

The World is Not Right:
Speech in Butte, Montana
(February 8, 1897)

When a man gets up and talks in favor of his fellow man at large in this age he is called a crank. Whenever a man has attempted to head any new movement that would be a blessing to mankind he has always been known as a crank or a dreamer. The dreamer of one age, my friends, is the philosopher of the next. The man who stands up and says that a workman should be protected in his rights may be called an agitator and an anarchist but he is nevertheless right.

The world is not right. Upon every hand there is evidence of cruelty. Men who work the hardest have the least, and men who work the least have all the wealth. Wall Street rules the American continent, and in some mysterious way it harnesses the American workingman, and while living and fattening upon his earnings compels him to pauperize himself.

In all ages there have been men who have had the courage to stand up for their rights and have even been crucified for it. Men who sought the improvement of mankind have always been maligned, persecuted, imprisoned, and even put to death, but the world is progressing and even the workingmen are beginning to think and wonder why the men who build houses live outdoors and why their wives who make the fashionable garments are clothed in rags. Under our flag with 45 stars they begin to ask why they press their rags closer about their bodies so as not to brush against the silks they meet; why they cannot touch the food of the banquet hall they had to prepare, and why they walk in the shadows of the palaces which they had built, but may not occupy. They are beginning to think and when they think they will soon have their rights. They will no longer supplicate, but will take their own — not by violence, but by the peaceful ballot. Shall not the workers come into their own? Let labor everywhere take hope, for the midnight is passing and joy cometh in the morning.

I am not here to appeal to the prejudices of men or to arraign man against man; would not if I could. But let us get close together and consider these things and see if we cannot devise some plan for overcoming the evils and distress we see around us. I have made up my mind that there is

something wrong. Some men say I ought to have respect for public opinion. I don't hesitate to tell you that I have not the slightest respect for what is called public opinion. Public opinion has aided, abetted, and sanctioned every public wrong and outrage the world has ever known. Public opinion in this day is very often manufactured and expounded by a vicious and unprincipled press. Washington, Jefferson, Hancock, and Franklin stood almost alone when they said taxation without representation was not right. They held a little meeting and the Tories called them agitators. The world has always held agitators in disrespect.

I take all the harsh terms that have been applied to that name and say that I am glad to be called an agitator. Washington was hated and vilified more than any President since his time, but he stood erect for what was right. With Franklin, Jefferson, and others he was called a rebel, a striker, and a revolutionist. The Tories cried, "Let us have peace," but the agitators stood together. They said we may have to go to war, but they said if we must, we will do so, that our children and our children's children may have peace. If there are any in this audience who are opposed to strikes, let them remember that we are under a striking government. The revolution, from Lexington to Yorktown, was a constant series of strikes — strikes against oppression, and but for those strikes we would still be under the British yoke.

If it was not for the oppression of laborers by the employers there would be no labor organizations today. Why do laborers organize? They combine through instincts of self-preservation. Before the individual employer was supplanted by the corporation, the employer was in touch with the laborer, but the corporation, a creation of law, cannot be reached by the laborer. It has no eyes, no ears, no soul, no conscience — only an appetite, and the more you feed it the hungrier it grows. The workingman feels that he is oppressed and there is a rankling in his breast. He cannot feed his wife and educate his children on the pittance he receives for his labor, and he does not know what to do. He goes to his fellow workmen and asks: "What shall we do?" "Let us strike," says his fellow laborers, but they decide to first see their employer. So they call on the superintendent with their grievance but the superintendent is only an employee and he orders them back to their work like quarry slaves.

Years ago, under individual employers, the coal miners of Pennsylvania were paid \$5 a day and they lived as a true type of American citizen. Bye and bye the corporation succeeded the individual employer and

schemes were planned for enriching its members at the expense of the miners. First they went about to disrupt the organization and then to reduce wages, and when the men rebelled the corporations imported Hungarians, Poles, and other cheap labor from Europe to take their places. The American miner was forced out of Pennsylvania and today the coal miners in that state are paid 65 cents a day. They don't live; they simply exist and inhabit holes scarcely fit for wild beasts to inhabit. It is proposed to extend this condition to Montana. They have tried to establish it in Leadville — and their first effort is to destroy the organization of the miners.

