
Keynote Speech to the Chicago Conference
of Labor Leaders
(September 27, 1897)
[excerpt]

I want it understood I was not to blame for the announcement that the convention was called off.¹ The Social Democracy does not wish to shoulder the blame of this action. We have been consistent; the others have not. I want it understood we are not opposed to trades unions. We are with trades unions always in a fight against organized capital.

The American Federation of Labor is solely to blame for calling off the convention. And right here I want to say if we have a few more such victories as the Federation of Labor claims credit for in settling the coal miners' strike, the workingmen of the country will be starved to death. The settlement of the coal miners' strike as the Executive Board of the Federation of Labor arranged it left West Virginia and Illinois out in the cold.² Those labor leaders have said that the ordering of a strike would settle a difficulty, but my experience has taught me that the more we strike the worse we are off. All the strikes of the last few years have been flat failures.

I am of the opinion that the workingmen will never get relief until they have sense enough to go to the ballot box in one body and vote for their own interests.

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¹ At the conference of labor leaders held in St. Louis on Aug. 30, 1897, Gene Debs lit up the room with a sensational radical speech. Intending to build upon the momentum of the gathering, he joined Knights of Labor General Master Workman James Sovereign and others in calling a follow-up convention, to be held in Chicago on Sept. 27. AF of L President Samuel Gompers and other top officials of the federation seem to not have been amused with Debs's agitation on behalf of the Social Democracy of America and the tactic of political action, however, and efforts were made to scuttle the Chicago gathering, with the AF of L releasing a statement indicating "We can see no need for the labor convention in Chicago... We advise our unions not to be represented there.... It is not by conventions, with

irresponsible talk, inflammatory declamation, and revolutionary buncombe that the cause of labor can be advanced.” (See: *Chicago Tribune*, Sept. 27, 1897, pg. 3. As a result, only an eclectic band of 65 delegates made their way to Chicago for the Sept. 27 gathering — a major black eye for Debs and the Social Democracy.

² While the recent coal strike was settled with significant improvements for the Pennsylvania miners, those from outside the state were excluded from the settlement.