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## **The Organization of Workingmen: Speech to the Chicago World's Fair Labor Congress (August 30, 1893)**

I appreciate the compliment of the Labor Congress in assigning me a place in its deliberations.

Standing upon this platform, this mound of vision, surveying my surroundings and contemplating this Labor Congress as one of the auxiliaries of the World's Columbian Exposition, I realize in some measure the gigantic strides of progress the nations are making towards fraternity and federation.

It requires, I confess, a more far-reaching vision than I can boast to penetrate the future and determine the date when battle-flags will be furled, when the drumbeats of war shall be hushed to silence, and the parliament of the world shall assemble to deliberate under the sublimating influences of "peace" and "goodwill toward men." But if there is anything in the signs of the times calculated to inspire hope, the "medicine of the miserable,"<sup>1</sup> then it must be conceded that a labor Congress as an appendage of the World's Columbian Fair is a token of cheering significance, a blazing signal in the wilderness of doubt and apprehension, a lighthouse on the stormy coast where labor has often been wrecked when seeking a harbor of security and repose.

I accept with diffidence the theme assigned me for discussion, "the organization of workingmen." I know the subject is trite, that it has been on the lips of ten thousand men for a century or more. I know from readings and from observation how toilsome has been the march of labor during all the centuries since Pharaoh's slaves built the pyramids, hewed out the sphinx, and reared the obelisks, since other slaves built the seven wonders of the world, aye, the multiplied wonders along the track the nations have traveled.

In all of the ages past the workingman has been doomed to toil and to silence. Born to toil and drudgery, uncomplainingly he bowed his head and back in token of submission, crawled in the dust at the behest of superiors, and accepted his cruel fate as taught by the gods and church, and steeped in ignorance and superstition, had a vague idea that when his bitter task was ended, somewhere a better life was in store for him.

Nor is labor yet redeemed from the blighting curses of the past, nor has it moved anywhere in all of the shining zones that belt the earth a fraction of an inch towards improved conditions except by the lifting and emancipating power of organization.

In making this declaration I unhesitatingly challenge the world. If it is asserted that here and there, now and then, laws have been enacted for the amelioration of workingmen, the irrefutable truth stands forth that such laws have their origin in the councils of organized labor and were forced upon the statute books by the conquering energy of organized workingmen.

In saying this, I pronounce no undue eulogy upon the organization of workingmen. I am not required to proclaim that labor organizations are immaculate. I know they are human and I frankly concede their errors. I know of the long captivity of workingmen, of the Red Seas they have passed, of their wanderings in the wilderness with burning thirst and consuming hunger in search of a promised land. Organized for victory they have experienced defeat. Their enemies, entrenched in wealth and commanded by generals of consummate abilities, have often been able to demoralize the forces of organized labor and subject the defeated to penalties of harrowing severity. But labor's battles have not all been lost, nor are labor's hosts disbanded or discouraged. On the contrary, organized workingmen were never more confident of success, never more hopeful of the future of labor than now, and for this trust and expectation there are many and cogent reasons.

In the first place, experience has taught organizations of workingmen the supreme value of education, of mental development and intellectual grasp. The great brain of labor has lain comparatively dormant, except as exercised along the line of the chosen field of work. Learning in its best sense has not been in alliance with labor organizations. It has been thought sufficient for workingmen to be skilled in their trades to hew and saw to lines marked out by others and to be content with the ABC of knowledge, a species of slavery and degradation which forever held their noses to the grindstone of dependence and kept their feet tramping the same treadmill journeys in which there was neither development nor advancement. The men who thought controlled those who toiled. As in the academies where Plato and Aristotle taught, workingmen have been excluded from the benefits and blessings to be derived from science and philosophy which related to their emancipation from conditions imposed by centuries of ignorance and oppression. But the spirit of organization touched them, united them in one vast body, sent the red currents of life

coursing through their veins, and they stood up and stood forth in a mighty army panoplied for war, proclaiming to the nations of the earth that while the stars shine above them and mind holds sway in the councils of men, labor shall not be enslaved — at least not in the United States of America, while our flag, christened “Old Glory,” has a star or a stripe upon its ample folds.

