

You Have a Higher Mission:  
Labor Day Speech in Knoxville, Tennessee  
(September 4, 1905)

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*Mr. George W. Ford, editor of the Knoxville Independent, introduced the speaker of the day in words fitted to the occasion. He paid a brief tribute to American manhood and the cause of union labor.*

*Mr. Debs first paid his tribute to Knoxville and her laboring people and to the beautiful [Fountain City] park which nature had offered as a fitting place for the labor celebration.*

*Said the speaker:*

The labor question is a question of all humanity. It is the survival of the era of civilization which marks a new step in history. Labor means the creation of wealth; it means the foundation for all government. While every other class may be eliminated, labor can never be obliterated so long as man exists on earth.

In all ages it has been the custom to regard the working classes as the lower class. The brow of labor has always been crowned by the classes with the brand of inferiority. In the early days of labor men served one another as slaves. Gradually the serf gave way to the laboring man, with the idea still paramount that the laborer is but God's creation for the upper class to profit by. It was the idea of the upper class that the working class shall be meek and accept the lot which nature has given them that the earth may multiply and replenish and the rich men or lords might live in happiness.

It was for the slave to live and multiply and build, and pass away like the little silkworm or the coral insect that dies in building its one small kingdom. The rich classes of the past ages knew nothing of the law of evolution that was gradually working its way upward, finding a higher and better purpose for the slave or workingman. After a thousand years of darkness the system saw that the upheaval of the serfs was at hand and a new era dawned.

**The Age of Machinery**

The coming of the new day was the moment of the manufacturing age. Today we have on every hand the unerring sign for another change, for another climax is at hand.

The beginning of the climax was inaugurated when machines began to take the place of tools. When men worked with mere hand tools, labor had a more nearly equal division, for what a man made with his own tools was his own, or its equivalent. When George Washington retired from public life there were no millionaires. There was not even such a word in a lexicon of that day. Washington himself was reputed to be a man of great wealth, and he was worth but \$600,000. He was considered the richest man of his day. The reason lay in the fact that the workmen of that day was the master of his own tools and what he made was his own to sell or keep. In the same time it took a laborer of that day to make a pair of shoes, one thousand pair can be made by a machine today, and the workman who makes them does not even own the pegs in one pair of them. *[Laughter.]* He takes it for granted that someone else is entitled to appropriate the result of his labor.

If your great-grandfather were here today and we were faced with such a proposition, the blood of the revolution boiling in his veins would show itself and there might be a scrap. *[Laughter.]* I ask that you who use the tools use them not to make others millionaires, but to free yourselves from slavery, that want may not stare in your face and that you may have leisure hours while your children may go to school and grow up as they should.

There were no tramps in your grandfather's day. There were no millionaires. They come together, and are necessary for one another. The one makes the other. For every millionaire there are his thousands of tramps, both made by the same result. One has food and no digestion while the other has digestion and no food. *[Laughter.]* Neither leads a complete life.

This tool has become a wealth producing agency, but the evolution of the tool is not yet complete. By virtue of machinery one man gets the value of the labor of thousands. He has the tools; they have no tool and must go to him for work.

John D. Rockefeller, the capitalist, is subject to the laws of evolution like the laborer. The capitalist is the development of society. In time he will no longer exist. In fifty years there will be no such thing in America as a capitalist. The smaller capitalist is afraid of the larger capitalist. He is afraid of labor agitation. We have no use for his paltry capital. It is not the

private worth of the small capitalist we are discussing. He needs to keep his weather eye on the large capitalist for when he gets through with him he will be ready to come over to us. Every time they crush out a small capitalist they make recruit for us.

Hate can never help matters. We must not hate anyone. The trouble with the working man is that he is too easily satisfied. It was Hugo who pictured the pitiable state of the slave smiling under his chains. That is the workman who does not see his state.

They may enjoin you; they may send the military out against you; they may stop you with court after court, but they cannot take one thing from you and that is your right to govern yourself. Samson lost his strength only when his locks were shorn.<sup>1</sup> The workingman shorn of his tools, his implements of existence, is without his strength. He is as Samson when his locks were cut.

