
Centralization and the Role of the Courts: Speech at Germania Hall, Cleveland, Ohio — Jan. 18, 1896

by Eugene V. Debs

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Ladies and Gentlemen:—

It has been said that centralization and combination are the master spirits of this age. The truth of the statement is so self-evident as to require no argument to strengthen or support it. The centralization of wealth in the United States of America during the last half of the 19th Century is without a parallel in the history of the nations, and in the conquering march we now number the millionaires by thousands and the mendicants by millions, and the power conferred by centralized wealth defies proper characterization. The old maxim that “Knowledge is power” might very properly be amended by adding “But wealth is omnipotent.” Centralized wealth dominates every department of the government of the United States. (*Applause.*) The voice of centralized wealth is potential in the halls of legislation (*Applause*), has invaded the church, and has absolute sway in all the affairs of man. This is not the charge of a wild-eyed Anarchist, an irresponsible agitator, but of men of acknowledged standing in the affairs of the nation.

Only the other day in the United States Senate, Senator [George Graham] Vest of Missouri very broadly intimated that the United States Supreme Court was susceptible to corruptible influences. (*Ap-*

plause.) But the most startling arraignment of the Supreme Court, once the most august tribunal in the civilized world, originates in the court itself. A little while ago the court rendered its decision upon the income tax law, a law designed to place the burden of taxation where it properly belongs, upon those best able to bear it. (Applause.) The law was declared to be unconstitutional. When that decision was rendered, three of the gentlemen constituting that court gave their dissenting opinions. Justice [Edward D. White]¹ in his opinion used the following language:

The injustice of the conclusion points to the error of adopting it. It takes invested wealth and reads it into the Constitution as a favored and protected class of property...whilst it leaves the occupation of the minister, the doctor, the professor, the lawyer, the inventor, the author, the merchant, the mechanic and all the various forms of industry, upon which the prosperity of the people must depend, subject to taxation.²

Justice [John M.] Harland used the following language:

The changes contemplated from the prayer of this matter are little less than revolution. Such a decision can not have any other effect than of arousing much indignation among the freemen of the country. It can not be regarded otherwise than as a disaster for the country.³

A Serious Charge.

Here we have it upon the high authority of one of the Supreme Justices that this decision places disaster upon the country. Justice [Henry B.] Brown said the decision involved “nothing less than a sur-

¹ The published transcript reads “Justice Wood” — apparently Debs misspoke.

² The transcript renders this quotation incorrectly, text corrected here.

³ If Justice Harland ever used this language, he did not use it in his dissent to the decision. What he did write was that “...a decision now that a tax on income from real property can be laid and collected only by apportioning the same among the states, on the basis of numbers, may, not improperly, be regarded as a judicial revolution, that may sow the seeds of hate and distrust among the people of different sections of our common country. * * * Any attempt on the part of Congress to apportion among the states, upon the basis simply of their population, taxation of personal property or of incomes would tend to arouse such indignation among the freemen of America that it would never be repeated.” (*158 US 1135, 1137.*)

render of the taxing power to the moneyed class.”⁴ Johann Most never made a more serious charge upon an American institution. One of these justices declares that this decision of the Supreme Court reads invested wealth into the constitution of the United States; another, that it is little less than a revolution, and another that it is a surrender [to] the moneyed class. As a matter of fact, corporate capital dictates the appointment of federal judges. It is next to impossible for a lawyer, however great his attainments, to reach that high position unless he is on good terms with the corporations of this country. (*Applause.*) The decisions of the Supreme Court have almost uniformly been against the common people, and especially against the workingmen of the country. I undertake to say that if the income tax law had imposed a burden of \$60 million upon the poor people it would not have been declared unconstitutional. (*Applause.*)

I am not here tonight to appeal to your passions, to arouse your prejudices or incite the populace, but to call your attention to matters of such serious import in our social, our political, our industrial affairs, as to challenge the thoughtful consideration of every patriotic citizen. There are multiplied thousands of people in this country who view with apprehension and alarm the widespread unrest that prevails in our social and industrial affairs, and taking counsel of their doubts and fears they arrive at the conclusion of Macaulay is about to be fulfilled that self-government is a failure and that the sun of our Republic is to set in universal gloom. I am not of that number. Believing as I do in the largely increasing intelligence of the masses of our people, I am persuaded that the grand old Ship of State will breast all the billows, weather all of the storms and finally safely reach her destined port. (*Great applause.*)

As for the workingmen of the country, I am persuaded that upon these great questions they are thinking more seriously and more intelligently than they have ever thought before.

Will Take Their Rights.

I agree with Fitch, and it is only here under the flag of 44 stars, where the workingmen are beginning to ask why it is they must press their rags still closer lest they jostle against the silken garments that their fingers have fashioned, and why it is they must offend their hunger with the odor of banquets they have spread but may not taste,

⁴ The transcript renders this quotation incomprehensibly, quote corrected here.

and walk weary and shelterless in the shadow of the palaces they have erected but may not enter. Workingmen are beginning to think — they will soon begin to act! They shall not make longer supplication for their rights, but they will take them; not in lawlessness, in disorder, in crime, but in lawful, orderly manner will take them; they will take them by virtue of a united ballot (*Applause*) — the weapon that comes down as silently as the snow flakes fall upon the sod, yet executes every man's will, as lightning does the will of God. And they hear the cries of people weary of centuries of oppression and tyranny, and the child of martyrdom, and they know a free people of a free country will answer that cry, because where labor is prophet or priest or king, the greater the concentration of all wealth, government, and civilization.

It is labor that heats the iron ore and seethes it in paths of fire and rolls and hammers and tempers it into the brightest blade, and the ponderous rail. It is labor that gathers the white fleece and transforms it into thousands of articles of beauty and use; labor that seizes the green-plumed forest monarch and bids him fall low upon the earth and sees his huge form sink under the saw, until the vast forests change into materials for home; labor that hammers at the doors of earth's chambers, bids them roll back upon their hinges — and shall not workingmen come into their own? Who shall doubt it?

