
“I Plead Guilty to the Charge of Being Radical” :
Speech at the St. Louis Conference of Labor Leaders
(August 30, 1897)

I believe the gravity of the industrial situation in this country is well understood. It is quite evident the delegates to this convention recognize the fact that civil liberty is dead in America. I have said, and say again, for the last time, I have appealed to the courts for justice and shall appeal to them no more. The ARU expended \$45,000 to have the question of civil rights tested in the Supreme Court of the United States, only to be told that we have no rights that capital is bound to respect. Shall we appeal to the Supreme Court again? No.

We appeal to this convention and to the country for an uprising of all the common people in every walk of life to beat back the courts and re-enthroned the rights of the American people. Labor day is near. What shall we do? I predict, my friends, that we will see the extraordinary spectacle of enslaved labor rattling its chains and dancing to the music.

Labor is the cheapest commodity on God’s earth, and yet there are those who would have it at a lower price. The united voice of labor has been raised against the appointment of Mr. Powderly to a federal position, and I notice that he was promptly put into the place.¹ (*Mingled cheers and hisses.*) From Justice of the Peace to Justice of the Supreme Court of the United States, all the judicial powers of the United States are directed against labor. All the organized sources of society are against labor and if labor expects emancipation itself, labor itself must do it.

Mr. Debs then told the convention that much destitution existed among the miners of the country and stated that 1,000 underground workers and their families were starving. He read the report of the commission appointed by Governor Mount² to examine into the condition of the miners of Indiana and then took up the thread of his argument.

Predicts an Uprising.

The time has not quite come to incite the population, [*said Mr. Debs, shaking his fist vehemently*]. I serve notice on the plutocratic element of this country that we are on the eve of another meeting in Chicago, which will be attended by all branches of labor. That convention will take up these same questions and will institute agitation and keep it going until the public conscience and public heart are aroused. Then will come such an uprising as the world has never seen.

I did not come to this convention to exploit social democracy or any other movement. There is something greater in this movement than any one element can manage — the emancipation of labor. There is no division here. Each man is entitled to his own opinion and his right to express it, each man to speak as becomes that man. I am side by side with you. I am a trade unionist and a socialist. (*Tremendous cheering.*) Whenever the trades unions of this country decide to do battle with our common enemy they can count upon us to come to the front and take our places side by side with them and fight with them. Never in my life have I been more hopeful than now. I am not gifted with great visionary powers, but I can see the beginning of the end. (*Cheers.*) This meeting is an inspiration. It will lead to great results. This movement has attained tremendous impetus and will go ahead with a rush. When the people are ready, and that day is not far off, my friends, there will be a spontaneous uprising, the Supreme Court will be abolished, Congress dispersed, and the sacred rights of American citizens and American freedmen will be enthroned. (*Great applause.*)

Talks of Bloodshed.

I plead guilty to the charge of being radical. I only wish you would allow me to be more radical still. Support us, gentlemen of the convention, and I promise you we will support the attempt to abolish the government by injunction and the judges who issue them. On bearing arms, I hope in this march of common intelligence we will reach a point where we will be able to settle these questions without appealing to the sword or bullet. I cannot tell. Certain it is there are thousands of our fellow citizens suffering, and certain it is this cannot last. The time will com to incite the populace. When this time comes you can depend on me. (*Cheers.*) I will not stand in the rear and ask you to go ahead. I will be in the front and say to you, "Come on." (*Renewed cheering.*) I shrink from that bloodshedding

[and Mr. Debs paused impressively], but if this is necessary to preserve liberty and our rights — in that event I will shed the last drop of blood that courses through my veins. (*Outbreak of cheering.*)

Plutocracy cannot buy me; they may send me to jail, may ostracize me or hang me, but, in the language of the revolutionary heroes, I do not propose to part with my self-respect, independence, and manhood. We no longer have a republic, there is not a vestige of it left. The judiciary of the country has placed a padlock on my lips, forbidding me to walk on the public highways and destroyed all my rights. I submit because you compelled me to. I am helpless. I appeal to you and to the country to come to the front, take this cause to heart, and these questions will be solved. I will be free and so will you.

The people are ripe for a great change. All they lack is direction and leadership. Let this conference supply it. Let this conference set the pace. Announce to the world that it will temporarily adjourn for three weeks to renew preparations. Ask every man to pledge himself to be there, come if you have to walk. No one has the right to plead poverty.

Mr. Debs went over the conditions existing in Pennsylvania, and when he finished that state, took up West Virginia. West Virginia, he said, had more government to the square inch than any state in the Union, and that meant less liberty. The less government, the more liberty — the only perfect government was no government at all.³ In conclusion, Mr. Debs said:

My friends, enforce your cause. The men who can be as good as their word stand erect.

As Mr. Debs finished the delegates jumped on their chairs, threw their hats in the air, and crowded forward to greet the speaker. Chairman Pomeroy pounded vigorously for order, but it was fully five minutes before the convention recovered from the spell which Mr. Debs' oratory had cast about them.

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¹ Terence Powderly (1849-1924), former General Master Workman of the Knights of Labor, was appointed Commissioner General of Immigration by Republican President William McKinley in July 1897.

² James A. Mount (1843-1901) was the Republican Governor of Indiana, first elected in 1896.

³ One suspects the editorializing of an unfriendly journalist, eager to cast Debs as an anarchist.