
“It is Something More Than a Strike” :
Speech in Chicago at Kuhn’s Park
(August 1, 1897)

Such meetings as this mean much to the cause of the people in whose interests we have gathered. It is most significant, and I am deeply grateful. The signs of the times are most cheering, and I look into the future with absolute faith that wrong will be stricken down and that right is to be enthroned. When you read the papers tomorrow morning you will observe that all the miners employed by DeArmittⁱ have gone out on a strike. DeArmitt has been the champion of the true deformative plan. He has made conditions impossible to comply with, and then has waited for the commendation of the people.

Mr. DeArmitt has no thought of bringing this strike to a close; he is in the full midst of a harvest. True, it is a harvest of misery for the people, who earn what little read they get by the sweat of their faces, but little does he care for this, for to him it is a harvest of the almighty dollar. I have just returned from West Virginia, where I have seen the ripened fruit of the wage system.

The state of West Virginia under the competitive commercial system is the plaything of the capitalists. A few coal operators own the state and have control of all of its functionaries; they have the control of the resources which belong to the people, who have sunk into the fathomless depths of poverty and degradation.

West Virginia from One View.

Let me describe as well as I can some of the industrial conditions that prevail in the state. I must confess at the very beginning that I am not equal to the task. Had I the tongue of an angel I could not properly describe the infernal conditions that prevail in that corporation-cursed state. Long before I arrive in that state on my last trip I was told that the very instant that I undertook to raise my voice in defense of the downtrodden I would be arrested.

I went to Fairmont, the seat of war, where I was announced to speak that evening [July 23, 1897]. I called on the mayor as soon as I reached town, and after a brief interview he gave me permission to speak to my fellow men. The meeting was held as announced and I presented to the people to the best of my ability the claims of the miners for their consideration. The people as a general proposition were kindly disposed toward us, but the operators seemed determined to make it impossible for us to hold any more meetings. They tried to provoke us into a quarrel and then kill us. They threatened every miner who attended the meetings with instant discharge, and forbade them having anything to do with us. Everything that was possible apparently was done to prevent free speech and the assemblage of supposedly free men.

Not one of the miners in the region I visited was out of debt, and every one of them is being robbed by the operators. The coal cars which they load in the mines contain from two-and-a-half to three tons and yet the miners receive credit for only two tons. For each ton placed to their credit they receive nominally 18 cents, and the average rate of wages is 42 cents a day.

Even this amount they do not receive in cash, but are compelled to purchase their supplies at the company's store. From their wages they receive a check on this store, where goods are sold them at a profit of 20 percent in advance of the profits obtained by the trade. The miners are robbed in their measurements; they are robbed in the company's store. As a result all that is left them at the end of the month is a debt. I have in my possession the time sheets of these coal concerns and know whereof I speak.

I met one miner who at the end of three months' hard work had fallen in the debt to the company to the extent of \$22.70.

Live in State of Slavery.

These miners are living in a state of slavery far more deplorable and abject than was the system which held in its clutch the chattel slave of 40 years ago. The chattel slave had some value. He was a commodity and had a value as merchandise, and was worth taking care of. Not so with the modern industrial slave.

These miners do not live in cottages; they live in hovels and they subsist on the coarsest of foods. They are so tired at the close of the day that

they throw themselves immediately on a bunk of straw, and this they seldom leave until the time rolls round for them to go to work again. They work from ten to twelve hours and live the life of beasts of burden. Day after day and year after year they drag along their weary days, until death finally emancipates them from their sufferings and penury.

The miners are never allowed to get out of debt. They are allowed to work for the company until their indebtedness is reduced to about \$5, and then if the company does not see fit to continue their employment they are laid off. It is impossible for these poor men to release themselves from the clutches of these heartless corporations.

West Virginia is a coal state and is owned by the coal operators. It is owned by men who own the state government, not excluding the Governor.ⁱⁱ Public officers are the creatures of the corporations that do their bidding.

When they found that they could not stop our meetings in the usual way they secured an injunction restraining us from exercising the right of free speech. If we encroached upon the ground of the company — and the company owns all the ground — they said they would shoot us. They had the proper spirit, you understand, in dealing with this labor question. They served notice on us that if we put our feet on their soil — and they took it for granted that the Almighty made the soil and the resources of the country for their especial benefit, and I have no doubt they expect a title in his own name some day — they said we would rue the day.

One mine owner, named Hight, stood on the ground with a Winchester rifle in his hand hoping that he would have the opportunity to put one of his Christianizing bullets into our hearts.