The Midnight Passing.

When the mariner sailing over the tropic seas looks for light, he turns his eye toward the Southern cross burning luridly above the tempestuous ocean, and as midnight approaches, the cross begins to bend, the whirling oceans change their places, and the Almighty marks the passage of time upon the dial of the universe. Though no bell may toll the glad tidings, the lookout knows midnight is passing, and relief and rest are close at hand. Let labor everywhere take cheer and hope, for the cross is bending, and midnight is passing, and “joy cometh in the morning.”⁵ (*Great applause.*)

There are those who, while admitting that our industrial affairs are seriously out of joint, claim that it is possible to quiet the discontent of the workingmen by force. The other day in the city of Washington, General [Nelson] Miles was interviewed and declared that on

⁵ From *Psalms*, chapter 30, verse 5: “For his anger endureth but a moment; in his favor is life: weeping may endure for a night, but joy cometh in the morning.”

account of threatened internal dissension he believed it necessary we should have a standing army of at least 75,000. When I read the interview it appeared to me Washington said something upon that subject. I looked up his farewell address and found he had declared against standing armies on American soil. (*Applause.*) I looked up Jefferson upon that subject and I found that he said precisely the same thing in a little different way. And then I said that standing armies and liberty do not thrive in the same soil. (*Applause.*) One of the other must give way; and it is usually liberty. The theory of Gen. Miles is that we shall have soldiers enough to mass near the centers of population so that when discontented, wronged, oppressed, and often plundered workingmen resist injustice they may be murdered.

Question of Humanity.

In my judgment, what is called the labor problem is now the question of humanity. It touches at a very vital point of human society, involves the welfare and prosperity and happiness of all the people. It is not confined to the workingmen of the country merely; it has passed beyond the lines of labor, and we find that among professional men, among businessmen, among all classes of thoughtful, patriotic citizens, there is a disposition to find out what is wrong with our industrial affairs, and apply the proper remedy.

“And just here let me remark in this connection that workingmen have not been half true to themselves. (*Applause.*) They have not taken advantage of such opportunities as they have enjoyed. Believing as I do that for the solution of this question we rely largely, if not entirely, upon intelligence, I feel that the workingmen, those most directly, most vitally interested, should study this question in all of its phases; devote their leisure hours to the study of economic questions relating to food and clothing and shelter, and all other phases of this great problem. I said tot the railroad men yesterday, at Olean, New York, that a great many of them were satisfied to sit in the round-house in their overalls and tell stories about runs that had never been made in the world and never would be made. (*Laughter and applause.*) I want to see them change their lodge rooms into school-rooms.

Goldsmith [wrote some time ago]:

For just experience tells; in every soil.

Those that think must govern those that toil.⁶

Workingmen have done no thinking except by proxy. (*Applause.*) I want them to rely on their own thinker; I want them to cultivate self-reliance, to depend upon themselves.

Good Advice.

A large number of workingmen have opportunities and fail to take proper advantage of them. In a few years they will find that they themselves are doing very much in the line of solving the labor problem. I want them to do some of it, to add a little something to the stock of their knowledge and heighten their intelligence. Do something in the line of self-improvement. Spend leisure hours at home. The labor problem is not going to be solved in the saloon. (*Applause.*) I can think of no more beautiful picture than that of a workingman, who, returning home, finds the beacon light shining at the window; he takes his supper, then draws up his old arm chair to the fireside, converses with his wife, plays with his children. The man that does that is doing something to solve the labor problem. (*Applause.*)

I admit there are many thousands of workingmen in the country who have no opportunities. From them I expect nothing; they have got to be helped; they are the victims of circumstances they did not create, that they have had no power to control. As I said before, there are between 3 and 4 million workingmen out of employment, traveling from city to city in search of employment that can not be found. There are those, I say, who are victims of circumstances. There are workers who are willing and anxious to work, but there is no work to be found. In my opinion ... there will come a time when there will be a change in the condition.

The Cheapest Commodity.

Have you ever given serious thought of the condition of a man out of employment and expecting to find it? Have you ever put yourself in his place? Take a man with a good situation. He loses his place through no fault of his own; he looks all about Cleveland, he goes up and down he street and can not find work — no one will give him an instant's attention. For in these latter years of the 19th Century the

⁶ Couplet from *The Traveler* (1764) by **Oliver Goldsmith** (1728-1774).

cheapest commodity of the world is human flesh and blood. (*Applause.*) He leaves Cleveland, goes to the nearest place and does not succeed and before he realizes it he is 500 miles away from home. His last dollar is gone, he is a strange among strangers — his clothes become seedy. At long range he can see his little cottage home, his wife in distress, his children crying for bread; he becomes embittered against society and it rankles in his breast, and in that mood it is but a few steps until he becomes a tramp by choice and from there on it is but a few steps into crime.

I have made the contention that 90 percent of the criminals of this country could under proper conditions be redeemed. (*Applause.*) Most of them find their way to jail because they are poor. (*Applause.*) Poverty is made to bear all of the burdens; if they had the money they could employ a lawyer, the lawyer would make a defense, they would not be convicted. (*Applause.*) I don't hesitate to declare that in some of our courts justice is a purchasable [commodity]. (*Applause.*) Not long ago Judge [Elmer Scipio] Dundy sent a tramp who assaulted a mail carrier and took one cent from him to the penitentiary for life. The same judge sent Mason, the Lincoln, Nebraska, bank wrecker, who robbed his depositors of \$1 million to the penitentiary for two years. (*Applause.*) What was the difference? A million dollars. (*Applause.*)

In Jail with Debs.

