
Speech in Houston, Texas

September 25, 1896

by Eugene V. Debs

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Had the weather been more propitious the Auditorium would have been crowded last night [Sept. 25, 1896] to hear the speech of Eugene V. Debs. This is inferred from the large audience that assembled there, despite the rain and slush. Nor was the audience composed entirely of the laboring classes. Lawyers, doctors, and merchants were there and a few ladies even ventured out to hear the great labor orator. And those who were there were well repaid for braving the elements, for Mr. Debs' speech was instructive and entertaining, and his style was a pretty piece of word painting. A committee from the Houston Labor Council accompanied the speaker to the stage and he was introduced by Mr. Spangar.

His speech was confined exclusively to a treatment of the labor problem and did not contain any reference whatever to the present absorbing topic of politics. He asserted that there were thousands of men in the country not able to find work at all. Women were taking their places in the factories. Many children are employed in these factories at 75 cents per week. He believed every child should have the advantage of education. While these children all work, the father, as a rule, is tramping around drunk. There are thousands of our brothers who are victims of man's inhumanity to men.

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I have no prejudice against the rich, not in the least. I am simply discussing conditions. The extremely rich of this country are as much the abnormal product of an abnormal system as are the extremely poor. I sometimes think they are as much to be pitied. The life of many of them is a hollow mockery. The man who seeks to accumulate more money than he can use is mak-

ing a mistake and sometimes the penalty of that mistake is his life.

Jay Gould died 20 years in advance of his time simply because he had too much money. In this country of ours, the most favored beneath the skies, there is no trouble about wealth or about resources. We have them in fabulous abundance. The trouble is about the distribution. No man in this world ever made a million dollars honestly. No man in this world can show a good title for that amount of money. It may have been wrung from those who produced it, by legal methods, but it is piracy nonetheless.

There is no wrong in the system under which we live, but it so happens that they who produce all the wealth of the world have little or nothing to show for it, and they who produce little or nothing have it all. More than a century ago we achieved our political independence. The divine right of kings and the crown and scepter were relegated to oblivion. The servants became the masters. We have our political independence, but we are in the grasp of industrial servitude. American workingmen under the present system to a very large extent are compelled to work for such wages as the corporations see fit to impose. If I am obliged to work for a man under conditions fixed by that man, that man is my owner I am that man's slave. I may boast of being a sovereign citizen, but I am a slave nonetheless. As a matter of course corporations say, "If you are not satisfied you can quit." And what does that mean? The right to quit nowadays means the right to starve. The corporations well know that there are millions of workingmen in the market. They know that they can reduce wages.

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This country is dominated by combined syndicates and trusts.

Just a little while ago, in the city of Indianapolis, a few glass manufacturers held their meeting. They concluded to restrict the production of window glass. What for? To increase the price. In order to do this they concluded to close their factories for a period of four months. This resulted in the dismissal of 15,000 operatives. For the sake of increasing their profits they threw out of employment 15,000 workingmen, which, allowing three to each family, we have 60,000 people thrown upon the world without resources to satisfy the insatiate private greed. Upon the one hand this little combine of glass manufacturers fix the price of glass absolutely, and the American people are compelled to pay

that price; upon the other hand they fix the price of wages and the workingmen are compelled to accept that wage. They are masters of the situation and from their decisions there is no appeal.

What are the workingmen going to do in such a situation as that? This is not only true of the glass manufacturers; it is true of the operatives in every department of labor in this country. It is true very largely of the railroad employees of this country.

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Labor has organized simply in the interest of self-protection. The railroads are organized; then why not their employees? They organize to fix rates and salaries and why not the employees organize in their own interests?

As to the Pullman strike he said very few people knew the causes that led to it. He cited the conditions at Pullman, where everything was owned and controlled by the Pullmans. These laborers could not leave Pullman, because Pullman kept them constantly in debt to him for rent. No such misery ever existed anywhere as at Pullman just preceding the strike of May 1894. Wages were reduced until the operatives became more and more in debt. He referred to the discharge of the committee that simply waited on Mr. Pullman for a redress of their wrongs. When they were discharged, the entire force of labor quit. They appealed to the people of Chicago, who tried to adjust matters, but the Pullman Company said there was nothing to arbitrate. They feared an investigation of the matter and declined to have it. The American Railway Union then declined to handle Pullman cars and this brought on the general strike. But the railroads stopped the cars and not the strikers, as they refused to run their trains unless the Pullman cars were carried. In five days' time all the railroads were stopped. The railroads immediately swore in 4,200 deputy United States marshals, who were a lot of thugs, cutthroats, and thieves. They burned up and pillaged the cars and incited riots. Up to this time the public was in sympathy with the strikers, but they were blamed for this and public sentiment was by the press, etc., turned against them.

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He referred to his incarceration as in violation of the constitution and the abrogation of the right of trial by jury. Corporations are not

restrained because they seem to be above law. He admitted that there were many honest judges, but in this day the courts were, as a rule, so corrupt that they were purchasable.

As a matter of course I do not declare that all courts are corrupt, because that is not true. There are very many honest, upright judges who administer the law impartially. In the presence of such a judge I doff my hat; I pay to him the tribute of my admiration and respect. But there are courts in this country where justice is a purchasable quantity and you can commit any crime you choose and escape the consequences if you have money enough. There is something radically wrong in such a state of affairs under which such injustice is possible, but I would not have you believe that I take a gloomy view of the situation.

