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# For Bryan:

## Campaign Speech on Behalf of William Jennings Bryan, Cleveland — Oct. 27, 1896

[excerpts]

by Eugene V. Debs

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*No stump speaker ever came to this city in any campaign and was received with more genuine, enthusiastic, and honorable demonstration than Eugene V. Debs, who spoke at the Music Hall last night [Oct. 27, 1896]. Any man might well be proud of the homage he received.*

*The well known, probably the best known labor leader in the world spoke to a crowd in Music Hall larger than which ever assembled in that historic meeting place. An hour before DEbs began speaking the hall was packed with a sweltering humanity, for notwithstanding the coolness of the night air, the hall was stifling hot, particularly in the galleries, with as great an audience as the police would admit.*

*Even ten there were thousands outside fighting, yes, actually fighting, with the police for a chance to get into a political meeting.*

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*Five minutes before 8 o'clock Debs came in. A deafening roar greeted his coming and for five minutes — the limit of any average man's shouting strength — this din was continued. When their voices gave out the men stamped their feet. While this was going on, a delicate little woman stepped alongside of Debs' towering form and gave him a basket of flowers. She represented the girls that work in the Mason steam laundry, which was organized and established some four years ago as the result of a strike in which the girls were defeated. That strike, however, resulted in the founding of a cooperative concern which has prospered and given*

*them better employment than they had. Debs, when he spoke here two years ago, referred very kindly to them and they reciprocated by sending him the basket of flowers last night.*

*After the uproar subsided, Debs spoke in part as follows:*

Mr. Chairman, Gentlemen and Fellow Workingmen:—

My heart is with you. (*Applause.*) The campaign now drawing to an end is by far the most important ever fought in this country. This is a conflict between American manhood and British gold, between man and the dollar. The dollar has ruled long enough. Under the gold standard, born in 1873, 2 million American workingmen have been reduced to the condition of beggars. Lincoln said man was born before the dollar. Now the man is on his bended knees asking for the privilege of living.

The gold standard was born in 1873, the same year the American tramp was born. The gold standard has made him a permanent institution on American soil. There are 3 million of him. He has grown into a grand army. His march, tramp, tramp, has grown into a funeral march to the grave. Many despise the tramp. Through his rags, through his squalor, I can see the [outlines] of a man. (*Applause.*)

I plead for no human sympathy. I ask office from no one. Labor can give me no office. I prefer to remain free and speak the truth. The palpitating, the quivering heart of humanity demands consideration from all true men.

Gold has ruled for 3,000 years. Twenty-five years ago employer and employee worked together and their differences were easily settled. The hear of each was open to the other. Gold has no conscience, no heart. So long as this conditions prevailed there was heart in employers. Then came the corporation. Ten men each with \$100,000 form a corporation. They had ten hearts. The corporation has none. Ten hearts, any one of which would not be responsible for the suffering that has been caused by that corporation.

This conflict is between the heartless aggregation of wealth on the one hand and humanity on the other. It is not a struggle between Republicans, Democrats, or Populists, but between plutocracy and democracy, between the Pullmans (*Hisses.*), the Carnegies, the Fricks, and the Hannas (*Hisses.*) — somebody says do not do him an injus-

tice. I can't do him an injustice. Had I the colors of a Michelangelo, the language of a [John] Milton and a [Victor] Hugo combined, I could not do him justice. Between this element and human liberty is the contest.

Wealth is not the test of a man. That magnificent democrat, Death, entered the home of a Vanderbilt. He didn't send up his card. The doctors were there. He pushed them aside and told that palpitating heart to stop. In half a second that multimillionaire was no better than the lowest mendicant in the land. Remember that shrouds have no pockets. (*Applause.*) But that is what they propose to make the test of American citizenship.

It is the corporation that is everything and nothing. They are the ones who think they are interested in the maintenance of the existing gold standard. It is that element which is endeavoring to coerce you. Major McKinley says it is cooperation. Yes, it is the cooperation of the lamb and the wolf. (*Laughter.*) He says they are cooperating. Perhaps he doesn't know the kind of cooperation it is. Perhaps he doesn't know that the cooperation is to increase millionaires and increase pauperism.