When I was in jail at Chicago (*Applause.*) I had a fellow prisoner who was serving a 12-months' sentence because he had stolen a second-hand cloak for his wife, valued at \$2. I heard his story and verified it by the facts. He had been out of work for six months. He tramped around looking for work in vain. He passed the second-hand store and saw an old cloak swinging in the breeze that they were using for a sign; he took it for his wife, he thought of her sitting in her desolation. He was arrested and it took five minutes to send him to jail for 12 months. The question that occurred to me was: Was he sent to jail for stealing the cloak or because he had no money? (*Applause.*) After I heard his story I said to myself had I been in his situation, had I done my level best to get a cloak honestly for my wife, and she had gone in need of one, I would get a cloak honestly or otherwise if there was a cloak anywhere in the world. (*Applause.*)

Here is a man serving a 12-months' sentence who is not a criminal at heart. There is no self-accusation manifest in his conscience. He was dictated by as humane a motive as ever a man had in this world. His crime was a virtue and entitled to commendation. (*Applause.*) He was the unfortunate victim of circumstances, of an unfortunate condition, and should be entitled to the compassion of society. But he went to jail and when a man goes to jail there is no escape for him except possibly through the back door of suicide. (*Applause.*) Society as it is now constituted doesn't allow a man who is identified with the criminal classes to redeem himself. Put a man in jail, release him, no one will give him work, nor a word of encouragement. He is exiled. No one knows him, society closes all of its doors in his face, abuse is heaped upon his head, and he is placed back in the jail and falls several degrees lower and finally he graduates from petty larceny to homicide. (*Applause.*) If it seems to you in the nature of an exaggeration, investigate for yourself.

Thankful to Judge Woods.

I have to be thankful to Judge [William Allen] Woods (*Hisses.*) for one thing; I am thankful for having been in jail and to know something of the condition of the inmates. I understand now they are entitled to our sympathy and I propose to do what little lies in my power to correct conditions under which these people are made criminals. (*Applause.*) Then there are those who are placed in the extremity of betting, but if a man is naturally bright he will not beg. If I had the choice between begging and stealing, I am not sure, I am not certain, but I [think I] would keep my self-respect and steal. (*Applause.*)

Have you ever thought of the extreme humility of a strong, able-bodied man who is a supplicant for charity? Just think of it. It humiliates a man, disgraces him; his self-respect deserts him. No matter how good a man he may be, when he is in that condition long enough he is divorced from his manhood and he becomes an abject creature or a criminal. He is in the position that the poet wrong about a long time ago:

See yonder poor o'er-labored wight,
So abject, mean, and vile,
Who begs a brother of the earth
To give him leave to toil;
And see his lordly fellow-worm

The poor petition spurn,
Unmindful, though a weeping wife
And helpless offspring mourn.
If I'm designed yon lordling's slave,
By Nature's law designed
Why was an independent wish
E'er planted in my mind? ⁷

The interrogatory has not been answered and may not be answered. Certain it is that a great many American workingmen are in that position today, when the opportunities are increasing and established in the large centers of population and while this is going forward, while millions are out of work, unable to find work. We have shops and mills and factories in which women and children toil for 12 and 16 hours a day. (*Applause.*) Upon this subject Frances Willard, one of the noblest of her sex, (*Applause.*) says:

There are millions of men and women in Great Britain and America who would gladly work, but the pitiless restraining hand of invention and monopoly hold them back, so that an opportunity to earn their bread by the sweat of their brow is already fought for as strenuously as men in former times fought for their lives.... Under this procedure of resistless competition men are ground into dust by a heavier heel than old-time tyrannies could boast, and they seek forgetfulness in those indulgencies whose hallucinations deteriorate body and soul. ⁸

Fifty Cents a Day.

I met James Gist at Chicago the other day. This gentleman is very familiar with machine work and gives much attention to these matters. He had just returned from Kalamazoo, where he made some investigation of a large furniture factory. He found that men were at work who had worked there for ten years, six days a week, for \$3 — 50 cents a day. Just think of a man working ten hours a day for 50 cents and having a wife and three or four children depending on him

⁷ From "Man Was Made to Mourn: A Dirge" (1784), by **Robert Burns** (1759-1796).

From Willard's address written for the Third Biennial Convention of the World's Woman's Christian Temperance Union, London, June 1895, a text which was to be read to local Unions of the WCTU across the United States.⁸ Quotation garbled in the newspaper transcription, corrected here.

for support! He said he went through the factory and saw girls working at some of the machines 13 years of age, and on some of their hands were four of the fingers missing. Oh, what a state of affairs in a community! What a vile calumny upon our Christian civilization!

The struggle is fierce enough and sharp enough if a child is equipped for the battle of life. But just think of the children of these men out of employment, or these men who have employment at 50 cents a day, who are compelled to grow up without education. They do not have a home. John Bright once said that the nation should live in a cottage. It should be so, but it is no longer so in this section of the country. They can not live in a home; they can not live in the home they inhabit, it is not fit for a dog to inhabit. The children are reared in such an environment. No education, no moral influence, and after they get old enough and drift into crime, as some of them inevitably do, because we are all creatures of our circumstances, then society imprisons them or hangs them.

Now, I have made the declaration that wealth dominates every department of our affairs — great aggregation of wealth. Even the man of ordinary means is being forced to the wall. Dun's reports show that last year we had in this country over 13,000 commercial collapses, aggregating more than \$172 million. In this morning's dispatches I read Dun's report for last week of 396 failures. The failures going forward in the United States at the rate of 66 a day — just think what this means! Think of this bankruptcy, ruin, disaster, suicide....

Feeling the Pressure.

