
“I Love Humanity Better Than I Do Gold” :
Speech at Coliseum Hall, Denver
[excerpt]
(February 6, 1898)

I welcome you all to the temple of the Social Democracy. For a little while this afternoon we will dismiss all thoughts of caste and condition and discuss the greatest question of the age. It touches a vital point, if not reaching to every portion of society. In this modern contest between the alley and the avenue, the rags and the riches, I stand for the alley and the rags. I stand here today as a socialist because I love humanity better than I do gold. It makes no matter what the future may have in store for me, for I propose to stand by my colors.

My friends, in these latter days we have seen the dollar deified above all things. When we consider that the man who works the longest and the hardest is the poorest, we think there is something radically wrong in the financial and commercial system in this country. In the march of the money system the poor but honest man is no longer able to do his duties as an American citizen. In this country there are millions of the victims of man’s inhumanity to man. We have unlimited abundance but there is also unspeakable poverty. It is the development of an abnormal system, and when it disappears we will see the millionaire and the tramp go together as men. I am opposed to a system which makes the poor inferior to the lapdogs of the rich.

During the past 25 years wages have steadily tended downward. Wages have not gone down so greatly, however, but the men do sometimes four times the work they formerly were required to do. But in the aggregate the wage has been decidedly reduced, and in this the machine has been a potential factor. In the days of hand work the boy who learned the trade and followed it was reasonably sure of being able to make a living. With the coming of the machine passed the industry to the capitalist. The employee no longer looks forward to the time when he will be the employer. He now works by permission of his capitalistic employer alone.

The woman displaced the man to a great extent, but helped support the family. But the machine grew to reproduce itself and then the children

were called in. Thus it is the man who was reduced to vagrancy, the woman to penury, and the child to machine oil. In partnership with the machine, the capitalist is enabled to reduce wages and labor. The question of what wages a man is entitled to is no longer asked of him.

Workingman's Share is Too Small.

The average workingman receives one-fifth of what he produces. Production is limited by consumption, and as the remaining one-fourth of the world cannot use the four-fifths' production, an overproduction follows. When the great strike of the miners occurred last year it was found that they were receiving on an average 42-1/2 cents a day. The tramp was formerly a curiosity. Now he is a product of this system. Labor is the root of the social and commercial tree, and the roots have not been nourished.

In the year 1896 nearly one-fifth of the concerns doing business in the United States disappeared, either voluntarily closed up or went into bankruptcy. There is a moral phase to this of as much importance as the ethical side — there were over 5,000 suicides and over 10,000 murders. In the short space of six years the number of murders and suicides has increased three-fold. I know that the press and others call those who present the situation as it is a "calamity howler." I take it from what I hear that there are none out of employment in Denver. (*Cries of "Oh, no!" "One-fifth," etc.*)

All of the social forces of the present system operate against the unfortunate. You wonder that men become criminal and I wonder that they don't. Take it on our railroads: a man if he has influence gets a pass; if he has some money he purchases mileage; if he is poor he pays full fare. With the smallest wage he pays the highest price.

One person in 757 is in jail. I speak from experience as well as observation. (*Uproarious applause.*) Don't laugh too much, you may be next.

Child Slaves in Georgia.

Recently I found children working in the cotton mills of Georgia at 57 cents a week. I was refused admittance when I wished to investigate. If all have not equal rights, none have. If I am in any respect superior to any human being I am under obligations to that person and should help raise him to my plane.

No single workingman in this country is employed except that he parts with almost all of what he produces. We have not risen above the beasts of the jungle. The greater fish eats the smaller, and so on until finally only the sharks remain.

Philip D. Armour was once asked what he thought about the social question. He answered: "I have not had time to think about it. If you want to know how to make sausages I can tell you." Think of it! With all his millions he has not risen above the sausage level.

We propose the abolition of the system that produces these conditions under which one man is gorged to suffocation and another dies of want. The time will come when people will wonder at such places as New York City.

Realize that this is a conflict between socialism and capitalism, a contest for the collective ownership of the world for the benefit of man.

The trust is the inevitable outgrowth of the competitive system, and you cannot legislate against it.

Our modern social state would not be what it is without the railroads. Read the opinions of the Supreme Court in the *Arago* case, whereby the 13th Amendment to the constitution was abolished, annulled, and slavery reestablished in this country.¹

We will operate the railroads and the telephone and telegraphs for the people. We will reduce the rates and give the railway men the protections that they were ordered by the national congress, but which they have not received as yet. For this we are organizing every city and village and hamlet in the country, until we reach the height of emancipation. I am confident of this, I can strain my eyes and see the first dawn of the cooperative commonwealth. It means the social regeneration of the world. It means that every human being shall do the work that nature intended him to do.

I believe with Lowell that "He is true to man who is true to God."² To the banner of the Social Democracy we welcome those who want to leave this world a little better than they found it. (*Tremendous applause.*)

Published as "Debs Day in Denver" in *Rocky Mountain News* [Denver], vol. 39, no. 38 (Feb. 7, 1898), pp. 1, 10.

¹ On July 7, 1895, the merchant ship *Arago* arrived in San Francisco with four of its crew in irons. The four had signed contracts to work aboard the ship on a round trip to Chile, but

owing to bad conditions had attempted to jump ship in Astoria, Oregon. Although arrested the four had subsequently refused to return to work, which led to their being disembarked in chains in California. The four argued that their arrest and forced labor constituted a form of involuntary servitude, violating the 13th Amendment's prohibition against slavery. The court case which resulted, *Robertson v. Baldwin*, was decided by the Supreme Court in January 1897 rejecting the sailors' claim. The case outraged the nation and led to the passage of ameliorative legislation in 1898 and 1915.

² From "On the Capture of Fugitive Slaves Near Washington" (1845), by James Russell Lowell (1819-1891).