
Address of Eugene V. Debs at the Opening of the Special Convention of the American Railway Union: Handel Hall, Chicago — June 15, 1897

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Ladies and Gentlemen, Friends and Co-Workers:—

We have assembled here in the paragon city of Chicago under the auspices of the American Railway Union to deliberate upon propositions which relate to industrial and economic affairs.

We are here as the representatives of Labor, which, overleaping the narrower limits of unions, lodges, divisions, and guilds, inscribes upon its banner the conquering shibboleth, "Humanity," and goes forth to battle with one supreme, overmastering purpose in view, that of bettering the conditions of men and women who work and whose only capital is their brains and their hands.

The toilers of all enlightened nations, by which I mean those who comprehend their unalienable right to "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness," by processes of mind evolution, have arrived at the conclusion that their mission in the world is something superior to eternal servitude; that they were designed by their Creator to occupy positions superior to beasts of burden, to "dumb, driven cattle," superior to the coral insect which builds, and dies as it builds, superior to the worm that spins silk, lays its egg to perpetuate its toiling race, and dies.

But they find that after all the centuries of toil, servitude, and denigration, conditions remain essentially unchanged, except in those rare and widely separated instances when they have sought to achieve some measure of emancipation from their thralldoms by breaking the fetters which their masters had forged.

But history, that "register of the crimes, follies, and misfortunes of mankind," reveals the fact that the wage system, which is of necessity slavery, hoary with age and forever producing the same results, has

created and perpetuated conditions at the mere mention of which humanity shudders.

But I should do violence to the truth and perpetuate the crime of ingratitude if I were to intimate that amidst all the gloom of the centuries the star of Hope had not held its place and cheered humanity to struggle for better conditions, and I should be untrue to my own convictions if I were to deny that even now, as 1800 years ago, there is heard above all the sordid strife and tumult of the world the promise, "On earth peace, good will toward men."

In the onward march of civilization and evolution, in the majestic mustering of the mind forces of the world, whose achievements make facts more wonderful than the creations of fancy, when the world, by the wires on which electricity travels with the speed of thought, is made a whispering gallery, when cities rise and flourish as if by magic, when in all the earth there is no *terra incognita*, when steam and electricity on the land and on the sea are solving all the problems of commerce, and man stands forth by the fiat of his own genius the crowned conqueror of nature, I ask, in this period of sublime achievements, what benefits have come to the great family of toilers, without whose work the world would roll in space a wilderness? I answer, they are just where they were when the Pharaohs built the pyramids with their slaves and kings built cities for their own glory.

The wage system, in spite of all the refinements of sophistication, is the same in all ages, in all lands, and in all climes. Its victims work, propagate their species, bear all the burdens, and perish.

I am not here to denounce capital, nor am I here to exploit my views of the rich, not even of that gentleman who discarded the beggar at his gate, and soon after "lifted up his eyes in hell." Men, as a rule, are the product of conditions, circumstances, environments, and these are favorable or unfavorable, men become useful or useless, noble or ignoble, good or bad. It is, therefore, not with the individual that I have to do, but with the system of society that produces him and is responsible for him, and my purpose is to discuss conditions and aid as best I can in pointing out means of relief for those of my fellow-toilers who believe that the time has come when better conditions for multiplied thousands can be secured.

I am not unmindful of the fact that there are those who disagree with us and who maintain that there can be no relief while any part of the wage system remains. They insist that the present competitive system must be completely overthrown and not a vestige of it left in

any department of activity, on a foot of our soil, before permanent relief to the suffering masses can be provided. With these good people I have no quarrel. Indeed, among those who are pledged to the Co-operative Commonwealth and who differ as to method only, there is no occasion for unfriendly feeling and all I need to say is that while we propose to battle with all our energy and zeal to carry out our plans for immediate relief, there will be no abatement in our efforts to further the cause of socialism in general until its universal triumph is proclaimed — and we are impressed with the conviction that nothing heretofore attempted in our country is so well calculated to augment the hosts in the fraternal faith and hasten the divine day of deliverance as the work we are about to undertake.