But this process of centralization is going steadily forward. The middle classes are beginning to feel the pressure. One product after another is being monopolized. The tendency is to syndicates and trusts and combines and monopolies. In 1890 there was a law enacted designed to restrain the formation of trusts. It had no effect and never can have any effect. The trust is the legitimate product of the present industrial system. We are rapidly approaching that condition when there will be in this country two classes separated by a very wide chasm — the few who have all the wealth, and therefore, all the power, and the great masses of the people who are in subjection. Call this a republic if you will, but there is not an element of real republicanism in it. (*Applause.*)

I have said and say again there can be no civil liberty with industrial slavery. Long since we achieved our political independence, but we will not be free until we have achieved economic liberty. (*Applause.*) Something is being done in that direction every day. The theory is, according to Lincoln, in this country we have a government of and by and for the people. He said, to use his own language, “Liberty before property, or men before the dollar.”⁹ We have lived to see his words accepted literally — not, however, in the way he intended. We see the man before the collar, but upon his knees, crouching, supplicating for the dollar, and for permission to live, and it is only a theory we have in the words “of the people, by the people, and for the people.”

We will never have a government of the people until we enfranchise woman and give her political equality. (*Applause.*) It is not for the want of regard, but we have a misconception as to the rights of womanhood. A woman has every right we have, and if she has not got a right to vote where did we get ours? Whether she wants to vote or not is a question for her to decide and not for me. I am one of those who believe that a great many ills that afflict the body social and industrial can be eradicated when woman enjoys political freedom and equality. (*Applause.*) And why not? There is not a rational argument that can be made against the proposition. Denying woman the right of political equality, it is simply the crime of animal force — superior strength. Woman has much more honor than men as a general proposition. (*Applause.*) You could not buy her vote with a drink of whiskey. (*Laughter and applause.*) We decorate her with jewels but keep her in political subjection. I want to see the time come when we will decorate her with that rarest of all gems, political equality, and then men and women will walk the highland side by side enjoying the rapturous vision of a land without a slave. (*Applause.*) I believe with Col. [Robert] Ingersoll, who once said that every magnificent man had a magnificent mother — almost anybody will do for a father (*Laughter.*)

Restraining Workingmen.

⁹ Lincoln’s exact words were “The Democracy [Democratic Party] of today hold the *liberty* of one man to be absolutely nothing, when in conflict with another man’s right of *property*. Republicans, on the contrary, are for both *the man* and the *dollar*; but in case of conflict, the man *before* the dollar.” (Letter to Boston Republicans, April 6, 1859.)

We now pass to some further matters in which labor has a very profound interest. I refer to the increasing tendency of the courts to restrain workingmen from asserting the power which organization confers upon them. We have arrived at a point where workingmen, especially those employed on railroads, are compelled by court decree to work for such wages and under such conditions of employment as the corporations may see fit to impose. When the managers meet together for the purpose of reducing wages the newspapers inform us that they held a conference. When the workingmen combine for the purpose of resisting the reduction, they call it a conspiracy. (*Laughter and applause.*) Now the only difference between a conference and a conspiracy is the difference between a railroad president and a section hand. If courts are justified in restraining workingmen from acting in concert to resist reduction in wages, then why are they not justified in restraining corporations from cutting wages? (*Applause.*) It is a poor rule that, like a locomotive, does not work both ways.

Here is an editorial that appeared in the *New York World* upon that point:

More dangerous and menacing than any strike is the carefully-laid plan for bringing about the intervention of the federal government on the side of the railroad. Such an injunction as that drawn by two corporation attorneys and granted by Judges Grosscup and Woods is a monstrous invasion of the people's rights. If operating a railroad is a public service, and railroad men are public servants in any sense that can justify federal control of their acts, then the federal government must not only protect the railroad companies against the employees when there is a quarrel between them, it must also protect employees in all their rights and privileges as public servants. It must guarantee them reasonable hours of service, fair wages, reasonable vacations, and all other guarantees that it gives to others in the public service.

Employees Chained.

Not long since the Northern Pacific road passed into the hands of a receiver — and the Northern Pacific is the goose that has been plucked wherever there was a feather in sight — just after that there was a petition filed to reduce the wages of employees. At the same time there was a petition filed to restrain employees from striking.

The court granted both orders, so that their wages were not only reduced under the guardianship and protection of the government, but they were prevented from quitting the service of the company under penalty of being guilty of contempt of court. Those railroad employees by virtue of those orders were chained to that corporation and made a part of its rolling stock. It was a case of the government of the United States holding up a body of workmen while a corporation went through their pockets. (*Laughter and applause.*)

On the Union Pacific system they made a reduction of wages and applied for a similar order, but there was an honest judge there — Judge [Henry Clay] Caldwell. (*Applause and cheers.*) Judge Caldwell expands to the proportions of an honest and upright judge, and I pay him the humble tribute of admiration and respect. Judge Caldwell said, “Before this reduction is made I propose to call the employees into court and give them an opportunity to be heard.” He called in the officials and he asked them to show the reason why the wages should be reduced, and he called in the employees and he heard their testimony and when the hearing was closed, he said, “This reduction shall not be made.” And he declared that if that property had been honestly managed there would be no necessity for reduction of wages, and he said, “There shall be no reduction here if not another dollar is paid in the form of dividends to the owners of the road.” It is this that inspires the confidence of the people exactly as in the other case it destroys it. I believe it was Choate who said that it is not so important that our courts are pure as that the people shall believe them to be pure.

And He Got Six Months.

In our own case in Chicago an injunction was issued at a time when the American Railway Union had its great struggle for human rights, and they were triumphant in restraining myself and my colleagues from doing what we never intended to do and never did do, and then we were put in jail for not doing it. (*Applause and laughter.*) When that injunction was served on me, to show that I acted in good faith, I went to two of the best constitutional lawyers in the city of Chicago and I said: “What rights, if any, have I under this injunction? I am a law-abiding citizen; I want what is right. I want you to examine this injunction and then advise me what to do.” They examined the injunction. They said, “Proceed just as you have been doing; you

are not committing any violence; you are not advising violence, but you are trying to do everything in your power to restrain men from the commission of crime or violating the law." I followed their advice and got six months for it. (*Laughter and applause.*)

What does Judge Lyman Trumbull say upon that subject? Judge Lyman Trumbull is one of the most eminent jurists the country has produced. He served 16 years in the United States Senate; he was chairman of the Senate Committee on the Judiciary; he was on the Supreme bench of the state of Illinois; he has held all of the high offices, but he is a poor man. There is not a scar nor a blemish upon his escutcheon. No one ever impugned his integrity. What does he say about this subject? To use his exact language, he says: "The decision carried to its logical conclusion means that any Federal judge can imprison any citizen at his own will." If this is true, it is judicial despotism, pure and simple, whatever you choose to call it.

