
“No Hope But Through the Back Door of Suicide” :
Speech on the Coal Mining Strike
at Wheeling, West Virginia
(July 26, 1897)

Ladies and Gentlemen and Fellow Citizens of West Virginia:—

Such a meeting as this is unusually significant.¹ It bears testimony to the fact that the people in every walk of life are aroused, and that there is on every hand an increasing interest in the labor question and that it has expanded to such proportions that it is taking precedence over all other matters. I shall not appeal to your prejudices. I would not if I could arouse your passions or incite the populace. I appeal to your sense of justice and to your patriotism, and I ask you to examine the conditions under which millions of your fellow beings are dragging out a wretched existence, and to ask you to get closer together — so close that you can hear one another’s heart throbs.

In the words of Paul, let us reason together. A great strike is in existence. More than 180,000 miners are engaged in a struggle for enough wages to keep soul and body together. With their families they represent nearly 1 million people. There are a great many excellent people who are opposed to strikes under all circumstances. Let me admit in all candor that I, too, am opposed to strikes. Most of the time strikes are of little avail, but now and then there comes a time when men must choose between a strike and starvation and slavery, and such a time is upon us now. (*Applause.*)

I understand perfectly the misfortune of being out of employment. But there is a condition infinitely worse — that of the American workingman degraded and reduced to a point where he can no longer resist oppression. Then it is a duty to strike. I would remind you that we live under a strike government. (*Applause.*) Every stripe and star that dignifies and glorifies the flag is the result of a strike. Our forefathers struck at Lexington, and again at Concord, and so on in a succession of strikes. And against what? Tyranny and oppression and for liberty and independence, and had it not been for those striking forefathers you and I would today be subjects of Great Britain instead of sovereign American citizens. (*Applause.*)

It is sometimes charged that my colleagues and myself are agitators. I plead guilty to the indictment. (*Laughter.*) I accept the compliment. (*Laughter.*) The progress of the world has been made possible only by agitators. (*Applause.*) Moses was an agitator. (*Laughter.*) So was Socrates. So was Jesus Christ. (*Applause.*) And the scribes and Pharisees nailed him to the cross. The world has the happy habit of crucifying its saviors and crowning its oppressors. (*Applause.*)

The trouble is, we have too little consideration in this world. So far we are creatures of circumstances. (*A voice: "That's the stuff!"*) I believe in speaking the truth at all times, though the stars fall. You tell me to respect public opinion. Let me admit to you that I have no faith in public opinion, as either counsellor or guide. Public opinion, as a general rule, has been and is wrong. The few have always led the world, and finally the minority becomes the majority, and this is the right view. It is not always popular to speak the truth, and no one understand that more perfectly than the ordinary politician. (*Laughter, and a voice: "Hit 'em again, Debs!"*) I'll get around to them before I get through. (*Laughter.*)

There are some people who are perfectly honest, who are inclined to tell the truth about the labor question, yet they say they are with us. If you are with us, why not speak out? The man who is right ought to speak openly. I believe in keeping on good terms with myself, and if I am afraid to do so, I am dishonest. Self-respect is a great thing. I don't want to be in the predicament of the man who jumped out of bed in the middle of the night and exclaimed: "There is nobody in this room!" (*Laughter.*) I propose to walk with my self-respect, and go to bed with my manhood. (*Applause.*)

Now I come to a discussion of the question of this great mining strike. It is not a strike in the usual acceptance of the term. It is not a strike for recognition or position, but a strike about starvation and rags. It was only yesterday I saw a miner in the Fairmont region. He had worked for three months, and he was in debt to the company \$2.77. (*Applause.*) Nor is that an extreme instance. I have in my possession the time sheets of the men out there, and I know whereof I speak, and I am prepared to substantiate every statement I make by the documentary evidence.