How It Was Granted.

Let me tell you how the injunction was granted. A coal operator named Mason,ⁱⁱⁱ president of one of the largest coal companies, who is a lawyer, prepared an application for an injunction restraining us from meeting or from walking on the highways. The judge found it convenient to leave the county and appointed the coal operator Mason to act as judge in his stead. As soon as Mason was appointed he issued the injunction on his own application. Mason, the coal operator, made the application, and Mason, the judge, issued the injunction. This I consider to have been one of the most sweeping injunctions in the history of American jurisprudence.

It restrained my colleagues and myself from holding meetings on the grounds of the company, and that includes all the ground except the public highways. We are restrained from visiting the mines and from being found on the roads that lead to the mines, and there was not a road there that did not lead to the mines. Indeed, I was almost restrained from leaving my boardinghouse.

Fortunately, or otherwise, I was obliged to leave before I had to opportunity to address another meeting at Fairmont. For some reason the judge did not see fit to issue the injunction until I was on the point of leaving the city to open a Wheeling conference [July 26]. I do not know what was the object in withholding their injunction, but I am going back to Fairmont, and if possible will speak there.

If free speech has been entirely suppressed in this country it is time for the people to know it. In West Virginia free speech has been suppressed. The sheriff of Pittsburgh sought to suppress it yesterday. During a public meeting, composed of orderly people, the sheriff at the behest of the money power, ordered that body of peaceful, law-abiding citizens to disperse. They refused to do so and he marched on them, but concluded not to disperse them.

Is An Extraordinary One.

This is in many respects the most extraordinary strike the country has ever seen. It is something more than a strike. Other men at other times have struck, but these strikes were in the nature of an attempt to secure some measure of justice. The miners in the present strike are not trying to secure justice. They are simply battling against starvation and rags. One hundred and fifty thousand miners and their families are dying by inches.

When people tell you this isn't true, they lie. It is true and I stand here prepared to prove the truth of my statement. These men have been getting on the average 42-1/2 cents a day for their labor. Most of them have families to support, and they have not been able to lay up a cent, and, as I say, nearly all of them are in debt. They are without resources and are face to face with famine. They are appealing to the American people. Will the American people respond? I believe they will. Is it getting to be the same old story? Are the companies to incite riot, and are the soldiers to be then called upon to drain the veins of these workingmen of their blood, without whose labor this country would be a desert?

You are the people. Answer.

There is something more than a mere matter of wages involved in this contest. It is a question in which has been merged all of the questions that are before the American people. It is a question as to whether we have a republic or whether we are living under a monied despotism. By processes that you and I understand prevail the workingmen of this country are being steadily reduced and degraded and the once powerful middle class is following them.

Both in a Bad Way.

The workingman is out of work looking for investment in his labor, and the middleman is looking for the investment of his capital. Both are oppressed by the great combinations of wealth that have taken possession of the country and have controlled all of its destinies. I do not look upon the dark side of things. I am exceedingly hopeful because I believe the American people are gradually awakening to the seriousness of their condition. They are beginning to understand the drift of things.

There is an increasing number of men and women, not among the wage workers, but what they call the upper classes, who realize that a sense of responsibility rests upon them, and that it is their duty to arouse themselves and go to the rescue of perishing humanity.

It is fortunate for use that there have always been men and women who have been courageous enough to do their duty, to face all the storms which beat upon them, and take the responsibility of their acts. We have such men among us today and they give promise that some of these days the sun of economic emancipation shall light the world. Such a moral hero is Captain Black,^{iv} who years ago, when the whole world was against him, stood rugged and sublime in his battle against corporate power. Such a man is Dr. Bayard Holmes.^v These men stand high in their respective professions, and yet they are beyond the reach of contaminating influences. They say it is our duty to do all we can to emancipate our fellow creatures from the vicious thralldom that has been forced upon them. They are on duty in this great fight, and they are going to be on duty until victory comes.

Such a man as I have described is Myron W. Reed of Colorado, and George D. Herron of Iowa, and Henry D. Lloyd of Illinois.

New Class Springs Up.