When the trials were in progress at Chicago, Mr. George M. Pullman was subpoenaed to give some testimony. Mr. Pullman attached his car to a New York train and went East and in some way the papers got hold of the matter and made some publication about it, and the Judge said that Mr. Pullman would be dealt with drastically. In a few days Mr. Pullman returned and he went into chambers, made a few personal explanations, and that is the last we heard of it. Had it been myself I would have to go to jail, that is the difference.

Another Case.

Only a little while ago Judge [Cornelius H.] Hanford cited Henry C. Payne of the Northern Pacific to appear before him to answer certain charges, and he went to Europe, and he is there yet. Will he go to jail on his return? Of course not. Why? The reason suggests itself. If it were a railroad striker he would be in Woodstock instead of Berlin.

Gov. Altgeld, in many respects the greatest Governor in the United States, says: "The precedent has now been established and any federal judge can now enjoin any citizen from doing anything and then put him in jail." Now, what is an injunction? It has all of the force and vital effect of a law, but it is not a law in and by the representatives of the people; it is not a law signed by a President or a Governor; it is simply the wish and will of the judge. A judge issues an injunction [and] serves it upon his intended victim. The next day he is arrested. He is brought into the presence of the same judge. Sen-

tence is pronounced upon him by the same judge, who constitutes the judge and court and jury, and he goes to jail and he has no right of appeal. Under this injunctional process the plain provisions of the constitution have been disregarded. The right of trial by jury has been abrogated, and this at the behest of the money power of the country.

What is the effect upon working men and especially railway employees to bind them to their tasks? The government goes in partnership with a corporation; the workingmen are intimidated. If there is a reduction of wages they submit; if unjust conditions are imposed they are silent. And what is the tendency? To demoralize, to degrade workmen until they have reached the ver dead line of degradation.

And how does it happen and why does it happen that corporations are never restrained? Are they absolutely law-abiding? Are they always right? Do they never transgress the law, or is it because the federal judges are their creatures? Certain it is that the united voice of labor in this country would be insufficient to name a federal judge.

Money in the Courts.

If all the common people united and asked for the appointment of a federal judge their voice would not be heeded any more than if it were the chirp of a cricket. Money talks. Yes, money talks. And I have no hesitancy in declaring that money has even invaded — or the influence, the power conferred by money has invaded — the Supreme Court and left that august tribunal reeking with more stench than Coleridge discovered in Cologne, and left all the people wondering how it was ever to be deodorized. There is something wrong in the country. The judicial nets are so adjusted as to catch the minnows and let the whales slip through, and the federal judge is as far removed from the common people as if he inhabited another planet. As Boyle O'Reilly would say:

His pulse, if you felt it, throbbed apart
From the common pulse of the people's heart.¹⁰

They are not in touch with the common people. Their people, their social environment, is altogether influenced by wealth. It enters into their very being. They are not answerable to the people. Jefferson declared more than a century ago that they would enlarge their pow-

¹⁰ Couplet from "Three Graves" (1886), by **John Boyle O'Reilly** (1844-1890).

ers and encroach upon the citizens until finally they would be a menace to the Republic, and the prophecy has been literally fulfilled and the encroachment will continue as long as the people will continue to submit. Despotism is a condition of non-resistance by the people to the encroachment of tyranny and to the exact extent that people will submit, their rights will be encroached upon, and at last they will be in complete subjection.

I do not believe, however, that the spirit of '76 has been entirely extinguished. I believe that in the due course of time American manhood will assert itself. A great many people cry out against labor organizations — denounce the strike, condemn the strikers. They do not know, nor do any of them care to know, that back of the strike there is an almost interminable succession of wrongs. If there is a railroad strike and a man is stopped on his journey, he damns the strikers.

Troubles of Their Own.

The public has no time to inquire into these wrongs that are gnawing at the base of society. They have got troubles enough of their own in this age of sharp competition. They know nothing about the condition of the great masses of people. They only know there is something wrong when their pocketbooks or their finances are touched, and then their verdicts are almost invariably against the striker. These are unfortunate conditions. A great many people say: "I have no use for strikers; they riot; they create disorder." But of the organization, but for the strike, American workmen would be infinitely worse off than they are. (*Applause.*)

Jefferson once said: "God have mercy on us if we ever reach a point when the American has no longer that spirit of resistance to tyranny," and Patrick Henry said that resistance to tyranny is obedience to God. (*Applause.*)

It sometimes becomes the choice between tyranny and degradation, and when that time comes I believe in a strike. As a general proposition I am opposed to them. But there is a condition worse than being out of employment, and that is being out of manhood. I would rather be out of work than to be a spineless, crawling creature on the face of the earth. I propose to keep on good terms with myself if I have nothing to do. I am not going to be in the condition of the fellow who looked in the glass and turned away in disgust, saying, "I know that fellow very well." I am not going to be in the predicament

of that fellow who, when about to wake up in the night, said: "My God! There is nobody in this room!" (*Laughter.*)

Here again tonight let me remind you my friends that we live under a striking government. At Lexington, where the shot was fired that was heard round the world, and from Concord clear to Lexington there was one continuous succession of strikes. Against what? Against tyranny and oppression. For what? For liberty, for independence, and had it not been for the magnificent courage and patriotism of the fathers in striking for their rights, we would be British subjects tonight instead of sovereign American citizens. I want to see the spirit of resistance increased.