McKinley does not represent himself, and the Republican Party doesn't trust the American people. Let us do no injustice to the Major. When Mark Hanna bought that \$118,000 worth of McKinley's notes he was not actuated by philanthropic motives. Oh, no. Mr. Hanna and those associated with him saw the promising Presidential timber; they knew well enough that if popular favor continued it would land him in the President's chair. A man in that chair is useful to plutocracy, but before he will serve plutocracy he must be under obligations to it. McKinley is under obligations.

What is it that Hanna's mortgaged Major promises? A higher tariff tax and confidence. (*Laughter.*) They say we are suffering from a lack of confidence. That lack of confidence, they say, has come from the free silver agitation. Oh, God! I say, Oh, God, reverently, and I wish all the people of this land could hear me. A monetary system that cannot stand the effect of agitation! What a thing to say to an intelligent people, that because they chose to talk about their money system they are plunged into misery, into degradation, into oppression. Oh, God, what will they not say in this campaign?

By higher taxation they are to restore confidence. For 23 years we have been following their leadership. That is what we are promised.

Every glistening tear upon the face, every suffering child pleads to us for the election of William Jennings Bryan. (*Long, continued applause.*) They call Bryan an anarchist. (*Applause.*) Who calls him an anarchist and who calls us anarchists? Trace it back to its source and you will find it comes from every stock jobber, every grain speculator, every foreign and domestic shylock, every oppressor of the poor — all yelling “Anarchist!” at Bryan and every man on the side of humanity. McKinley stands for British gold; Bryan stands for humanity. (*Applause.*) McKinley stands for a despotism; Bryan for constitutional liberty. (*Applause.*)

They say free coinage is wholly in favor of the silver mine operator. I believe the *Cleveland Leader* asked me some questions. (*Hisses.*) No, don't hiss. When I was here a year ago the *Leader* treated me very fairly and I want to be equally fair. The *Leader* wants to know what good 53-cent dollars will do the workingman. If you working men get 53-cent dollars you can pay them out again, can't you? You owe your wages before you get them, don't you? If they are 53-cent dollars, where is the benefit to the silver mine owners? (*Applause.*) Then that paper wants to know about benefit to railroad men. I simply want to refer that paper to Henry Clay Caldwell, a federal judge, the only federal judge who ever opened his courtroom to the workingman. He says that if the Union Pacific affairs had been managed properly that road could have paid decent wages and would not have been compelled to cut their wages.

Railroads still charge three cents a mile when you ride. (*A voice: “Except when you go to Canton.” Laughter.*) I think there are some railroad men here (*A chorus of “Yes, yes!” and several hundred men rose up.*) and you will bear me out in saying that railroads have doubled the capacity of their engines and cars. They do twice as much work with half as many crews and yet they claim they are unable to pay decent wages. They can't pay decent wages and interest upon mountains of bonds issued on watered stock. (*Applause.*) Interest must be paid first, wages last. When Bryan is President you railroad men will not be afraid to attend meetings. He will keep them so busy obeying the laws that they will overlook you. (*Applause.*) Every man who fears the laws will be enforced is crying “Anarchy!” and chief among these are the manipulators of wrecked railroads. (*Applause.*)

It is becoming so now that a man who does nothing to earn the title Anarchist is a just subject of suspicion. (*Laughter.*) I repeat, this campaign is a conflict between the dollar and humanity, between patriotism and plutocracy, over which stands the sad and tragic face of Abraham Lincoln as a constant benediction. He came from the people, he sympathized with them. The New York press hailed him as a freak from the morasses of Illinois and the Boston press said a kangaroo had escaped from his keepers in the West. They are saying practically the same thing with regard to Bryan.

