
An Uprising of the People: Campaign Speech for William Jennings Bryan, Duluth, MN — Oct. 21, 1896 by Eugene V. Debs

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Wednesday night was organized labor's night, and in spite of the cold weather and chilly atmosphere of the car barn, the demonstration in honor of the Woodstock heroes was one of the most memorable of this remarkably enthusiastic campaign.

The parade had been very sparingly advertised, nevertheless 500 or 600 union men were in line, and their stentorian cheers were indicative of the cheerful alacrity with which they will cast their votes in November against Hanna's little Mac [William McKinley].

About 5,000 voters were in attendance at the barn and their enthusiasm was hearty and continuous.

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When Eugene V. Debs arose to speak there was literally a storm of applause which lasted fully three minutes.

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Ladies and Gentlemen:—

I regard the campaign fast drawing to a close as the most important political contest in the history of the country. I have faith in the intelligence, independence, and patriotism of the American people, and I believe that on November 3 American manhood will triumph

over British gold. This is a campaign of the people. This meeting is significant, and it demonstrates to my satisfaction that the principles of liberty are not nearly extinct in the hearts of American freemen. This is more than a political movement. It is an uprising of the people. It is time for a change, and that is coming as certainly as the rivers find their way to the sea. Let us get together and forget parties for a while, simply remembering that we are American citizens, the proudest title ever borne by any man on this earth. (*Applause.*) You and I and all of us love the Republic and we are interested in the perpetuation of freedom.

We have been branded as anarchists. Let us trace the compliment to its source. It comes from Wall Street, whence our oppression comes. Some of these days we are going to revise our dictionary and it will have new definition for anarchy, and under the new definition I will be surprised if it does not embrace the managers of the Republican campaign. (*Laughter and applause.*) The man today who does not do something to draw upon himself the epithet of anarchist is an object of suspicion. (*Laughter.*) Anarchy and patriotism have become synonymous. The real anarchists are trying to press down upon the toiler's brow a crown of thorns.

Just the other day a gentleman of the cloth espoused the cause of gold and with a hammer of gold drove one more nail into the body of a suffering people. Think of this follower of the meek and lowly Nazarene. Christ never deserted the poor. If he ever had a dollar history has yet to record it, and in this particular at least he does not resemble Archbishop Ireland.¹ (*Laughter and applause.*) The American people are not longer doing their thinking by proxy. The average citizen is standing magnificently erect, and by straining one's vision ever so little one can see the first glimmer of the dawn of emancipation. Some people view with alarm the unrest in our politics and prophesy the failure of free government. I believe that the good old ship of state will breast all billows, face all storms, finally reach the port of prosperity. (*Applause.*)

In this campaign two parties are contending, one of which repudiated the Declaration of Independence. It says that America is not able to legislate for itself. Over 100 years ago American independence

¹ **John Ireland** (1838-1918) was the Archbishop of St. Paul, Minnesota from 1888 until his death.

was achieved. Today Bryan, Lind,² and Towne³ (*Tremendous applause*), as magnificent men as ever gave glory to American history, are fighting to achieve our financial independence. In the days of Washington were those who hesitated, who said, "Let us have peace." They were willing to sacrifice American independence for the sake of peace. Washington was an anarchist, Franklin was a demagogue. (*Applause.*) All the powers of plutocracy were arraigned against them. The same forces are arraigned today. They fought and passed into history. The fighters of today will pass into history.

Some say that Bryan is going to fail. Bryan cannot fail. (*Cheers.*) His nomination was not of the Democratic Party, it was ordained by the Almighty. (*Applause.*) His nomination was providential, and it is going to be ratified by an overwhelming majority of the American people next month. (*Great applause.*) Bryan was not born to defeat. (*Applause.*) He stands today where Lincoln stood in 1860. (*Applause.*) Lincoln, like Blaine was fresh from the loins of the people and was to the end of his life the sole proprietor of himself.⁴ His sad and sweet and tragic face has become a permanent benediction. I am just reminded that he said that God must have loved the poor because he made so many of them. (*Laughter.*) I am not prejudiced against the rich, but as between the rich and the poor I am for the poor, because the rich can take care of themselves.

A few men naturally become rich; they can't help it. Many naturally remain poor; they can't help it. If one has a superior brain he is entitled to no credit. If one gains a fortune he is entitled to no credit. If a brother is helpless and remains where he started he can't help it, and I have an idea that it is the duty of the man who gets more than he needs to help him. (*Applause.*) Men may say that I am a dreamer,

² **John Lind** (1854-1930) was the fusion Democratic and People's Party candidate for Governor of Minnesota. He lost to his Republican opponent by fewer than 3600 votes out of more than 337,000 cast.