Have you got a private yacht or a private car? Where is the "four hundred" of your society? The press of the day inadvertently admits there are classes, though the papers are decrying it to you that no such condition exists and that it is a picture of the imagination set for you by leaders of strife. The millionaire points to you that you have your chance. They illustrate with one bootblack who is now president of a railroad.

Twenty-seven million men, women, and children are laboring today for the benefit of others. The owner of a tool is a capitalist; those who used the tools are the workingmen. The higher the profit, the lower the wage scale. The worker demands all he can get for wages, but the capitalist fights him back and asks all that he can for his goods.

### **The Tracy City Trouble**

The Tracy City trouble was not caused by a labor agitator.<sup>2</sup> It sprang from a conflict of economic circumstances and interest. In his beginning a capitalist is a necessity, but when he is full grown he is divorced from all further interest in industry and he can go from continent to continent if he chooses. He is released and every month he gets his check that represents your earnings. He is no longer bound to the common tie of mankind. He does not even know the slaves that do his work for him. they are working to enrich some count or no-account on the other side of the ocean. You will never change it until you unite on the industrial field and line up at the ballot box.

Long ago you threw away your tools, and now the plant is running without you. You must cooperate so that even as you work you may whisper to one another of your strivings, and may teach each other and inspire each other that your ignorance may be blotted out. You must develop the capacity for thinking.

Your political friend stands before you and flatters your looks and intelligence. He knows you and he knows better, but you do not, and because you do not know you applaud him in your ignorance and make it the plainer that you are ignorant. You have a higher mission than working for others. I defy any man to show me wealth that is not the product of the working class. You can be your own employers — make yourselves happy and live in peace.

Most of your workmen live in rented houses, while they build the palace for the millionaire. You make automobiles, and walk yourselves — except on election day, and then you ride to vote, to walk the other 364 days in the year.

Your workmen made the guns that met the miners in Tracy City. Workmen always make the guns; they make thousands of them every year, but they always stand at the wrong end of them. You make the silk for the wife of the rich man, while your own wife wears calico. If you were intelligent you could own the earth and abolish the ills of society.

### **Learn to Vote Together**

Slowly indeed you are acquiring wisdom. You work together, strike together, live together, are shot together, and tramp together, and are locked out together. The time has come when you should learn to vote together.

Capitalists are never bought on the slave market. They are not sold. There is a labor market for the 27 million working people. Only their hands represent their capital. If you have no tool you are in the working class. With the tool you could conquer the earth. Your only access to the tool is by selling your labor-power to the man who owns the tool.

The politician talks tariff and finance. They are not of interest to you. Capitalists in competition have worked labor down. They have brought to our shore the lower uneducated classes of other nations and gradually the American was forced westward. In New Orleans I even saw a Negro bossing a gang of white men. You must not get mad because the colored man

works at your side. You and he are nothing in the sight of the capitalist but slaves to accomplish his purpose He does not care whether you like Negro labor or not. It does not matter to the capitalist how the labor package is wrapped.

After a while they went to our homes and they took our children and put them to work. They had already gotten our women. But they found the child was even cheaper than the woman. A century ago the women and children were at home where they ought to be. They are working more than 5 million of these children all the way from five to ten years of age. The capitalist is not a hard-hearted man. He does not want children to work for him because he is cruel. It is because he is a capitalist. He has machinery. The child can work it cheaper than the man or the woman, so he gets the child.

A time of depression comes to the capitalist as well as to others. Night follows day. The world's labor market is congested and the labor supply is no longer needed. The laborer himself cannot consume his own over-production. He, too, suffers. In 1873 the tramp army was first formed. It is with us yet. Men went beyond redemption, and the number of fallen women increased to an appalling extent. There is an economic reason for it.

Environment and poverty make the man. Put a tender girl in the slums of Chicago and you will likely produce a prostitute. Surround a man with poverty and want, deny him work or wages, and you wreck him. We are now seeing a period of depression setting in. If there are no idle men today then were are the men who take the places made by strikers? The workman strikes because he has been driven to it.

### **Nashville Minister's Opinions**

Let me mention here a press dispatch in the *Journal and Tribune* this morning.<sup>3</sup> It referred to an opinion expressed in the pulpit by a Nashville minister that the laboring man was greedy and grasping. The minister thought the miner wanted to gobble things up in Tracy City. This gentleman in my mind's eye bears a strange resemblance to the meek and lowly Jesus. He may be honest, but I am bound to say that if he has been correctly quoted he is a fit candidate for a feeble-minded institution.