There were Tories during the revolutionary war. There are Tories now. (*Applause.*) They said we couldn't achieve independence and liberty in 1776. Greene's soldiers tramping barefoot through the Carolinas to help Washington was their answer.<sup>1</sup> Their rifles wore through their clothing. They put bunches of grass on their shoulders. Their arms wore through that and their blood marked their path to answer the objection that the 13 weak and disorganized colonies were not strong enough to achieve their independence.

The Republican Party says we are not strong enough to achieve our monetary independence without the permission of Europe. Let me tell you the European sovereigns never demonetized silver for the benefit of the moneyed class, for the purpose of entering into an international agreement to permit America to restore silver to its position as a standard money. (*Applause.*) Since 1878 we have had a law on our statute books inviting an international agreement. The invitation has been treated with contempt. Still that is the hope Hanna's mortgaged Major holds out to you, knowing full well, as he does, that an international agreement is not among the probabilities, scarcely a possibility. (*Applause.*)

In the march of this money power it has usurped all the functions of government. It comes from its den and robs the American citizen. Nowadays a man lives by permission of the money power. It was my turn to live in jail a while ago, and it may be your turn next.

If a Hanna were tried for one of his innumerable crimes I would insist upon his receiving a trial by jury. People are losing confidence in courts because courts are no longer courts of justice. Men no longer stand upon the basis of equality. Rags are dominated by robes.

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<sup>1</sup> General **Nathanael Greene** (1742-1786) was commander of the Southern Department of the Continental Army during the American revolutionary war.

The millionaire makes the judge, the judge makes the law, and the law crushes the rags. Only the poor go to jail.

It is a question of humanity. the heart of every man and every woman must be touched in the presence of corrosive, corrupting influence of centralized wealth. Yes, do anything you like. Strike down your fellow man, destroy the virtue of your sister, pollute the fountain of all the streams of human happiness, be a monster, be a criminal, do as you like — have money and go free. But woe unto you if yo are a moneyless man. Have no money and steal a garment with which to protect the shivering form of your wife, and go to jail. It is that which is involved in the campaign, a campaign of humanity, of the heart, of the intellect, against the aggressive march of human greed.

If you are enormously rich you may trample under foot the laws of man and debauch the Supreme Court. They have invaded Congress. They have entered the Christian pulpit, they have touched the robed minister at the altar; they freeze his heart and blotch his soul and send him forth a traitor to his consecrated vows, with the price of his treason in his pocket. The pulpit no longer dares to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ. There are magnificent exceptions, but like Christ they have found themselves like the Divine Tramp. In the early days f the slavery agitation Wendell Phillips said: “They have prostituted the pulpit.”

Christ, in all his beautiful, self-denying life, never had one dollar. In this respect he differs materially from Archbishop Ireland.<sup>2</sup> This priest of Christ, who has time enough to accumulate \$1 million, has no real sympathy with the suffering poor. He is one of those who have, by reason of his priestly robe, authority to press down upon the brow of labor a crown of thorns. Some people may think this irrelevant, but I do not think so. Christ was a poor man. In all his life he never turned his bak upon the poor. He met the poor, suffered and sympathized with them. You remember how he received the poor, sinful woman and stayed the mob that wished to stone her. “Let him who is without guilt cast the first stone,” he said to them.<sup>3</sup> That first stone was not cast and it never will be.

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<sup>2</sup> **John Ireland** (1838-1918) was the first Catholic Archbishop of St. Paul, Minnesota.

<sup>3</sup> *John*, chapter 8, verse 7, which reads: “So when they continued asking him, he lifted up himself, and said unto them, He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone at her.

In conclusion, Debs spoke for his friend, George H. Gordon, and referred to the Brown strike in general terms, saying that the strikers fought for the right of petition, and asked his hearers to put themselves in their places. He marveled that soldiers were called out only to quiet workingmen and wondered if they are always wrong, that they should always be the destination of the bullet. He closed with an appeal to each man to take stock of his patriotism and voted as his heart dictated on Nov. 3.

Bryan, he said, is a man above the ability of money to corrupt, fresh from the hearts of the people, diligent to their service, and fully fitted to be the highest officer in the land.

*Edited with footnotes by Tim Davenport*

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