³ **Charles Arnette Towne** (1858-1928) first won election to Congress from Minnesota in November 1894 as a Republican. A progressive and an advocate of Free Silver, Towne was dumped by his party but chose to run for reelection in 1896 as an Independent, losing the race. He would later decline nomination for Vice President of the United States at the 1900 convention of the People's Party.

⁴ The reference to Blaine is obscure and it seems likely that this is an error in transcription. **James G. Blaine** (1830-1893) was a career Congressman and Senator from Maine who was the Republican nominee for President in 1884, but he came from the prosperous petty bourgeoisie, did not favor Free Silver, and was no great hero of the emerging progressive movement.

but it sometimes happens that the dreamer of one age is the philosopher of the next. The man who works longest and hardest gets least to show for it. I object to the conditions under which the man who does least gets all. That is something that appeals to all for correction. Wealth has accumulated in the hands of a few, by special legislation and special privilege.

The theory of our government, according to Abraham Lincoln, is: "Life is of more consequence than property. The man before the dollar." We see today the words of the great Lincoln literally interpreted. We see the man before the dollar supplicating on bended knees for the right to live. (*Applause and laughter.*) In the presence of the dollar, the dollar which we have deified, we prostrate ourselves. In the presence of the almighty dollar we are slaves.

Multiplied thousands complain of man's inhumanity to man. Millions are begging for what the world owes them, an opportunity to work. In the presence of this appalling condition what does the Republican Party propose? Nothing. The tramp is the spawn of the gold standard. I remember when a tramp was a curiosity, but now there is no need to look in a museum to see one. (*Laughter.*) Let me tell you how the tramp is made. The unfortunate husband comes home at eventide and there is no work to be found. Then he tells his wife and gathers his children about him and looks sorrowfully about him at the bare table and the fireless stove and the want that has crept into his home, [and declares] that he will go elsewhere and seek for work that he may give them life. He trudges off next morning with the purpose of going to some distant point. He does not take the passenger coach, for he has no money, but he climbs under the coach and rides on the truck. I want all those who think men are tramps from choice to try that. Before he gets to the next station the brakeman discovers him and he is left along the way. He wearily trudges on in search of work, but his clothes have become seedy and he is soiled and worn and haggard-looking, and the eye of suspicion is directed toward him. The only person he knows is the policeman, but his heart throbs as he wearily trudges on, and he thinks of the little white cottage where his little ones are and where his wife is waiting for him and where there is suffering. As he goes on the suspicion increases. He gets 200 or 300 miles away from home and he can obtain no work. People will not have him. All the future is dark and he begins to realize that on earth there is no room for him. His sensibilities become

blunted. His self-respect deserts him, and he is a tramp on the face of the earth.

Let me try the same on you. Let me turn you out into the cold world and have every door locked to you for six months! Let me place you in his position where the garbage and filth of society is poured upon him, and would you be any better than he? Would you become anything else but a tramp?

The tramp is now to be found in all states, and forms a grand army of menace to the republic. The declaration of the Republican Party on the money question is an insult to every American citizen. They have not the hardihood to declare for the gold standard, but promise to change by the permission of England. The Democratic Party says we'll change anyway. (*Applause.*) It says that it is time for a change and that we will change without consulting Europe. We should bear in mind that an invitation extended 18 years ago to the nations of Europe to a bimetallic conference has been treated with scorn and contempt. John Bull has no respect for Uncle Sam, and he would not pretend to have any if he did not have his hands in Uncle Sam's pockets up to his elbows. The nations of Europe did not demonetize silver in their own countries to remonetize it in this country. We will never get bimetallicism by agreement, and no one knows that better than the gentlemen who wrote the financial plank of the Republican platform. They intended to deceive, but, thank God, the American people are not to be the victims of duplicity this time. (Great applause.)

I wish to discuss McKinley for a while. (*Laughter and applause.*) Mark Hanna⁵ (*General hisses and groans.*) saw that McKinley was in financial difficulty. With great discernment he saw in McKinley promising Presidential timber. He and H.H. Kohlsaats⁶ helped the Major out of his money troubles. They took up his paper and Hanna has it in his strongbox today. They have a mortgage on the Republican candidate, and if he is elected, which I think, God forbids, they will foreclose it. Mark Hanna is the commander of McKinley's forces. Mr. Kohlsaats wrote the financial plank of the Republican platform.