It is well enough to extol the beauties of the ideal system, but in the presence of existing conditions, when millions are suffering, many of them tortured by hunger pangs and driven to desperation and despair, and all this in sight of fabulous resources, something should be done and done *now*, and though the whole world cried out in opposition, I should still favor immediate action on such lines as common sense commended and to such an extent as ceaseless effort and indomitable will made possible, in preference to serene contemplation of these horrors while awaiting the ushering in of the millennium by the ordinary processes in operation. Even though we fail — but we shall not fail, for our mission is sacred as ever aroused men to action, and tens of thousands will at once rally beneath our standard in every state of the Union, and cheered and sustained and reinforced by succeeding tens of thousands, press forward with the resistless ardor of a new crusade, nor will they be deflected from their course the breadth of a hair until slavery in every form has been abolished and humanity rises to exaltation, redeemed, regenerated, and disenthralled.

The fetters of the slave and the scourge of the master symbolize the reign of competitive commercialism, and while the barbarous system is suffered to endure, the Declaration of Independence is a meaningless platitude and our much vaunted free institutions a delusion and a sham. Not until slave and master have both disappeared, and forever, and the equal freedom of all has been established, can we lay any proper claim to civilization.

No proposition will be accepted by the convention which will not withstand the severest criticism, which is fully expected. Neither the magnitude of the task we are about to undertake nor the power of the opposing forces is underestimated. You will observe when this con-

vention is organized for business that only such propositions will be submitted as will have the endorsement of a host of the best thinkers in the land — students of affairs, men and women of large intellectual endowments, wide and varied knowledge and profoundly interested in the welfare of society. Some of these thinkers, interested in industrial, economic, and humanitarian affairs, will participate in the deliberations of the convention. They know, as Goldsmith knew, as we all know that

“Ill fares the land to hastening ills a prey,
Where wealth accumulates and men decay,”

and they know, as, we all know, that the twin curse has long since reached the United States of America. Here, wealth has accumulated until individual fortunes deny computation; here, men by millions are decaying, and here the ills which the author of the “Deserted Village” so graphically portrayed are epidemic, and are spreading with alarming rapidity from the center, in every possible direction, over the land.

In certain quarters it is esteemed a duty to indulge in criticisms designed to make any and every humanitarian enterprise the butt for ridicule and contempt, and to characterize their authors as vagarists, if nothing worse, and their schemes as senseless and impossible. But such a course, designed to work disaster and perpetuate wretchedness in the interest of those who profit by it, no longer intimidates those who, amidst storms and battles, have achieved so much self-emancipation as to dare to think for themselves, and have learned outside of optimistic and pessimistic schools that they must work out their own salvation and not trust the “ordering” of events relating to the emancipation of others, not even to that inscrutable “divinity” which is said to “shape our ends, though hew them how we will,” nor supinely wait for that one “tide in the affairs of men that leads on to fortune,” but with will and courage and self-reliance hew out for themselves new pathways to better conditions.

The past is not a sealed book. Whatever have been the trophies of our boasted civilization, the emancipation of wage-slavery does not appear in its list of victories. Nowhere on the face of the earth has a monument been erected as a memorial of such an event. The combined forces of religion, education, science, and civilization have been unequal to the task of so shaping affairs as to permit men who toil to

own themselves. The wage-system has held them with unrelaxing grasp in perpetual bondage.

We have had the declaration from an inspired apostle of the Christian religion that "God is no respecter of persons." We have it incorporated in our Declaration of Independence that "all men are created equal," and we have constitutions and statutes in consonance with the declaration, but it is held that the cruelty of the wage-system can in no wise be modified; that while "men may come and men may go," the system, like the brook in the poem, must flow on forever; that wage-slavery is the one curse for which there is no redress, and that labor must forever be the creator of wealth in which its share is bare subsistence and all too often, a cipher at the right hand of a decimal point.

But the "thorny stem of Time" is even now budding with cheering indications that a new dispensation is at hand.

What is this new dispensation and what does it signify?

In the presence of this audience, made up of workers and thinkers, I would not, even if I had the tongue of an angel, seek to encourage delusive hopes. My experience and observation teach me that we live at a time in the history of our country when industrial conditions are of a character which everywhere excite unrest and alarm. Business prostration is universal. "Confidence" seems to have taken to itself wings and flown away, and so far as the most penetrating vision can discern there is no indication that it will ever return. In the meantime the gloom that has settled down upon the country deepens into darkness, nor would relief come to the disemployed millions if confidence were to return tomorrow, simply because there are more workers by far than can find employment under the most favorable conditions possible under the present system and because the number of enforced idlers is steadily and rapidly increasing by reason of the labor-displacing machine which, under the capitalist system of production, has doomed labor to fathomless depths of servitude, suffering, and degradation.