I would not inflict punishment on him for this. I would like to have him given a test, however, of three months in a miner's camp. After he has

lived in a shack, in which a rich man would not put his dog, and seen his wife and children suffering for food, with sick children crying for the help he cannot give them, I want to ask him if he think this puffed up, bloated miner in a Tennessee mine is responsible for this recent trouble.

I would like to call on the capitalist for whom he is preaching and ask him his opinion of the preacher if he expressed any other sentiment. Ah, my friends, it is in the power of eh capitalist to discharge the minister just as he can discharge you. If he preaches the economic doctrine of truth, which is done only too seldom, he would be out of a job. If he were true would he not cry out against the men who sent the troops against those miners in Tracy City: "Ye scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites!"<sup>4</sup>

If 200 men work to sing a coal shaft, to whom does it belong? In the capitalistic system one man gets the benefit and 200 have done the work. I make no apology for you working men for tat assault in the mines at Tracy City. the charge has not yet been held against you. Without one particle of evidence to prove that you did it, they cried out that it was the work of union me, and the troops were sent against the miners. They branded the union men as murderers. What think you of a social system that will produce such murderers? Are they not the result of environment if they did do this thing? Put a man where love cannot dwell because of poverty and you develop the beast in him. It is the slums that develop the prostitute.

Think of the 700,000 laboring men without whom the government could not turn another wheel. They are the foundation of labor. Here comes the strike or the lockout and they are brought face to face with the fact that if they can defeat the capitalists they must defeat the military and then the entire government behind it.

I want to congratulate Governor Cox<sup>5</sup> for calling out his military. Why? Because it will open the eyes of the miners of Tracy City. [*Applause.*] When the miner sees that he is fighting the government as well as the capitalist, he will understand that it is the government of the capitalist and will take the ballot in his own hand. If the capitalist can control that government then why cannot you do it? You are more than he.

Your paper and your minister and your friends say: "Keep out of politics." The little your great-grandfather made was his own. Everything has changed now except his great-grandson and he is still voting the same old way. If every workman could get his working average he could have a house of his own and get married. The day has come when a man cannot marry. He hesitates. Marriage is a sacred thing, but the wage-slave cannot

afford it. Not if he respects her he loves. This, too, is daily broadening the stream of prostitution.

### **Learn to Think**

You'll never get what you want until you learn to think. A pistol is a good thing on a dark night when a hold-up is around, if you know how to use it, but if you do not it is dangerous. Your vote is the same way. You should vote the economic interest of the workingman. A "good man" in the Tennessee legislature would be a rare thing. This voting for a "good man" has become a bygone. A "good man" in the Tennessee legislature would be shunned like a case of smallpox.

The railroad company wants legislation. Does it treat with you? How many of you have railroad passes in your pockets? Hold up your hands. *[No response.]* They deal with your masters, and like steers on a ranch you are rounded up in due time. They'll put their banding iron on you next.

I am trying to get you to take care of yourselves. You'll get what you produce and if you'll vote the right way they'll produce what they can get. That is what I'm working for. I want you to be intelligent enough to get what belongs to you. At the bottom of every party is an economic foundation.

They talk to you about the grand old flag. It floated over every bullpen in Colorado a while ago. You join the party that is for your own interest. Never mind what they talk to you about. The Republican Party are the big capitalists. The Democratic Party are the little capitalists. Let them fight out their own battles of money and tariff. It is not your affair.

When the teamsters struck in Chicago the millionaire bankers subscribed \$50,000 to fight them. The fight did not belong to them, but they stuck to their own class. If the workingmen had been as loyal to me I would be president today, and there would not have been soldiers called out to face you.

Let me ask my friend John Mitchell<sup>6</sup> the question, if the operators and miners are in the same class, why do they not join the same union instead of fighting each other with a union body against a trade body? The struggle will go forward until the system is finally overthrown.

### **Reference to Editorial**

I exceedingly appreciate the spirit in which the morning paper referred to me today. Several years ago they did not writ so well of me. I presume I have grown more respectable. I suppose they see that my tribe is increasing. When the masses agree with a man then he ceases to be an object of ridicule and abuse. After a while some of these people who have abused us will be the ones who will be saying, "I told you so."