In this emancipation being wrought out by organized workingmen, if one cares to listen, may be heard welling up from every organization of labor the demand for more and a higher education. This mind march of labor is phenomenal. Students multiply by the thousands, lodges are becoming schoolrooms, books are in demand, and a labor literature, daily increasing in power, is among the cheering signs of the times.

This mustering of the mind forces of labor has a majestic significance which ought to challenge the admiration of patriots and philanthropists of every school. If there are those who aver that this work is moving slowly, I do not hesitate to admit the affirmation and express my approval of the staid but sturdy character of the march. I am not an advocate of the spectacular. The present is the formative, the educational, the consolidating period of the organization of workingmen, and the work is proceeding in a way betokening ever increasing force and strength, and this “Labor Congress” in this “White City” of the world,<sup>2</sup> the local center of the thought of all the nations, may be cited in support of the declaration.

The time is coming, fortunately, when we are hearing less of the old paternal pharisaism. “What can we do for labor?” It is the old, old query repeated along all the centuries, heard whenever a master wielded a whip above the bowed forms of slaves. It is the language of the slave-catcher, the slave-pen, the slave-block, and the slave plantation. We hear it yet occasionally, along lines of transportation, in mines and shops, but our ears are regaled by another and a more manly query, an interrogatory permeated with the spirit of liberty and independence, which is, “What can labor do for itself?” The answer is not difficult. Labor can organize, it can unify, it can consolidate its forces. This done, it can demand and command. Such are the possible and the practical things labor can do, is doing, and will continue to do, until constitutions and courts and laws, based upon principles of eternal justice, make no distinction in dealing with the people.

Such grand achievements I do not doubt can be accomplished and be vastly expedited by the organization of workingmen. I am unable to discover anything in the program chimerical. It is not a fantasy, a dream, or

a creation of the fancy. It is, on the contrary, an expression of faith in human attainments, when the mind, no longer fettered by ignorance nor deformed by bigotry, expands to its full orb'd power to bless the world.

I would not have it understood that I underestimate the power of the forces in league to circumvent the high aspirations of labor or to defeat the purposes of the organization of workingmen. I appreciate the herculean task that comforts labor, and how long and tedious and dreary will be the march before the hosts of labor will be able to celebrate their full emancipation. But were the obstacles in the way a thousand times more formidable than they appear, I would still have faith in the triumph of eternal justice, though it were but as "a grain of mustard seed" that labor would be able to remove them all and advance,<sup>3</sup> since the converse of the proposition would be that "right is to be forever on the scaffold" and the "wrong forever on the throne,"<sup>4</sup> in which event the duration of the earth has already been ample and its destruction by any of the processes from time to time suggested ought to meet with a hearty welcome.

It ought to be understood and it is conceded by men of thought, by statesmen who can lay any just claim to the appellation, that the supreme welfare of the social fabric depends upon the prosperity, happiness, and contentment of workingmen, and since the absence of this great fortune means the opposite viz: adversity, poverty, and want, it requires no seer to foretell social calamities — crime and its attendant woes. Workingmen's organizations, having in view the maintenance of fair wages, are doing more for the wellbeing of society than all other agencies combined. I am not unmindful of what is said of the church and the school, nor am I here to wage warfare against either of them, nor against any other human agency for the mitigation of social ills, but dogmas and creeds, the refinements of religion nor the learning of the schools, ever did demand or maintain fair wages for workingmen, and the fact that wages have been unjust accounts for a vast percent of the ignorance, squalor, degradation, and crime that now confront our much-vaunted civilization. The shylock policy of reducing wages has been and continues to be the prolific parent of innumerable ills, and against this policy the organizations of workingmen proclaim unyielding hostility.

If such dangers, resulting from persistent injustice to labor, threaten the social fabric, what may be said of the perils that environ our political system consequent upon a policy which seeks to reduce men who wield the ballot to pauperism? Do I cry "Wolf" when there is no wolf? we hear on all sides cries of alarm caused by illiteracy. Men declare that ignorance is the one great peril of our institutions and that the school, and

only the school, guarantees security. It is well. Organizations of workmen are in active alliance with the school. Their motto is "Education," but in addition they demand just wages and fair conditions for work, because wages reduced to the point which barely suffices to keep soul and body together blocks the pathways to mental culture, and until the elevating power of honest wages is recognized and established, the state will continue to deplore the demoralizing results of illiteracy.