A century ago there were Tories, and we have them among us still — those who wanted peace at any price, who were willing to accept degrading conditions, willing to be humiliated, willing to sacrifice the colonial honor, their integrity, their manhood. And they said so to Washington and Franklin and Jefferson and Paine and the rest of those anarchists and demagogues and agitators. (*Applause.*) Washington was called a demagogue in his day, he was vilified as no other President of the United States ever was. He is a demigod today. The difference between a demagogue and a demigod is about a century. There were those who appealed to them and said, "if you continue this agitation it will result in war and bloodshed." Then they said, "If we have got to have war to achieve our independence, let us have it now, that our children and our children's children may enjoy the blessings of peace." They were not merely strikers and law-breakers, but they resorted to violence and to riot and the destruction of property. Hancock and his compatriots did not hesitate to dress up as Indians and go down to Boston Harbor and dump the tea into the harbor. It is a good thing that Judge Woods didn't preside in that day. (*Laughter and applause and a voice, "Or Judge [Augustus J.] Ricks."*)

Mothers Also Strikers.

And then what about the Revolutionary mothers? They were not strikers — they were boycotters. They said, "We will not drink another drop of imported tea." They were filled with that sublime spirit of resistance that gives liberty and independence and all other things of good report among men. Precisely so with the labor organizations of our day. The labor organization is a product of tyranny and oppression. If all employers of labor had always treated their employees

fairly and justly paid them in even-handed measure and value for their toil, there would not be a labor organization on the face of the continent, not one. (*Applause. A voice: "Nor a millionaire."*)

In organizing labor simply emulates the example of capital, and all it is asking for today is just a fair chance. It doesn't ask for any special legislation, it doesn't ask for any privileges or favors; all it asks for is an equal, even chance at life. The capitalists are all combined — they act in unison and harmony in all matters touching their interest and in this regard they are immensely in advance of the workingmen, who are often divided into factions, so busy in waging war upon one another that they have no time to do anything for the common good.

But as I say, we are making progress, and the universal unrest and discontent that pervades the country is to me the most cheering sign of the times. And if under present conditions the workingmen are content, I should be without a hope, and in all the horizon of the future I should not see one star. But unrest precedes agitation; agitation means education; education means emancipation. Sometimes when I strain my vision just the slightest it seems to me that I can see the first faint glimpse of the dawning of a better day. (*Applause.*)

Walpole Lied.

But there are those who denounce those engaged in this sort of agitation as demagogues and cranks and impostors, and they do not hesitate to declare that the men who are officially connected with the various organizations of the day never rise above self-interest. They believe with Walpole that every man has his price.¹¹ A scoundrel can not possibly conceive of an honest man; no man can rise above his own conception.

When Walpole made that declaration he lied. He had his price or he never would have conceived of that infamous falsehood. There are men in the world above corrupting influences, and you find them in every walk of life. They are the men who are the salt of the earth and the light of the world and who are to hew the way to freedom.

¹¹ "Every man has his price" is an aphorism attributed to a 1734 speech by British Prime Minister **Robert Walpole** (1676-1745), who allegedly remarked of politicians offering flowery patriotic oratory, "All those men have their price." Walpole's line was first published in a biography produced decades after the alleged utterance. The line should be regarded as apocryphal to Walpole, rather being a witticism of ancient origin.

And there are those who have no patience with any man who is identified with any kind of a reform. They frown upon every effort that is made in that direction. They have neither time nor inclination to listen to a word that may be said in that direction. I read about one of them the other day. They built a church at his very door, but he wasn't in it. They brought him a scheme for relieving the poor, but he wasn't in it. "Let them work for themselves and take care of their money as I have done," he said. But a hearse went up the street one day, and he was in it, and the funeral trappings made quite a display — and he was in it. St. Peter met him with book and bell: "Well, my friend, let me see your ticket..... Your elevator goes down in a minute." (*Laughter.*)

Solved by Intelligence.

Now what are we going to do about it? As I have already said, I am in favor of education. I believe in the uplifting, the emancipating, and the sublimating power of intelligence. These questions are to be solved by intelligence. I admit that it is a big question. In my judgment no man, not even the tallest intellect, can define a social system for the future. A social system is a matter of growth, of evolution, of development. It is growing every day; every hunger-pang is helping it forward, every trust is doing something in that direction. (*A voice: "They are digging their own graves."*) Yes, they are digging their own graves, and they will fill them before long.

There are some phases of the question, however, that are perfectly simple and easy of comprehension and easy of adjustment. For instance, why do we not take possession of the telegraphs of our country? We are the only civilized nation on the face of the globe that does not own its own telegraph system. The United States and four or five 10th-rate republics in South America are the only countries in the world where the telegraph is operated for private profit instead of for the public weal. If I sent a telegram from here to California, I have to pay 10 cents a word. In England you can send a telegram any distance for a cent a word, and the telegraph is more than self-sustaining. The Western Union Telegraph Company is capitalized for \$100 million, and the very best authorities inform us that we can duplicate the system for \$25 million. They have declared dividends as high as 400 percent upon their investment. Their employees are the worst paid employees in the country. An operator used to be considered a skilled

artisan and used to get fair wages; a great many of them are now working for from \$20 to \$25 a month. Men are being displaced and children put in their places. The great American people are compelled to pay extortionate prices for communicating with one another.

This ought to be a function of government — the telegraph ought to be operated in the interest of the people. And, why not? What objection can possibly be made to it? Just imagine the advantages that would flow out from government ownership of telegraphs. The telegraph system would be indefinitely improved. We would send 20 messages where we send one now. We would want more lines, more employees, and a better service and a reduced cost. But we continue to permit a monopoly to take possession of and control this all-important function of our government.

Buy the Railroads.