In the first place, the Fairmont miner is robbed by fraudulent measurement. It is a notorious fact. It has been ascertained by the correspondent of the *New York Journal*, who made a full and impartial investigation, and reported the facts to that great paper, that cars which were supposed to

hold two tons of coal actually held two and a half tons and two and three-quarters tons. (*A voice: "Right you are."*) And not only that, but after deducting his supplies — that is, the powder and oil and tools, and 50 cents a month for the company doctor, whether one is sick or not, the miner nets but 18 or 19 cents a ton. But this is not all, nor the worst of it all. The miner is not paid in money. He is given a check, or a book of checks, and is compelled to deal at the company store, and the farmers in that vicinity will tell you that the miner is compelled to pay from 20 to 30 percent more for his goods than the other customers. (*A voice: "Right you are, old man."*) All the miner has is his labor, and he is compelled to sell that at the cheapest, and to buy at the dearest rates. Under that system every right of the individual is hopelessly lost. How would you citizens like someone else to draw your pay and spend it for you? (*Laughter.*)

That is the lot of the West Virginia miner. His wife goes to the store where the checkbook is kept, and buys what she wants and the checks are taken out, and although her husband works every day, at the end of the month he is in debt and has not a dollar to show for what he has done. Thus the miner is an abject slave, with no hope for him except through the back door of suicide. (*Sensation.*) I appeal to you to put yourself in their places. Would you be satisfied. (*A voice: "No."*) I am sure you would not be. If the people of the United States could be put in that position for one week, this strike would be settled in favor of the men — that is to say, it would be in favor of the right and in favor of honesty.

But they say that Debs and Rea² came here to make a contest. That is the fact. If men are contented in such a state of degradation, then there is no hope for the future. But in this contest every American citizen should be an organizer. (*Applause and cries of "Good."*) If you could spend one day out there in the mining region, you would stand as I do, holding that conditions are a disgrace and an outrage.

We are making a little progress — just a little progress every day, and I have faith in the future, because I have faith in the people. They are coming around to believe in the necessity of acting. The miners and garment workers have sunk to soulless depths of degradation. I remember when the miner made \$5 a day, and he could live like a white man and educate his children. But his wages have been gradually reduced until, in my own state, the miners, on an average, before this strike make 42 and a half cents a day. I am familiar with their condition.

At this point Mr. Debs spoke in detail of the condition of the miners in some sections of the country, particularly citing Brookdale, Alabama, where the men, although working hard, never see any money, and just manage to get enough clothes to make them presentable on the streets. Proceeding he said:

John Bright³ once said that the nation lived in a cottage. It was a beautiful and poetic idea. But a large proportion of the wage earners among our citizens no longer live in a cottage, for the cottage implies a home. Byron said: "When falls the Coliseum, Rome shall fall; and when Rome falls — the world."⁴ Here and now, we say that when the American home falls, then falls America; and when America falls, there falls the greatest country in the world. I do not say the American home is to fall; but I do say the American home is in jeopardy when a man has to work for 42 and a half cents a day. (*Applause.*)

The average miner does not live in a cottage. He lives in a hut, a hovel, sometimes in a hole in the ground hardly fit for wild beasts. He works hard, yet his return is little. His habitation cannot be a happy one. His wife is discouraged — she has been trying to live on 15 or 20 cents a day — the children are half naked, ignorant, and all is wretched. And after ignorance comes crime, and after crime punishment, in the shape of the prison or the life strangled out on the gallows. These are the products of conditions. Under proper conditions we have true manhood and virtuous womanhood; under vicious conditions humanity sinks to the level of the beast. Go to the large centers of population — to New York and Chicago — and you will see hundreds of thousands of people huddled together, ignorant, vicious, and depraved, and as a natural result of these conditions there is not a state at present with adequate capacity for the punishment of its criminals. This question appeals to the patriotism of every honest citizen of the Republic.

And I want the ear of the businessmen of this community for a little while. I want to say to them that they are just as much interested in this matter as the miners. If they are defeated, you will suffer to a corresponding degree. If the miner gets but 42 cents a day he must live on it somehow. He cannot buy good, wholesome food. He can't pay a grocery bill. He can't wear good clothes. He cannot become a factor as a consumer. If he has children and they are sick he cannot pay the doctor; and if he is wronged he cannot employ a lawyer; and so it is all around. The entire superstructure of our system rests upon labor — labor is the representative

and all-important thing. Labor is the foundation, and if the foundation is weak, the superstructure cannot be strong. (*Applause.*)

Who is to be benefitted by the defeat of the strikers? Will it be the businessman? No! Then who will it be? I will tell you: it will be the few millionaires who traffic in the misery of the common people. (*Applause.*) A fair standard of labor should be secured, in the interests of capital, of labor, and of the country at large. No country can prosper where labor is impoverished. That is an axiom in economics. Labor produces everything; it pays all the revenues, and it ought to be able to maintain a living wage.