It is to the interest of every good citizen to maintain the American standard of wages, for after the wages are reduced they may also find themselves reduced. Only here in the backbone of the Rocky Mountains have laborers been able to maintain their wages. It is difficult to dislodge men who live in the mountains. William Tell lived in the mountains. The invigorating atmosphere seems to promote in each love of liberty.

This greed for money-getting has been the ruin of many lives as well as nations. Jay Gould died 20 years in advance of his time because of this disease. Very recently a lot of glass manufacturers in Indiana got together and concluded they could make a few million dollars by closing their factories, forcing up the price of window glass, and forcing down the wages of the operatives. The plan was carried out and 15,000 operatives were thrown out of employment. The manufacturers then fixed the price of window glass which the people had to pay and fixed the price of wages to which the employees had to submit, and from the decision there was no appeal.

The amassing of wealth and its centralization of wealth during the last quarter of a century is something not previously known in the history of the world. The money power has invaded the legislature; it has involved Congress. It has had its influence on the Supreme Court. It has even involved the pulpit and has sent forth the minister with the price of his defilement in his pocket. The Supreme Court declared unconstitutional the law taxing incomes. Do you believe that if a tax had been levied upon poverty it would have been declared unconstitutional? Three members of that Supreme Court declared it as their deliberate conclusion that the decision was an absolute surrender to the money power.

I have not the slightest prejudice against wealth. I do not hate the rich man, but there is such a thing as getting too much wealth for one's own good. The rich forget that shrouds have no pockets. The rich forget how

insignificant they are and that there are only a few steps from the cradle to the grave. Death is a democrat. He is no respecter of persons. Only a short time ago he entered the Fifth Avenue palace of a Vanderbilt and in a second's time the multimillionaire was reduced to the level of the lowest vagabond that walks the highway.

The humblest child of the lowliest parents in Montana, in my opinion, outweighs all the gold and wealth in the universe. I believe in manhood and womanhood, such a manhood and womanhood as dignifies and uplifts humanity, which, but for this greed for wealth, might make of this country a paradise.

The cheapest commodity in the world is human flesh and blood. A railroad company would rather kill a brakeman than a hog. The hog has a commodity value and the brakeman has not.

They speak to you about survival of the fittest. Who is the fittest — the man with the longest beak and the sharpest fangs, called a financial genius, whose only faculty is for money-getting? Or the man of superior intellect and mental endowment who cannot get a crust to eat and has a constant struggle for existence until death comes to his relief?

The mayor of Chicago, a few days ago, made an appeal, in the name of God, to save 50,000 of these wretches from starving and freezing in that city. A similar condition of affairs exists in New York, while the farmer freezes near his well-filled barns and granaries because there is no market for his grain — no one to buy it and no money to purchase clothing and fuel. Nature has abundantly supplied for the wants of all men, but man's devilish iniquity interferes with nature's plans.

The small businessman has a sharp, fierce struggle to make both ends meet and I want to tell them that many of their brothers are on the highway to trampdom, for the business failures last year were something appalling. Who is the tramp? Let me tell you that he is your brother. I sympathize with a tramp for two reasons. The first is I cannot help it, and the second is that I am liable to be one myself someday.

The same conditions which have reduced the American workingman to the level of the Mexican peon is after the businessman who has \$10,000 invested. They are also after lawyers and professional men, and sometimes the judge on the bench feels this power, not through his conscience, but through his pocket. Judges are not all that way, however, for there are some good men on the bench. I cannot speak the name of Judge Caldwell without taking my hat off, for he is one of the noblest and purest of men.