A new class of men has come to the front to lead in this great movement and they have sprung from the common people. They are looking for no reward. They are seeking for no office nor do they covet its emoluments. They are simply responding to the high prompting of duty toward their fellow men. We have been living, my friends, under the rule of money, centralized money. The almighty dollar has been enthroned as king of all, and before it the world is debasing itself. We do not estimate men and women by their character, by their integrity or their virtue, those qualities that dignify and glorify human nature, but we estimate them by their possessions. The man who has been able to acquire the most money, no matter how he gets it, is looked upon as having solved the world's greatest problem of success. There are thousands of able, virtuous men who lack the qualities which make for commercial success, so the world rushes over them and tramples over their prostrate bodies. This is all wrong. We want to measure men by some proper moral standard. We must stop crowning the oppressors of men because they have money and power, and I hope that sometime the world will become civilized to the extent that it will no longer crucify its saviors.

What we are aiming at, my friends, is to achieve economic freedom. We want to make the Declaration of Independence a realized fact. If men are entitled to life, they are entitled to work and to the fruits of their labor. Under the present vicious system men have been robbed of the fruits of their toil. Others who have simply schemed have become enormously rich and by virtue of their possessions they have acquired tremendous power and they have used that power for the oppression and subjugation of the people and for the subversion of liberty. They have to a certain extent destroyed our free institutions.

Have Too Many Tsars.

The only difference between this country and Russia is that in Russia there is only one tsar and we have 1,000. In no civilized country on the face of the globe is the average workman so completely the property of his master as in this, on our boasted soil.

Multiplied thousands of workingmen depend upon the arbitrary will of an individual for permission to live. When a man gets employment nowadays he has got to sacrifice all his manliness and self-respect. I know very

well that last fall the great corporations were not satisfied to buy the labor of their slaves, but they insisted that their votes should be included in the contract. The average corporation does not want a man who is respectable. It does not want a man who chafes under injustice; it wants a man who will submit to its demands in silence and wear its fetters without a protest. And what is the result? The result is that men of independent minds are out of jobs, and only the servile and subservient have work. I admit that there are some exceptions. I am discussing the rule. I have met with workmen who have called me aside and whispered in my ear, "I am with you," but who do not dare to come out into the open because of their fear of the wrath of their employers.

In these mines in West Virginia every fifth man is a spy. It is impossible for one of those slaves to address a fellow slave without being reported to the superintendent or pit boss. In the mines of Siberia men are serving life sentences. So they are in West Virginia. They are life convicts. There is a pardoning power over there and there is none here. There is no escape for the miners here unless it be through the back door of suicide. There is nothing to look forward to, nothing but a continuous siege of toil, without adequate compensation. In sickness he has no one to care for him and when he dies the [miner's employer] is glad that he is gone.^{vi} His life is a curse and is not worth the living.

Think All is Well.

Yet some people imagine this condition of affairs is perfectly proper. They imagine the world was made for their especial benefit and that the great masses of the people are only fit to be beasts of burden. Our competitive commercial system has at last resulted in a classification of the people. We have in this country a social caste that is far more odious than the Indian caste. We have an aristocracy of wealth in which are included the dudes and dudesses of the country; who register 110 degrees in the shade on the social thermometer and the less brain they have got as a general proposition the higher they rise socially.

The men who do the work of the country who create the wealth of the country; the men who build all of the palaces and raise all of the produce of the country are left out in the cold, and their condition is daily becoming more precarious. There was a time in this country when a man with reasonable economy could lay by enough to be independent in his declining

days. Under present conditions the longer a man lives, the poorer he becomes, and if he is unfortunate enough to live out the measure of his days he is almost certain to become a pauper.

The country is filling with paupers and mendicants and we have no assurances that we will not soon be in the same vagrant army.

Mr. Gage^{vii} announced the other day that prosperity had come all in a heap. It is only necessary now for men to imagine prosperity, and then — presto, change, they have it. Still, it is hard to convince a man that he is prosperous when hunger's pangs are gnawing at his stomach. It is hard to convince him that he is blessed when he has not clothes enough to cover his nakedness, and the people will not longer believe these false prophets, whether they be Lyman J. Gage or "Hinky Dink."^{viii}

Scouts New Tariff Law.

Think of the absurdity of the statement that the tariff law which was signed by President McKinley the other day is going to restore prosperity. If there is anyone who really believes such a tale all I have to say is that he is a fit subject for some feeble-minded institution. The new tariff law, just passed has been dictated absolutely by the industrial trusts and combines, and they intend to raise enough revenue to pay their campaign expenses of last year, and by increasing the tax on the shoes you wear and the clothes you wear and the lumber you put into your cottages, these prophets say they are going to tax you back into prosperity. What is needed, my friends, is a radical program, such as that proposed by the Social Democracy of America.