Statistics relating to the vast army of men, women, and children who toil for a living in all our centers of population constitute a picture of poverty which cannot be contemplated without the most painful forebodings of ills which affright courageous men. Hunger and squalor in a land of fabulous plenty is a condition which, whatever else may be said, demonstrates beyond controversy that the Almighty does not rule in the councils of nations and if, in the onward

march of mind evolution, men are at last convinced that they must emancipate themselves from bondage, it is all that can be hoped for. No miracles will be wrought to supply men with food, clothing, and shelter. No northern blast will be tempered to a southern zephyr in response to the bleatings of the shorn lamb. No "five thousand men, besides women and children" will be "fed with five loaves and two fishes." No ravens will feed the lone tramp in the fence corner or under a haystack. No widow's "barrel of mean" and "cruse of oil" will be replenished by an Elijah. What then?

If the new dispensation is to continue the wage-slave system, eulogies are out of order and the tongue of Hope may rest from its labors.

Not so, however. The new dispensation is not ushered in by heralds proclaiming that man shall work no more, but it does promulgate the new and divine gospel that man may work for himself, that the chains which bind him to wage-slavery shall be broken, and that unfettered, disenthralled, and emancipated, he may expand to the full stature of a free man, receiving, by right divine, the proceeds of his toil.

It is a dispensation that ushers in the Cooperative Commonwealth, not at once in its full orb'd noon, but more properly its sunrise, its morning, its beginning.

Cooperation is not a word newly coined. It is as old as the tower of Babel, erected by the tribes in the plain of Shinar, when men believed they could build a tower whose top might reach into heaven, a majestic folly, but demonstrating, nevertheless, what may be accomplished by cooperative effort. These cooperative workers did complete their tower, they did lay the foundations of Babylon and their tower, though its top did not reach the skies, stood for a thousand years one of the great wonders of a great city. And men now, as then, are interdependent and the term cooperation illustrates the idea, and debate upon the law of mutual dependence is not required. It is a fundamental law, an axiomatic truth, the only question to be debated being, is the purpose of cooperative effort wise or otherwise? Is it a vagary or a verity? No scientist, no philosopher, no statesman, no philanthropist ever has in the past, does in the present, or will in the future pronounce cooperation a vagary, a hallucination unworthy of consideration. Cooperation presupposes a condition, as applied to industrial affairs, in which men work together in harmony for one another's property, happiness, and independence, a condition in which no man

is master and no man a slave, a condition in which a man's brain and brawn and soul are all his own and not, as under the wage system, another's.

I would have no one deceived. Here, in this presence, should be mindful of the practical. The *ultima thule* of cooperation, the Cooperative Commonwealth, is perhaps in the distant future, not, however, in the dreamland of the enthusiast, but entirely within the realm of the possible.

We are here to deal with initials and among other things to find a location, a spot favored by nature, in climate salubrious and a soil which will yield abundant harvests of food products for man and beast. Any one of several Western states, which are sparsely settled and where the people are very largely in sympathy with the enterprise can be selected for the beginning. Invitations, cordial and heartfelt, have been extended by thousands of citizens, including governors of states and others eminent in public affairs. The state decided upon, we propose to colonize it with men and women thoroughly imbued with a knowledge of economics as applied to industrial affairs, men and women whose philosophy has taught them to deal with the knowable and the attainable, men and women of profound convictions who point to the ten thousand monuments of cooperative success that line all the pathways of civilization, the profits of which have been snatched from the builders to enrich those who owned the wage-slave, while the toilers, despoiled of their rights lived on as they are living today, by permission of those who control all opportunities and dictate all conditions.

There are those who believe, and i am one of the number, that it is practicable to inaugurate a change of program and that the time is ripe for a beginning.

There may be those within the sound of my voice who expect the Cooperative Commonwealth to advance and reach maturity by some inscrutable power, without the aid of human endeavor. Not so, my friends. It means hard work. It involves moral and physical courage of the highest order. It presupposes earnest convictions. Its goal is industrial independence, an independence the world has never known and can never know until cooperative labor, solving every problem and surmounting every obstacle in industrial affairs, achieves emancipation for its votaries.

I need not be told that the term independence is a much used and a much abused word. It may stand for much or for practically noth-

ing at all. Under the operation of the wage system there is no independence for those who toil, because independence means exemption from control by others, the direction of one's own affairs without interference.

Dealing with the subject from this point of view there is not in the United States a wage-worker who is independent. He must not only work to live, but always under conditions dictated by another person. His life and the lives of those dependent upon his work are absolutely under the control of others.