The same court which cited me to appear and show cause why I should not be punished for contempt (and who would not be guilty of contempt for such a court?) also cited George M. Pullman. He came in his private car from New York, made an application to the court, and was excused. I explained and got six months. [*Great laughter.*] I am glad the people of Butte like it; I did not. Judge Jenkins¹ made an order reducing the wages of the employees on the Northern Pacific, and then make another order that if the men did not accept the reduction they would be sent to jail for contempt. The decision was so rank that even Congress ordered an investigation, but the committee soon exhausted the appropriation and no investigation was ever made.

It is a poor rule that, like a locomotive engine, does not work both ways. If a judge has the right to reduce wages, he also has the power to raise wages, and if he has the power to compel to work, he also has the power to prevent a corporation from discharging its men. Did you ever hear of any such order? Jenkins should have been impeached, but he is a creature of wealth and was not molested. Wealth should not be a shield for rascality.

The man who takes a stand for right and for the interests of mankind is persecuted, maligned, and imprisoned. It has been so always. It has been the case from Socrates down to Coxey.² The experience of Christ was no exception. If Christ had a dollar, authentic history makes no mention of it. His face was always to the poor. He was utterly unfashionable, but his great throbbing heart always beat for the poor, and he was a friend of labor, too. We are all liable to make mistakes and if there is a man who ought to be forgiven it is he who makes a mistake. I have made so many myself that I feel the great need of the charity of forgiveness in the human breast.

When I see a man in jail, I feel like putting my arms around him and saying: "You have made a mistake, but come to me and I will help you overcome it." If I have one thing to thank Judge Woods³ for in sending me to jail it is for the opportunity it gave me to associate with the other unfortunates in prison and see the evidence of man's inhumanity to man. We are making criminals faster than we can incarcerate them, and when we get them in jail we don't forget or forgive. When they get out the police keep them spotted; everybody points a finger at them and everyone avoids and shuns them; they may try ever so hard to obtain employment and reform but their name and misfortune is a bar to all that, and soon they fall back into prison and we compel them to graduate from petty larceny to

homicide. We should do something to prevent crime as well as to punish it. I would meet the man at the door as he came out of jail and say to him: "You have made a mistake and I'll help you, and we'll see if we can't forget." A helping hand, a word of encouragement and forgiveness, would redeem 95 percent of our criminals.

The jails are not for rich but for poor fellows who have not a cent to defend themselves. While in the Chicago jail I met a poor fellow who was serving out 12 months for stealing an old cloak from in front of a second-hand store. He had been out of employment for a whole year; his wife needed a cloak to keep her rags together and her body warm, and prompted by the purest motives that ever sprung up in a man's breast he stole a cloak. It was not he who committed the crime; it was the other side that was wrong. He had no money and it took the judge just five minutes to send him up for 12 months.

Some people who enlisted in this fight have given up. I never shall. Some people say: "Stop, there's no use." They said that to Columbus and if he had heeded them this continent might never have been discovered.

I wish to refer briefly to the Leadville troubles, regarding which the press has not spoken the truth. I don't want to criticize the press of your state, for I understand they have been very fair. When I went down to Leadville I inquired into the situation as I wanted to act intelligently on the subject. I always want to find out both sides of a question. I am not one of those men who think labor organizations never make a mistake. We have made many a one, I am sorry to say, but in our principles we are right. Ella Wheeler Wilcox⁴ said that no difficulty is settled until it is settled right. When I found out how matters stood in Colorado I found that wages had been cut from \$3 to \$2.50 per day. The miners found that they could not live as white men on such wages and they concluded to quit. They did so and they are still out and it looks like they will continue to remain on the outside.

The wages of the miners were reduced, but they protested and struck to prevent Pennsylvania conditions from being introduced in Colorado and Montana. They did not strike until they had made two efforts to settle the trouble peaceably. The men are united but the mine owners are divided, and one of them said to me that when he could not pay \$3 a day he would shut down his mine.

After looking thoroughly into the matter I talked to those 1,200 men who represented the striking miners of Leadville and I told them what I

thought. I told them to give up everything but principle — to waive all past differences, to waive the new men imported to work and to make every concession consistent with honor. They demanded \$3 per day and the mine owners offered \$2.50. Now my proposal was to concede something on both sides and make the scale of wages \$2.75 per day. Those 1,200 men, from whom nothing of the sort should be expected for God knows the miner earns [his] \$3 per day, those 1,200 men I say without a dissenting voice agreed to make this sacrifice. They were right but they were reasonable and were willing to concede anything in reason.