The People's Party did good work. It was organized for the disintegration of the two old parties and furnished common ground upon which Republicans and Democrats could unite. It was, however, a destructive and not a constructive party. It went far enough to take out of the old parties many men who were honestly desirous of bettering the conditions of their fellow men, but it did not go far enough. It was neither a capitalistic party nor a socialistic party. There can be no compromise. If collective ownership of a few things is good, collective ownership of public utilities is better.

The Social Democracy proposes rule by the people. It proposes absolute economic freedom for the individual and collective ownership of all the means of production and distribution. It is our idea that every man

should virtually become his own employer, and should be entitled to receive all the fruit of his toil. Every industry is to be carried forward for the public welfare and not for private profit. It is a system under which the millionaire will be as impossible as the mendicant, a system under which all men will enjoy equal rights and equal privileges.

Talks About Socialism.

Only a little while ago there was a deep-seated hostility against the very term socialism, especially on the part of those who did not understand the term.

The capitalistic press does not talk about socialism as much as formerly, nor do the people scare as they formerly did. They have begun to investigate and the result is that a mighty mustering of the people has taken place, unparalleled in the history of organizations. Although but a few weeks old the Social Democracy has been organized in 17 states of this Union and within two weeks more it will be organized in all the states and territories, and when the first convention is held in June next [1898] every state will be represented, a national platform will be adopted, candidates will be named, and the Social Democracy will bid for the favors of the American public.

In 1900, my friends, the Social Democracy will be in the field and I predict that at least 2 million unyielding, uncompromising socialistic votes will be polled.

There is this about the socialist — he does not compromise. He has a conviction and he stands by it, and so the Social Democracy will never order a retreat. Meantime we are doing the best we can in the interest of the new movement, but we are not doing nearly as much as the members of the plutocracy are doing. They are organizing more effectively than we, and are working day and night. Every injunction they issue striking down free speech is, however, an impetus to our movement. However this great coal strike which is now in progress may end, successfully or not, it is going to be immensely helpful to this movement. It cannot be otherwise. As a matter of course, I am with the strikers in their desperate struggle against the power of the coal barons, but even if they succeed they will still be wage slaves, and it will be six months before their conditions are as deplorable as before.

How the Matter Stands.

While the competitive warfare lasts the operator who furnishes the cheapest coal will get the big contracts, and there you are. In spite of all that can be done the miner will be the slave, and what is true of the miner is true of all other classes of workingmen. There is no exception to the rule. Under the same system the garment workers have been reduced to rags and crusts. The sweatshops may be called the headwaters of the ever-broadening river of crime.

Some people wonder that there is so much prostitution. I wonder that there is so little. Under the wage system the sewing girl is compelled to work her life out day and night in order to keep her protesting soul within her wretched body. I have been in some of these places and know that a rich man would not keep his dog in such hellholes. I have seen those unfortunate girls and know something of the conditions under which they work. The papers rarely refer to these things and when they do they say these stories are grossly exaggerated.

Wages are gradually but surely becoming smaller and conditions are becoming harder in every line of industry. But, friends, this system under which we live is rapidly disintegrating; it is in the throes of dissolution. We are on the eve of an organic change, and competition is closing up its deadly program. Men will soon free themselves from their thralldom and their demands will soon exceed the limitations of a creed. Do not be discouraged. The day is dawning when humanity will unite in humanity's interests, and when men shall labor for the common good of all.

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ⁱ W.P. DeArmitt was President of the New York and Cleveland Gas Coal Company.

ⁱⁱ The Governor of West Virginia in 1897 was George W. Atkinson (1845-1925), a Republican.

ⁱⁱⁱ Marion County [WV] Circuit Court Special Judge Mason was also President of the Mason Coal Co.

^{iv} William P. Black (1842-1916) was the lawyer that served as counsel for the defense in the capital trial of Chicago radical activists Albert R. Parsons, August Spies, and six others in connection with the 1886 Haymarket affair.

^v Bayard Holmes (1852-1924) was a physician who was the candidate of the People's Party for Mayor of Chicago in 1895.

^{vi} Original source has a typographical error reading "...miner's employe..." Therefore, alternatively this could be rendered "the mine's employee is glad that he is gone."

^{vii} Lyman Judson Gage (1836-1927), a goldbug who hopped between the Republican and Democratic parties and back again, was Secretary of the Treasury under Presidents McKinley and Theodore Roosevelt.

^{viii} Michael "Hinky Dink" Kenna (1858-1946) was a crooked Chicago city alderman and political boss who preyed on the city's working class.