What is true of the telegraph is true of the railroads. (Applause.) A great many businessmen say these railroad strikes are disastrous and a menace to public business, to the business interests of the country. What are we going to do to avert them? Just take possession of the railroads and the question is solved. But they say, "We can not afford to buy the railroads." That admission is a fatal one. Do you mean to tell me that the 70 million of our population can not afford a luxury that a few people, a handful, indulge in? I don't believe that; I don't believe there is anything on American soil that the American people can not afford to own. And the railroads would not be such an expensive investment after you had the water squeezed out of them.

Secretary Cobb of the Santa Fe investigating committee said the other day that there was not a railroad company in the United States that was not violating the Interstate Commerce law every day of its existence. They have forms of secret rebates, of which the favored shippers get the advantage. When they made an examination of the affairs of the Santa Fe system, they found that \$7 million had disappeared. Mr. [Joseph] Reinhart was president of the company. He was permitted to retire. He is in social clover today up to his ears. Wealth, like charity, covers a multitude of sins. And what was done about it? Nothing. The great trusts and combinations have their secret branches.

There is specific charge made on the Northern Pacific system by Brayton Ives against the receivers.¹² There was no attention paid to it. They are the favored classes who enjoy the benefits of that discrimination that is prohibited by the Interstate Commerce law, and when it comes to a matter of travel, the rich men ride on passes, the middle classes have mileage, poor people pay full fare.

And I am one of those who believe in going still further. I have arrived at the conclusion that as long as a vestige of the wage system remains there is no escape from these slavish conditions. (*A voice: "There you touch anarchism."*) The machine has invaded every department of activity. It is displacing men by the thousands and tens of thousands, and the machine is said to be designed to bless the world. The machine is becoming more and more perfect every day, and it to a large extent reproduces itself.

People Own the Machine.

I have just received a telegram from London saying that a typesetting machine has been perfected that sets the type of 20 compositors. If that be true, what is to become of the compositors of the country? Some people say let them go into other occupations. But the workmen are becoming more numerous and the places to work are becoming less. In the march of invention machinery is to do the work of the world, and when that time comes the man who owns the machine will be the master of the world. I want the people to own the machines. (*A voice: "There is socialism for you."*)

As long as a workingman is compelled to work for such wages as his employer will allow him, under such conditions as his employer may impose, he is a slave. Call him a sovereign American citizen if you will, but he is a slave. Put yourself in that position. (*A voice: "We are there now."*) and see if that is not literally true. Not only this, as long as men are competing with each other for a place to work, and the number of competitors is steadily increasing, the tendency of wages will be downward and it will continue downward until the starvation point is reached. (*A voice: "It is there now."*) And no matter how humane or how just or even how generous the employing classes may be, that is a fact in the nature of things, and the steady reduction of wages is inevitable.

¹² **Brayton Ives** (1840-1914) was President of the Northern Pacific Railroad from 1893 to 1896.

Now, I agree entirely with the worth chairman of the evening when he says that we want to reduce the number of hours that constitute a day's labor. (*Applause.*) The rights of a single individual are as sacred as the rights of all the rest combined, and if there is a single man in the Republic who is denied the right to exchange his toil for the necessaries of life, there is slavery in our country. (*Applause.*) With three or four [million?] others out of work, with a vast number of others who are working for a miserable pittance, we still find that in some of the factories, mines, mills, and shops of the country, men, women, and children are working from 12 to 16 hours a day.

There is no trouble about wealth or resources. We have them in fabulous abundance. What we want is a more equitable system of distribution. We want all men to have a fair chance in life. That was the theory of the government when it was founded. We don't want any privileged or any favored classes. We want no special privileges accorded by legislation or otherwise; but we do want to remove the handicap and give men an equal chance and an equal opportunity.

Four Hours a Day.

Now, then, I am one of those who believe that if four hours a day will do the work of the world, let four hours constitute a day's work. (*Great applause.*) It does not matter to me what you call it. I believe in it. I want work for all men. In the city of Cleveland there is a given amount of work to do and a given number of men to do it. Put them all to work and hey can do it in about four or five hours a day, and it will be done just as well, if not better, than it is being done now.

We are sometimes told that the country is suffering from over-production. There was never such a thing in the world. Give every man in Cleveland a good suit of clothes tonight and there won't be anything left in the stores; and fill all their stomachs and the grocers will have to send in more orders.

When men are out of work — and there are millions in that condition — they don't consume anything, they subsist upon charity. They have no money with which to buy anything and in that exact proportion consumption lessens. Others are remanded to idleness. With improved machinery they can turn out coal enough in three or four months to meet the demands of the market for a year. They run the mines three or four months and then there is a lockout until the men are compelled to come back on any terms the company may af-

fix. Mr. [John D.] Rockefeller took possession of the key of a very important storehouse of nature and said, "Whoever wants oil must pay tribute to me." He fixes the price of oil absolutely and you have got to pay his price, and he pays his employees wages fixed by himself and his corporations. There is no appeal from his decisions.

Now, I don't see what right a man has to station himself at a storehouse of nature and take possession of what was designed for the use of all mankind. (*Applause.*) And then Mr. Rockefeller increases, as he did last year, the price of kerosine from 20 to 40 percent and makes about \$40 million by the operation. Then he gave the University of Chicago \$3 million and the whole world applauded. A great many people said, "Behold the modest philanthropist." I am not inclined to indulge in harsh names. I don't discuss Mr. Rockefeller personally — if we were in his place we would probably do as he is doing. He gives the University of Chicago \$3 million — a mere pittance. I have a high appreciation of the educational institutions of our country, but I wouldn't want to get my education in such an institution. (*Applause.*) There is not an element of philanthropy in it. What would you think of a Jesse James University (*Laughter.*) or of a Captain Kidd College? The methods differ in kind as well as degree. Mr. Rockefeller and his corporations are enabled to extort these vast sums of money from the American people by legal processes compared to which grand larceny is a glittering virtue. I want it so that all the people will take possession of the oil fields and then build their own university. (*Applause.*)

Making Headway.