True is it, borne down by the exactions of masters, the toilers have struck in the hope of securing emancipation, but when the struggles are over they found themselves in the grasp of the same old system, more heavily manacled than before. The chains which bound them, unbroken, gnawed deeper into their flesh — into their very souls, and the contest has served to deepen the impression that the fight for independence has made them still more dependent and that they are pariahs in their much vaunted "land of the free and the home of the brave."

Such conditions have aroused thoughtful men within and without the ranks of Labor, and the consensus of opinion is that there is one way out of the labyrinthian pathways in which toilers have traveled for centuries, in which poverty has kept abreast of progress and is now so far in advance that a remedy must be found and applied without delay. The antidote is believed to be cooperative effort on the part of all toilers. By cooperation they can work out their own salvation, their redemption and independence. By cooperation they can burst through every enthrallment, break every fetter, rise superior to present environments, and produce such a change as shall challenge the admiration of the world.

I have referred to the building of the tower of Babel, not to approve the folly of the workers in the construction of a monument to perpetuate a delusion, but to demonstrate the possibilities of cooperative effort.

But we have in our own land and within a period of living witnesses a far more stupendous cooperative enterprise carried forward to the acme of success. I refer to the achievements of the Mormons in Utah, not to condone persecution, but simply to demonstrate that cooperative effort possesses those essential qualities of success that achieve victories over the most obstinate impediments. In the case of Utah it made "the desert rejoice and blossom as the rose." It made

“the wilderness and the solitary places glad.” It touched the mountain streams which in their flow awakened the fertility of a generous soil and filled the land with harvest-home melodies. It built a city and adorned it with a temple equal to any of the seven wonders of the world, and Utah and Salt Lake City are enduring monuments of what cooperative effort may accomplish.

“Work for the unemployed” is the first call to duty and demands immediate action. To rescue these from tenements and hovels, from streets and slums, from charity’s degrading bondage and give them the opportunity of applying their labor to the natural resources is the initial and commanding duty of the present hour.

When carping critics say our scheme is not feasible, let the answer be “Work for the unemployed.” These words must burn and glow on the first banner thrown to the breeze in the new crusade. “Work for the unemployed” must be the battle cry and it must be taken up and echoed and re-echoed until it reverberates in tones of thunder throughout the land. Here, and now, I declare myself enlisted in the cause of “Work for the unemployed.” Nature provides the means and in the words of “Old Hickory,” “By the eternal,” we will provide the places. No excuse or evasion, no compliment or criticism will deflect us from our course. Nothing less than “work for the unemployed” will answer the demand.

An organization of a million workers whose hearts are with us is the first thing in order. We must at once press the work of organizing until every village, hamlet, town and city of every state and territory in the union is voiced the demand and command, “Work for the unemployed.”

In the new organization there will be no division lines All whose hearts are attuned to the symphonies of humanity will be welcomed, totally regardless of race, color, nationality, occupation, or sex. It will be an organization of equals pledged to the sublime work of giving effect to the Declaration of Independence on American soil.

Each will contribute according to his ability to the support of the new movement, and the monthly installments will soon be sufficient to start the pioneers Westward, and by that time the state will have been selected. Under the supervision of able and experienced persons the foundation of the new order will be laid, lands will be secured, machinery and tools will be provided, the soil will be cultivated and industrial enterprises will be established, and thus will begin the work which will not end until the Cooperative Commonwealth has be-

come a realized fact. Gradually we will develop along cooperative lines, withdrawing, wherever and whenever possible, all patronage and support, commercial and political, from the decaying old competitive system, until “innocuous desuetude” opens its vaults to receive it.

The theme is inspiring and invites to elaboration, but time forbids detail. The convention will mature plans and devise ways and means to proceed, and the day of adjournment will mark the first day’s campaign. Not one day, nor hour is to be lost. Action, here and now, is the supreme demand and this convention will respond in a spirit to dispel all doubt as to ultimate success.

The fruits of cooperative industry are benedictions. Plenty banishes poverty. Free men, the possessors of free homes, are not scourged to their tasks by hunger pangs. Work is no longer a curse to be deplored, and life, emancipated from despair, is worth the living. Wifehood becomes a thing of beauty — Motherhood a joy forever, and home a type of heaven.

I felicitate you upon this auspicious beginning of a great and philanthropic work. If wisdom prevails in our councils we are destined to see thriving cooperative colonies planted in this country which, growing, as success crowns earnest endeavor, will ripen at last into a national Cooperative Commonwealth in which men shall be brothers and shall enjoy emancipation and all the fruitions of independence.

Edited by Tim Davenport

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