Children will not be employed in the [mines and shops] and why should they be sacrificed <illeg.> rearing human beings? When we [jointly] own the [machinery] and every man has a right of inheritance to work at an honest income, the time of peace will dawn. We do not want the private property of the individual.<sup>7</sup>

In the editorial this morning it intimates that my doctrine is bad although I am not such a bad fellow. Who do the papers belong to? To the class they serve. A man used to run his own paper his own way. But everything has grown larger these days. The newswriter of today sells his brains to carry out the dictate of his bosses. He sells brains as we sell labor. If you want a job on the Chicago Chronicle you must agree to let your opinions be dictated.

You would not buy Ingersoll's<sup>8</sup> works to study the Bible. You cannot read labor news in the average paper.

I do not ask you to accept my doctrines. Have the manliness to form your own doctrines. Preserve your own mental integrity. I appeal to you to vow this very hour to do your share.

All who have studied the labor question have become avowed socialists. Frances Willard<sup>9</sup> declared that it was her study of poverty that made her change her mind. Before she had believed that whiskey was the cause of poverty, but she learned to see that poverty was the cause of whiskey.

We see 1,000,000 tramps, 600,000 thieves, 500,000 fallen women, and 150,000 convicts. But thank God, there are many strong and true who are trying to help these fallen souls to a better understanding. If you are the only agitator let them point the finger of scorn in your community, for their children will live to plant flowers where you sleep

You are the conquering army of the new century. Join the union and then take the political field. Build up the party that is for your interest. You have the cause of humanity on your side. Read, think, and study. I can see the rising of the sun. The day is coming where the right is marching on.



Mr. Debs closed after reciting a verse inspiring to his cause. He was loudly cheered and was carried away by the throng which me to do him the honor.

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<sup>1</sup> Allusion to the story of Samson in *Judges* 14-16.

<sup>2</sup> Tracy City is a small coal mining town located about 115 miles southwest of Knoxville. On July 1, 1904, miners went out on strike against the Tennessee Consolidated Coal Company over reductions in the wage scale imposed by the company. This bitter strike continued for more than a year, with a parallel strike at Whitwell, Tennessee, and a lockout of union miners at the company's facilities in Alabama lasting almost as long. On August 24, 1905, the Tracy City mine was to be reopened with strikebreakers. That morning three people were shot in an ambush, with a foreman and one scab miner dying and another critically injured in the attack. Grundy Co. Sheriff Sam Meeks called for troops to preserve order and Governor John Cox was quick to comply, dispatching seven companies from the 3rd Regiment of the Tennessee National Guard on August 28 to guard strikebreakers at the reopened mines.

<sup>3</sup> Debs refers to the material published as "Tracy City Trouble" in the *Nashville American* of September 4, which quotes at length from the sermon of Rev. George W. Swope of the North Nashville Baptist Church the previous day. Swope is quoted as blaming the "outrages" associated with the Tracy City strike upon "man's looking for too much material benefit in his labor" and attributing the difficulties to union "selfishness."

<sup>4</sup> From *Matthew* 23.

<sup>5</sup> John I. Cox (1855-1946), a Democrat, was governor of Tennessee for only about two years, resigning the post in January 1907 to take a seat in the US senate.

<sup>6</sup> John Mitchell (1870-1919) was the president of the United Mine Workers Union. An advocate of collaboration between mine owners and the labor movement, together with American Federation of Labor chief Samuel Gompers, Mitchell was an organizer of the National Civic Federation in 1900.

<sup>7</sup> This paragraph only partially legible in film of the original document.

<sup>8</sup> Robert G. "Bob" Ingersoll (1833-1899) was regarded as one of the best public speakers of his era and was a personal acquaintance and role model for Gene Debs. Raised in a Christian household, Ingersoll spent his career as an advocate of rationalism and freethought as an alternative to superstition and religious conformity.

<sup>9</sup> Frances Willard (1839-1898) was the college educated co-founder of the Woman's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU), the leading prohibition organization in the United States. She served as president of that organization from 1879 until the time of her death. Willard turned to Christian socialism during the last decade of her life.