The courts were the best managers of railroads. When a railroad became wrecked and bankrupted through bad management it was put in the hands of a receiver and thus turned over to the government. Hence the government was a sort of railroad repair shop and they managed wrecked roads so well as to create the suspicion in the minds of many people that the management of all the roads should be turned over to the government.

He referred to the judge who sent a tramp to prison for life for stealing one cent from a mail carrier and a millionaire banker to the penitentiary for two years for robbing a band of a million dollars. The difference between these two men was simply a million dollars. None but the poor go to jail. He spoke from experience.

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He painted the following picture of the tramp:

There is very little sympathy for the tramp, but my heart always goes out to them. Some of them become tramps, and when they are reduced to that level society closes its doors against them. Through his rags I can still see the outline of the man. I happen to know how some of these tramps are made. He loses his position through no fault of his own; he looks about for work and can not find it. After awhile he gets three or four hundred miles from home; his last dollar is gone; he is a stranger among strangers, and his clothes begin to get seedy. Those who pass him on the street look upon him with suspicion. The realization comes that in this world there is no place for him. His sensibilities

become blunted. His self-respect deserts him. At long range he can see the little cottage he left behind, and in his fancy he sees his wife in anguish over his non-appearance, and his little children crying for food. He is a tramp on the face of the earth. It is only a few short steps from that condition to crime. Such a man is entitled to all the sympathy and pity we can bestow upon him.

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Not long ago in the city of London all those who were out of employment met at Trafalgar Square. The police were ordered to disperse them and when they charged upon them those unemployed men gave three cheers for Jesus Christ.

Some people declared that they were irreverent and profane. I deny it. In this world they had no sympathy, but they remembered that Christ was the friend of the friendless, that Christ was the divine tramp of the universe. If Christ ever had a dollar history gives no authentic account of it. Christ did not despise the poor and unfortunate, and He did not only preach to them, but He fed them. He pitied the unfortunate and his sympathy went out to the erring. You remember that the rabble pursued the woman who had been guilty of the unpardonable sin, just as Christians are pursuing her today, and you remember that Christ cried out, "Let him who is without sin cast the first stone," and although century after century has been rolled up in the scroll of the ages that stone has never yet been cast. That stone never will be cast.

The speaker did not have a very high regard for some of the ministers of the gospel:

There are many ministers of the gospel who preach everything but Christianity. The poor don't attend church because they can't afford the style that the churches of today put on.

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The labor question, he said, would never be settled until it is settled right.

It will not down in the presence of superior force or before the bayonet. It will never be settled till it is settled right, till every man has the right to work and the right to get what he earns. The workingman is not entirely blameless for existing conditions. They should make better use of their time by expanding their knowl-

edge. Knowledge will eventually free you from industrial bondage. Stay at home and read. The labor problem will never be settled in the saloon. Better buy books than beer.

He pictured the happy and ideal home life of the working man very eloquently. Those who think must govern those who toil. Mix some thought with your work.

He outlined the principles of organized labor. The trouble among working men is that they are too selfish. We are all necessary to one another.

He felt hopeful for the future. The workingmen had suffered, but they had profited by experience and were beginning to rely more on themselves. This ought to be the most prosperous land under the sun. If the conditions were only right every man would have employment.

He believed the present system was in the throes of dissolution. The machine was at work. Under present conditions men work for such compensation as corporations chose to give.

We are now in the grasp of industrial servitude. I have faith that in time, however, this great question will be settled and settled right. No man who has faith in himself and in his undertaking can ever fail. In the mad pursuit of money the very heart is being eaten out of our civilization. Man are not now measured by their character, but by what they are worth. We can help ourselves simply in proportion as we help ourselves.

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The speaker related the following incident and experience he had during his incarceration in jail:

I have one reason to thank Judge Wood for, and that is for having committed me to jail where I could be brought into close touch with the victims of social crime. Have you ever thought that only the poor go to jail? When I was in jail at Woodstock I had a fellow prisoner a man who was serving a year's sentence. He had been out of work and could not get any to do. He passed an old second hand store and there was an old cloak, worth about \$2, hanging outside. He thought of his wife, who was at home suffering for the want of a cloak, and, prompted by as human a motive as ever actuated a human heart, he took that cloak. He was caught in the act. It took just about five minutes to send him to jail for 12 months. Whenever I think of it, I ask, did he

go to jail for stealing the cloak or because he did not have money?



The speaker believed in woman's suffrage. He thought that politics would be purer than it is today could women exercise the right of franchise. This idea, however, was at present opposed to public opinion:

Some people say you should always respect public opinion. I wish to say tonight that I have little respect for what they call public opinion. It is very unreliable as a counselor or guide. Public opinion has sanctioned every outrage that has been perpetrated in this world, public opinion has justified every crime committed against humanity. I admit that public opinion in the course of time gets right, but it sometimes takes two or three thousand years, and that is too long for the average mortal to wait.

The speaker closed his remarks by reciting a poem called "Labor Day is Coming." In fact, his speech was interspersed with snatches of poetry, all of them used appropriately and well emphasized. His remarks were frequently interrupted with applause, and when he concluded his speech, which consumed about an hour and a half in its delivery, he was the subject of general congratulation.

Mr. Debs goes from here to Beaumont and is advertised to speak there tonight.

Edited by Tim Davenport

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