 1/7 of what they produced. That is, they “yielded up” to the masters approximately 85 per cent of the fruits of their labor. “The degree of his slavery varies according to the ratio between that which he is forced to yield up and that which he is allowed to retain” (Spencer). The ratio in other pursuits (agriculture, mining, etc.) obviously does not vary materially from that in the manufacturing industries, and the 15 per cent, approximately, the working class as a whole receives out of the total wealth it produces corresponds roughly to the wealth “owned” by the workers, i.e., eight per cent, which is to say, practically nothing!

The workers in the factories work for a subsistence wage, that is, just enough to enable them to buy the necessaries of life. Every worker knows that this is no theory—it is a bitter fact. And we have the word of an early President of the United States that such a state amounts to slavery. It was John Adams, second President of the United States, who observed:

“When the workers are paid in return for their labor only as much money as will buy the necessaries of life, *their condition is identical with that of the slave.*”

And so it is, and all the talk about democracy, freedom of action, etc., etc., cannot alter that stern, and, in our day, criminal fact!

TODAY, INDUSTRIAL VOTE IS “THE FREEMAN’S VOTE”

In what way does the exercise of the political vote in behalf of so-called social legislation affect the economic condition of the workers? In a real sense the answer is: It does not affect it at all, except possibly for the worse. Insofar as the workers succeed in having laws enacted which supposedly improve the conditions under which they labor, the voting merely aids in consolidating their slavery, and in codifying the terms of their slavery. It does not, and cannot, alter or beneficially affect wage slavery itself. The political vote is utterly unrelated to the economic status and conditions, except as aforesaid. The political vote, taken as a whole, is at best but a half vote—it is not whole or complete. “Cast your vote,” said Thoreau, “not a strip of paper merely, but your whole influence.” *The “whole influence” of the workers’ vote must include the industrial vote of the workers within the precincts of industry.* To cast the

political vote, citizens are organized in political units—wards, districts, counties and states. To cast the industrial vote, the workers must organize into industrial units—into Socialist Industrial Unions, thoroughly integrated—that is, in the particular industries where they work. When they vote in industry they have an unrestricted ballot. For by the *industrial ballot* they determine their hours of labor, they elect their own foremen and superintendents, they elect their delegates to the local and national industrial councils and to the general congress of all industries where sits the industrial government—democratically elected, responsive to the will of those who elected them, and charged with the task of coordinating industry, and of integrating the various industrial processes, in effect estimating the needs of society and administering production and distribution as a whole. And they vote on any other question affecting their welfare as industrial workers and members of the commonwealth.

But possession and exercise of the industrial ballot require, first, organization into Industrial Unions, and, in due time, by the democratic process of the political ballot, the abolition of private property rights in land and industry—in short, the abolition of capitalism and the instituting of the Socialist Industrial Republic of Labor. Then, and not until then, will the workers enjoy true democracy; then, and not until then, will the workers truly possess the freeman's vote. For then, but not until then, will the ballot—the industrial ballot—really relate to the things vital to their lives and welfare, and then, but not until then, will the exercise of that ballot have meaning and effectiveness in governing their affairs as producers, as co-owners of industry, socially operated as it will then be socially owned.

To complete their citizenship—or rather, to emerge at last as freemen in every sense, the workers must demand, and organize to enforce the demand—

THE SOCIALIST RECONSTRUCTION
OF SOCIETY—
THE INDUSTRIAL VOTE.

But in setting about to effect the great change that will insure the workers a whole, a *freeman's*, vote, the political ballot must be used, and this is the last

great service it will be called upon to render. And a truly noble climax that will be to that great instrument forged by man in his struggle for freedom, the political ballot. For there is but one way in which the change from the robber system of capitalism to the Industrial Commonwealth of Labor can be effected peaceably, *and that is through the political ballot*. Only at its peril will labor discard prematurely this precious instrument of progress—precious still, however inadequate—and when the industrial ballot is the secure possession of the citizens of the future, it will contain within it all the enduring qualities of the political ballot. The industrial ballot will become the crown-jewel of Industrial Democracy. In the words of the great American writer, H.D. Thoreau:

“Only *his* vote can hasten the abolition of slavery who asserts his own freedom by his vote. . . . Cast your vote, not a strip of paper merely, but your whole influence. A minority is powerless while it conforms to the majority; it is not even a minority then; but it is irresistible when it clogs by its whole weight.”

The workers must use their political vote to hasten the abolition of wage slavery, and to speed the conquest of the industrial ballot. Though a minority today, the Socialist Labor Party represents the interests of the vast majority. It represents the hope of the workers, and the practical possibilities of the future. At this historic election we take our stand on the proposition that the interests of the working class are the true interests of society as a whole, and of civilization and progress.

We shall resist the majority and stand alone as long as the majority is wrong, in the firm conviction that thus alone are the ends of freedom and democracy advanced, and in the only way by which they can be advanced. And we shall prove irresistible; for we shall “clog” by our whole weight.

And so, to the polls:

*“The crowning fact
The kingliest act
Of Freedom is the freeman’s vote.”*

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

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