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“Reduced to a Walking Hunger Pang” :  
Speech at the Duquesne Wharf  
[excerpt]  
(August 5, 1897)

This vast assemblage bears testimony to the fact that the American people are aroused.<sup>1</sup> It shows that 150,000 men are protesting against starvation. It is a picture that makes men and angels weep. The miner has been reduced to a walking hunger pang and a fluttering rag. More than a century ago our ancestors took their stand for independence. It is time for us to continue that fight along new lines. In those days our leaders were styled “agitators.” It is the same problem working itself out.

We are not opposed to law. We are law-abiding citizens, but we object to the law being distorted in the interests of corporate capital and degrading us. Then we are not law-abiding citizens. Who are the lawbreakers? It is a notorious fact that corporate power respects no law, human or divine. The trusts are supreme above all law.

**Money Gives Immunity.**

Some people object to these famishing miners wanting others to quit work. Why? They surely went about it in a peaceful way. That is more than some of the trusts do. I know whereof I speak. The people of this country are fast losing faith in courts. Men no longer stand on an equality in the judicial chambers. They are held by the corporations. You can commit any crime if you have the money.

They tell me I must not be incendiary. Well, I won't. I don't have to be incendiary. I stand only on the ragged truth. And I will state that if I hang for it. The time has come to stop these injunctions. Labor has crawled long enough. It may be necessary to make some sacrifices, but remember that sacrifices are always essential to attain any end.

I hear much now about the sacred rights of property. You don't find anything about that in the Declaration of Independence. What about the rights of human beings? Remember the slave days? Well, where negroes

used to bring \$800, \$1,000, and higher, I am willing to wager that Pennsylvania miners wouldn't bring 15 cents a carload.

We are living today under a government of injunctions. It is the institution of power against the workingmen. I see they have been having lynchings out in Urbana, Ohio, as the result of some of them. Well, let the judges keep on issuing injunctions and they'll meet a similar fate.<sup>2</sup>

*Mr. Debs then talked for a short time on the benefit to be derived from the government control of railroads.*

The United States government has become a repair shop for wrecked railroads. If Uncle Sam can operate these railroads after they are wrecked, he could certainly run them when they are still in good condition.

### **Government by Injunction.**

*Then the injunction issue was taken up, and the speaker declared that the Supreme Court has usurped the law of the country. He quoted Choate,<sup>3</sup> Thomas Jefferson, and other public men in proving his assertions against rule by injunction.*

If the miners of this country are entitled to life and liberty, as the Declaration of Independence declares, then they are entitled to a living wage. It is their solemn duty to demand this in the face of all opposition, and to secure it in the face of all odds. Even a defeat of this cause would not settle the labor question. A question is never settled until it is settled right, in accordance with the principles of eternal justice. Remember the miners cannot be driven beyond a certain point. the workingman has been patient — too patient — and he has borne with many injustices. Yet the worm will turn, I say to you, beware. Your security is more fancied than real. If you compel it, you will have them “talk French” to you.<sup>4</sup>

You have the courts barred in your faces. You support the soldiers, and then they are called out to shoot your ragged bodies full of holes. Yet you have right as well as rags on your side.

Right among the church people you will find many enemies of the men. Some of the pillars of the church are the ones Christ scourged out of the temple. Then there are the politicians — other hirelings of the money power. You are responsible for that. (*“Yes, we know it,” said a voice from*

*the crowd.*) If they want anything, they kick labor and get it. If the sheriff were to put you in jail it would make his re-election more sure. For you forget all these things when election time comes. Oh, yes you do. Then the politicians come to you and call you a “horny-handed son of toil.” Then your enmity collapses and you vote for him.

### **Would Sell Out Cheap.**

It’s the same old story. They tell you you have the chance to someday be President. I am willing to wager that a good many men here tonight would sell their chances of getting the Presidency for a square meal. The Declaration of Independence is a myth for 364 days of the year; one day it is a reality — on Election Day.

You must rise in your might and stand together like a living wall. You must get together. The revolutionary fathers were strikers. WE want such men today. If fate decrees that we die industrial slaves, let it at least be while fighting for freedom. If we win it will lessen the vast army of tramps. To my mind, the tramp is the most melancholy feature of our modern civilization. It is only an accident that I am not one. I may be one yet, someday. (*“Hooray!” shouted a well-meaning listener down in the front row, and he didn’t understand the next moment why Debs stopped and laughed so hard.*)

The world has a happy habit of crowning its oppressors and crucifying its saviors...

*He then scored Andrew Carnegie, who, he said, was trying to blind the working class to [his] wrongs by endowing libraries. Then he shifted around.*

...[Those] who have better brains than others should use them to help our fellow men and lift others up. In this country the dollar is counting more and more and the human being for less and less. But I am not discouraged. We are not longer divided by race, color, or nationality. We must think and act for ourselves, and the ballot is the only way to do it.

I appeal to you to stand for your God-given rights. Recollect that it is better to be in the right with two or three than in the wrong with a multitude. Better to die fighting for freedom than to live in bondage.

## Advised Peaceful Methods.

Keep the peace. If the crisis comes in this trouble, I am willing to swear that it will not be the miners who will [be the aggressors]. Watch for spies. There is many a Judas about who has not the courage to hang himself. We are the children of one father and we will conquer at last.

A labor day is coming,  
Don't you hear the grand refrain  
Sweeping round the country  
From the Golden Gate to Maine?  
That workingmen are free,  
and have broken every chain?  
The Right is marching on.<sup>5</sup>

Published as part of "Must Act Together, Says Debs" in *Pittsburg Post*, vol. 55 (Aug. 6, 1897), pg. 2.

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<sup>1</sup> This speech was before a massive crowd estimated between 5,000 and 10,000 people on the Duquesne wharf, near Pittsburgh. It came one day after a sweeping injunction had been issued by US District Court Judge John Jay Jackson, Jr. (1824-1907) in Parkersville, WV, barring Debs from interfering in any manner, either by word or deed, in the affairs of the Monongah Coal and Coke Co., which was embroiled in a bitter strike of its mineworkers.

<sup>2</sup> The reference is obscure and the threat seems out of character for Debs, indicating a possible misquotation by the (unfriendly and less than perfectly skilled) reporter taking shorthand notes. During the night of June 4/5, 1897, militiamen defending Charles "Click" Mitchell, an African-American man accused of rape, at the Champaign County jail in Urbana, Ohio, fired on a mob which was attempting to remove and lynch the prisoner. Four members of the mob were killed and at least ten others wounded. The gunfire only managed to further swell and infuriate the crowd, estimated at 2,000 people. Fearing mass bloodshed, the mayor of the town subsequently negotiated the withdrawal of the militiamen, thereby allowing the prisoner to be removed by the mob and hung. In the aftermath a "gruesome" photograph of the murder victim was proudly displayed in the window of a local clothing store. See: *Wellington Enterprise*, June 9, 1897, pg. 3; *Delphos Daily Herald*, June, 20, 1897, pg. 2.

<sup>3</sup> Apparently Joseph Hodges Choate (1832-1917), a prominent New York lawyer who ran as a Republican for US Senate in 1896.

<sup>4</sup> Apparently an allusion to the Great French Revolution.

<sup>5</sup> Second stanza of "A Labor Day is Coming" (1889), by J.B. Maynard, a member of the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen from Indianapolis.