When I went to the mine owners with this offer of a compromise, which was indeed a concession of 50 percent, they said they would consider it. They did consider the proposition and soon returned with the message that it would not be accepted. What they wanted was unconditional surrender and a victory that would break the back of the Miners' union.

I consulted with Governor Adams, who was there in hopes of settling the strike, and I told him of the very reasonable proposition of the miners. They were willing to leave their case in the hands of the people. Arbitration would be satisfactory to the miners in almost any form. They were willing to submit their case to a committee of five or any number of men and abide by the issue. In fact all the advances were made by the miners and refused by the mine owners.

I proposed to Governor Adams⁵ that the matter be submitted to arbitration, and he eagerly accepted the offer, and said he was sure the mine owners would agree to it. The miners were unanimously in favor of it because they knew their course could not suffer before a committee of arbitration. Governor Adams himself drew up the plans and submitted them to the mine owners, but they, too, were rejected. The object of the mine owners is not so much to reduce wages as present as to break the band of union that binds the miners of Colorado together. Before I left Leadville I advised the miners to never be unreasonable but rather than submit to conditions that are attempted to be enforced on them to die and starve in their tracks, but never to give in, and every laboring man and woman in Montana should stand by them in this fight.

The mine owners may succeed in destroying the Miners' union, but if they do this republic is in danger. I don't say that labor organizations never make mistakes, for I am sorry to say they do. Here in Butte you are splendidly organized and have great power but beware how you abuse that power. I say it now that recent mistakes have been made and some of

labor's best friends attacked by laboring men. Such things cannot help but weaken the cause of labor. When a labor union commences to persecute a man it loses the moral support of the people and it must lose its power and influence just as sure as right will prevail in the end. You are well organized and powerful but such power must be used with discretion and judgment. To do otherwise is to help destroy the cause of the laboring man. Capital takes advantage of the mistakes of labor and such a mistake is the worst that can be made.

I have been called a leader. I don't want to be a leader, and I don't want anyone to follow me. I want everyone to act for himself. If a few truths I tell you are of benefit to you, accept them and profit by them.

There are 4 million men and women in this country begging for employment and begging for the right to live. You are fortunate in your condition. The world is beginning to understand, and I see an improvement in the condition of mankind.

I want to see the time come when every woman can have the same right that I have. I want to see the time when man and woman can walk together in a land where there is not a single slave. Woman is entitled to all the rights possessed by man, and when a man questions that, I almost feel ashamed of my sex. If she has not the right to vote, where did we get that right? It has been said that every magnificent man had of necessity a magnificent mother; but probably any sort of man would do for a father. The idea of making women, who have more honesty and certainly as much intelligence as men, only equal politically to an Indian, an infant, or an idiot makes me ashamed of my own sex. Without woman's help we would never have emerged from barbarism and darkness. She is entitled to walk side by side with man in the sunshine of light and should be politically his equal as she is in any other way. She will purify politics. You cannot buy a woman's vote with a drink of whiskey as you can that of a man. She should be emancipated as she deserves.

Amalgam of three slightly differing stenographic reports. Based primarily upon "Labor and Capital," *Anaconda Standard*, Feb. 9, 1897, pg. 6. Integrated with "Eugene V. Debs Talked," *Montana Standard* [Butte], Feb. 9, 1897, pg. 5; and "Labor's Leader," *Philipsburg [MT] Mail*, Feb. 12, 1897, pg. 1. The speech was delivered at the Murray Opera House in Butte.

¹ Judge Jenkins FOOTNOTE HERE.

² Jacob Coxey FOOTNOTE HERE.

³ Judge Woods FOOTNOTE HERE.

⁴ Ella Wheeler Wilcox FOOTNOTE HERE.

⁵ Governor Adams FOOTNOTE HERE.