⁵ Millionaire businessman **Mark Hanna** (1837-1904), soon to be elected to the US Senate from Ohio, was the manager of William McKinley's campaign and was regarded as one of the most influential conservative political figures of his era.

⁶ **Herman Henry Kohlsaats** (1853-1924), a staunch Republican partisan and outspoken supporter of the gold standard, was a newspaper publisher who in 1896 was the owner of the *Chicago Times Herald* and the *Chicago Evening Post*.

Mark Hanna — I do not want to do him an injustice. I could not if I would. I cannot even do him justice. (*Laughter and applause.*) This is a condition which appeals to the patriotism of every American citizen. I have nothing to say against McKinley, but as the creature of the money power I oppose him.

When I speak of the money power, do you comprehend the tremendous import of the words We are in its hands. Seventy million people are helpless. It has invaded the Supreme Court and debauched it. The income tax was a law that taxed the wealth of the country. But the highest judicial authority in the land declared it unconstitutional. In declaring the law unconstitutional the Supreme Court usurped the legislative functions of the government. If instead of taxing the wealth, the Congress of the country had enacted that the poor be taxed, the Supreme Court would never have declared the law unconstitutional. I have read the opinions of three judges of that court, not demagogues, nor cranks nor anarchists, who say that this decision of their fellows on the bench is in the nature of a revolution.

The decision was a complete surrender to the money power. This is not the declaration of a wild-eyed anarchist, but the calm, deliberative judgement of some of the men who constitute that high judicial tribunal. I cannot but recall the appearance and the language of that grand man, Lyman Trumbull,⁷ who was engaged in the defense of myself and colleagues, when after trying to accomplish something for his clients, said: “Mr. Debs, we are hopelessly, helplessly at the mercy of the money power, as represented by the courts.”

The American people were never so much aroused as now. They have never been thinking so of great questions, especially the laboring men. The laboring man is asking why he builds palaces, but lives in a hovel. They are beginning to think and will soon act. If they cannot get their rights they will take them. They will not demand that they be given theirs by force, but with the ballot that falls as lightly as the winter snow, yet does the work of lightning from the heavens, will they fight in the future and insure to themselves their right — their equal right with the corporations and the trusts and the elements that seek to crush them down and make them slaves. (*Applause.*)

It is labor that draws out the shining rails from the molten ore and transforms them into the wagon roads of commerce. It is labor that takes the fleeces from animals of the field and manufactures

⁷ **Lyman Trumbull** (1813-1896) was a longtime US Senator from Illinois, where he served as head of the Senate Judiciary Committee.

them into articles of commerce. It is labor that fells the green-plumed forest monarch and transforms it into lumber with the gang saw. It is labor that controls the black cavalry of commerce and shapes the destinies of the commercial world. It is labor that goes into the golden harvest field and garners the grain and makes it into bread. And shall not labor come to his own? Let labor everywhere take heart of hope, for the midnight is passing and joy cometh with the morning. (*Continued applause.*)

The world is not just, it is a long way from being generous, but it is getting better every day. There should be no multimillionaires. When a man schemes to get more than he needs he makes a mistake, and his punishment is sometimes on earth. I love to think of the democracy of death. It enters the home of a Vanderbilt without a card and reduces the occupant to the level of the veriest pauper. Men should remember that shrouds have no pockets. We are here just a little while, and humanity is as far above gold as stars are above earthly mold. Character is better than cash. Men are not equal, but they are entitled to equal opportunities. We have no trouble about wealth; it is about distribution.

After paying his respects to Mark Hanna, Chauncey M. Depew,⁸ H.C. Payne,⁹ H.C. Frick,¹⁰ and others, Mr. Debs concluded by drawing a beautiful picture of a workingman's home under prosperity.

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Edited by Tim Davenport

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⁸ **Chauncey M. Depew** (1834-1928) was the President of the New York Central Railroad, a line engaged in continual combat with its workers. He would be elected a Republican US Senator from New York in November 1898.

⁹ **Henry Clay Payne** (1843-1904) was President of the Milwaukee & Northern Railroad. He would be appointed Postmaster General in 1904 by Republican President Theodore Roosevelt.

¹⁰ **H.C. Frick** (1849-1919) was Chairman of the Carnegie Steel Corporation and the company's point man during the brutal 1892 Homestead strike.