But, I say again, we are making a little headway. The resistance is increasing. The opposition intensifies every day. There is a healthy public sentiment abroad; it is acquiring new force every day; it is beginning to crystallize. We are much in the position of the Republican Party in 1858, when Lincoln made his great speech at Chicago. There were a million and a half men who had already voted for reform. They differed about a great many propositions. Some were in favor of the total abolition of slavery, some others wanted conditional abolition, but they were all for reform. They were united upon one thing only, and that was upon what they didn't want. Lincoln made his great speech and he said, "Be patient and do not falter now, because

we are to succeed in the near future.”¹³ And two years after, notwithstanding they were then torn into factions, two years afterwards that reform sentiment swept the country and slavery was extirpated from our soil. (*Applause.*)

Precisely so with the reform sentiment of this day. We differ about a great many matters simply because none of us comprehend them clearly. But we are getting new light. We want still more light; we all have the same end in view, but we are traveling upon different lines. But that there is to be a radical change in our social, in our industrial system in the near future, I have not the slightest doubt. Lincoln said, “You can fool all of the people some of the time, and some of the people all of the time, but you can’t fool all the people all the time.”¹⁴ And if the immortal emancipator were still living he would be on our side in this great contest. (*Applause.*) His startling prophecy is being fulfilled.

You remember that Jefferson said, “We want a government in which there shall be no extremely rich and no extremely poor.”¹⁵ WE have them both. And Lincoln said that there was every indication of the development, the expansion of the money power that should subvert and destroy the liberty of the people. But the very factors that apparently threatened society are factors in the revolutionary processes that are to bring on the better day.

I am one of those who believe that what we call the wage system, that is to say the feudal system, that is to say the slave system, is in the last throes of dissolution. And I believe that we are getting together in a little closer touch. I believe that men fraternize more than they did a little while ago. They are becoming more tolerant of one another’s views; they are beginning to reason together in a spirit of true humanity; they are beginning to take an inventory of their resources; they are beginning to map out the lines of progress; they are mustering the reform forces. And to me it is perfectly clear that in the very near fu-

¹³ **Abraham Lincoln** (1809-1865) did not utter these words in his frequently-cited Chicago speech of July 10, 1858.

¹⁴ The connection of this witticism to Lincoln is apocryphal. Published sourcing traces the “Lincoln said” connection back to the 1880s, when the attribution was made at two different Prohibition Party conventions.

¹⁵ **Thomas Jefferson’s** exact words were, “Let us found a government where there shall be no extremely rich men and no abjectly poor ones. Let us found a government upon the intelligence of the people and the equitable distribution of property. Let us make laws where there shall be no government partnership with favored classes....”

ture they are to vote their way from bondage to emancipation. (*Applause.*)

Lowell said:

They are slaves who fear to speak
For the fallen and the weak;
They are slaves who weakly choose
Hatred, scoffing, and abuse,
Rather than in silence shrink
From the truth they needs must think;
They are slaves who dare not be
In the right with two or three.¹⁶

A Broader Humanity.

Lowell also said, "He is true to God who is true to man."¹⁷ And we agitators are simply asking for a broader humanity. We are believers in the brotherhood of man. It does sometimes seem as if the lust for gold has eaten the heart out of humanity; that in this mad pursuit of the almighty dollar we forget the better and nobler things of life.

When the question is asked how much a man is worth, do we allude to integrity and intelligence and benevolence and kindness, and all those beautiful qualities that dignify and glorify men? Not at all. We have reference to the amount of money he controls. Money is of vastly more importance than manhood. Men are weighed according to their possessions, and if you would tell me how much money a man has got I can almost determine what degree he marks on the social thermometer.

But in the world of labor the conditions are changed, and there is every reason why we should look confidently on the future. The splendid prophecy of Burns will yet be fulfilled; in the world of labor at least we are beginning to estimate men according to their character. More than a century ago Burns sang of the quality of men, and in that song there are all the stars and stripes that are in the American flag:

A man's a man for a' that * * *
An honest man, though e'er so poor,

¹⁶ From "Stanzas on Freedom" (1849) by **James Russell Lowell** (1819-1891).

¹⁷ Line from the poem "On the Capture of Fugitive Slaves Near Washington" (July 1845).

We believe in the philosophy of Burns. We believe that a man can only help himself by helping his fellow men; that we are dependent upon one another; that we should have a thought, a care for our fellows, and especially for those who are less fortunate than ourselves. Suppose that I am born with superior mental endowments, keen foresight, good judgment and business capacity, and I am enabled to take advantage of my surroundings because of my superiority over my fellow men. Suppose I have a half-witted brother who has the brand of inferiority upon him, who is unable to provide himself with the common necessities of life. He is as little responsible for his condition as I am for mine, as little to blame as I am entitled to credit. What kind of a man would I be if I were to surround myself with wealth and riot and revel in luxury and let my brother starve to death?

We look upon the human race as constituting one family. Every man who is in the right, regardless of his color or conditions, or who is trying to be in the right, is my brother. (*Applause.*) I believe in the brotherhood of man. I believe in looking beyond the family boundary alone; looking out into the world, knowing something of all the unfortunate conditions that prevail, and giving ourselves the duty of doing what little we can to correct them.

A man can not afford to be mean and selfish and contemptible; life is too short. We are only here a little while — a few ticks of the pendulum of time and we pass from the scene of action. The world is not just, and is a long way from being generous, but it is getting to be a little better, and I believe that a labor day is coming when the workmen shall stand as free and independent as any in the land, and shall be rewarded for this toil of brain and hand. For the right is marching on.

I thank you from the depths of my heart for the patience and the kindness with which you have listened to me.

Edited with footnotes by Tim Davenport

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¹⁸ Excerpt from Burns' "For A' That and A' That."