But they say, "What have the miners of West Virginia got to do with it?" I will tell you. West Virginians are mining coal and sending it to the Western markets. They might just as well send their miners there and put them to work in place of the strikers. (*Applause.*) But they say, "West Virginia miners ought to be given a fair show now." But suppose the strike is defeated, and Western prices go down, do you think that West Virginia prices will not follow suit? You can't send West Virginia coal there then. (*Applause.*) But you say, "The West Virginia operators are paying their men living wages." How long have they been paying them, and how long will they continue to pay them if the strike is a failure? (*Applause.*) Four years ago your wages increased. (*A voice: "Nit."*) You were deceived all along the line. (*Applause.*)

You are enjoying a boom at present, but it will be a short-lived one. They are willing to pay big wages now, but they are speculating on the empty stomachs of the miners, and every dollar gotten in that way is blood money, and represents the misery of your fellow citizens. The workingmen of the country are not benefitted. The consumers who buy in small quantities are compelled to pay the price. The real benefit goes to the big men. I declare it to be the duty of the miners of West Virginia to drop his tools until living wages are paid to all. (*Applause.*)

You have become disorganized and therefore demoralized. The strike is clearly right, and will prevail, but if it shall fail through the West Virginia miners, and after that happens and the men are scourged back at starvation wages, you here will be helpless, and you will not dare to strike, and no one knows that fact better than the operators. The result will be that, you having worked until the other miners were defeated, they will work in turn until you are defeated. The thing to do is to stand together, and see that a uniform scale is made in each district that will do justice to each, and then all can go back to work in a body, and you will all be

earning living wages, with no more strikes in sight. (*Applause.*) But as long as the miners of one state can be used against the miners of another, wages will go down until the bedrock of degradation is reached. (*Applause.*)

I do not think we will fail. I am not in the habit of looking on the dark side of things. I believe we are making a little progress. (*Applause.*) The most hopeful thing is that workingmen are beginning to think and as they think they are wondering why they must draw their rags a little closer so as not to touch the silks they have woven, why they must walk in the shadow of the palaces they have built but may not enter. And when they see these things properly, they will take their own — not by force, nor by violence, but by the ballot, which falls lightly as a snowflake which works the will of man as lightning does the will of God. (*Applause.*)

Labor is the creator of all that is useful and beautiful in this world, and shall not labor come into its own? Who shall doubt it? As the mariner plowing Southern seas turns his eyes to the Southern cross blazing in the sky, as a beacon to guide him on his way, let labor everywhere take heart of hope, for the cross is bending and the midnight is passing,⁵ and “joy cometh in the morning.”⁶

Mr. Debs then turned his attention to the courts in their acts against labor and in favor of capital, and after discussing this in a most interesting manner, to the delight of his audience, concluded at half-past 10, the crowd greeting him with three cheers.

Published as part of “The Debs Meeting Was a Monster” in *Wheeling Register*, vol. 36, no. 16 (July 27, 1897), pp. 1, 5.

¹ This speech was delivered outside the Wheeling City Building to a crowd of 3,000.

² J.W. Rea of Chicago was Second Vice President of the Brotherhood of Painters, Decorators, and Paperhangers of America and shared the podium with Debs at Wheeling.

³ John Bright (1811-1889) was a British Liberal politician.

⁴ From *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* (c. 1812) by George Gordon Noel Byron (1788-1824).

⁵ Historian Richard Oestreicher has noted that the same metaphor of the “bending cross” was effectively used in Debs’s final speech at time of sentencing Sept. 14, 1918 and subsequently repurposed by Ray Ginger as the title of his 1949 Debs Biography. Oestereicher attributes the origin of the phrase to an 1890 keynote address at the annual convention of the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen by Tom Fitch. See: Oestereicher, “A Note on the Origins of Eugene V. Debs’ ‘Bending Cross’ Speech,” *Indiana Journal of History*, vol. 76, no. 1 (March 1980), pp. 54-56. Dr. Oestreicher’s research from the pre-Google era

understandably misses Fitch's likely source of inspiration, an anonymous July 1863 poem from Roxbury, Massachusetts entitled "Midnight is Past — The Cross Begins to Bend," which also includes imagery of a mariner sailing the Southern seas. See: *The Living Age*, whole no. 1,000 (Aug. 1, 1863), pg. 194.

⁶ From *Psalms*, chapter 30, verse 5.