Wages is one of the supreme requirements of labor in social and political affairs. I am not here as a money worshiper. I know that dollars are called "tokens," and are said to be mediums of exchange, the yardsticks and balances of trade by which we weigh and measure the prosperity, happiness, and contentment of workmen. If wages approximate labor's honest share in the wealth it creates, the homes of workmen are bright and joyous, and as wages are reduced below that standard, there is gloom and squalor, and organizations of workmen animated by the noble ambition to secure and maintain fair wages which, while providing a suitable living for their wives and children, enables them to meet every required obligation of the state.

Again, it should be said that when labor is honestly paid, communities and states feel at once the vivifying influence; consumption keeps pace with production; trade and commerce proceed on lines of security and wide prosperity, and rewards are equitably distributed. To secure these blessings is the paramount purpose of organizations of workmen.

Standing amid the marvelous displays of work and skill concentrated in this world renowned White City from the four corners of the earth, I am prompted to deal in eulogistic words of work, but the majesty of the theme dissuades me. Had I the imagination, the genius, and the eloquence of an Ingersoll, I would make this labor congress an epoch immortal in the annals of labor. I would put tongues in workmen's organizations whose words should echo around the world when this great Columbus Fair takes its place in the traditions of the centuries.<sup>5</sup> Here students may learn how inert and dead is the thing we call capital until it was touched by the vitalizing power of labor — labor of brain and hand. Here the Federal government might have poured to exhaustion its accumulation of gold and silver — here the states of this mighty republic might have concentrated their wealth, and here, Chicago, the wonderful interoceanic city of the continent might have drained her coffers until the Alpine pile of money amazed the nations of the earth, but Jackson Park<sup>6</sup> would have remained a barren land but for the play of the elements. But,

touched by the hand of labor, behold the transformation! The weird fictions of Aladdin become facts for the contemplation of the world. Palaces, the description of which defies all languages, spring up as if by enchantment and a fairy realm is created by the magic power and genius of labor. And here are concentrated, as never before in the history of all the ages, the products of skilled workers of every clime under the starry heavens, and as the millions come from the north and the south, from the east and west, from continents and islands, the exclamation is made, "Verily, the genius and skill of man is the marvel of the world."

These visiting wonderers may search in vain for something that kings, aristocrats, plutocrats, the rich and titled snobs of the earth have made. As well search for roses amidst the eternal snows of the Arctic zone. No! All things in the White City combine to eulogize labor, and workingmen's organizations, whatever the future has in store for them, may congratulate themselves that they are animated by the sublime purpose of redeeming their members from the thralldoms which centuries of cruelty and oppression have imposed upon them.

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<sup>1</sup> Allusion to a line from *Measure for Measure* (c. 1604), by William Shakespeare (1564-1616): "*The miserable have no other medicine but only hope.*"

<sup>2</sup> The main exhibition buildings of the 1893 Columbian Exposition shared a common neo-classical architectural theme and were faced with white-painted plaster, garnering the nickname "The White City." Most of these buildings burned to the ground in a January 1894 fire.

<sup>3</sup> Allusion to *Matthew*, chapter 17, verse 20, which quotes Jesus of Nazareth as saying, "*for verily I say unto you, If ye have faith as a grain of mustard seed, ye shall say unto this mountain, Remove hence to yonder place; and it shall remove; and nothing shall be impossible unto you.*"

<sup>4</sup> Adaptation of a line from "The Present Crisis" (1845), by James Russell Lowell (1819-1891): "*Truth forever on the scaffold, Wrong forever on the throne.*"

<sup>5</sup> The World's Columbian Exposition was a celebration of the 400th anniversary of the arrival of Christopher Columbus (c. 1451-1506) in the new world.

<sup>6</sup> Jackson Park, today a 500 acre park on Chicago's South Side, was the site of the Columbian Exposition.