
“I Plead Guilty to the Charge of Being Radical” :
Speech to the St. Louis Labor Conference
(August 31, 1897)

Gentlemen of the Convention and Ladies:—

I believe the gravity of the industrial situation is fully understood by every delegate here, and you gentlemen are aware that liberty is dead on American soil.

I wish to state, in support of what I say, that I have appealed to all the courts in this country, from the lowest to the highest, and have failed to get justice. I shall appeal no more. The federal judges of this country are but the creatures of plutocracy. The American Railway Union raised \$40,000¹ to test this question, only to be told in the end that we had no rights in this country which corporate wealth is bound to respect.

There have been combinations of wealth for a long time, and the time has now come, my friends, for a combination of the common people to rise up in their might and beat back to their native hell the allied forces of plutocracy.

It will not be long before Labor Day, and it is a sad thing to think that on that day, when labor should celebrate its independence, we should still see labor rattling its chains to the music of its own groans.

Labor is the cheapest commodity on God’s earth, and yet there are those who would have it at a lower price. Only the other day the united voice of labor was raised against the appointment of Mr. Powderly to a federal position,² and I notice that he was promptly put into the place. (*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 forces of society are against labor, and if labor expects to emancipate itself, labor must do it.

In my own state there are today almost 8,000 men and their families starving. Think of it! Do you realize what I mean when I say starving? In the presence of the awful facts and ghastly misery in the mining districts, description sits down powerless to draw pictures of the scene.

The time has not yet quite come to incite the populace to arise in their might, but I want to serve notice to the plutocracy that we are to hold a

meeting next month in Chicago to keep these questions alive,³ and one meeting shall follow another to keep these questions alive till there shall be such an uprising as the world has never seen.

I have been called a demagogue by the newspapers, and I accept the title, if being a demagogue means a man who stood in the front ranks with his colleagues in Chicago in 1894 and braved the dangers of that hour.

I did not come here for the purpose of furthering the Social Democracy or any other movement. There is no division among us. If your heart is touched with the scene of human suffering, I care not what you are, we can stand shoulder to shoulder in this fight. I am myself a unionist and a socialist, and I am ready at all times to fight their battles.

I am no pessimist. I do not stand with those who cannot see a single star of hope in the heavens. I am not a prophet, either, but I can see the beginning of the end.

Another meeting is to follow this. It is called for in the resolutions. Another meeting will follow that, and another, until there is an uprising that will sweep away the Supreme Court and change the entire complexion of Congress, and when that time shall come American freemen shall have their rights. We will then suppress the injunction, and the issuer of the injunction with it.

The last quarter of a century has so degraded American workingmen that there is hardly any spirit left in them. I have read that we are reaching a point where all troubles in civilized countries will be settled without the aid of the sword or the bullet, but I want to say, should it be necessary in defense of American liberty, I shall be found in the time of [crisis] not in the rear, saying "go," but in the lead, calling on you to come. It may, in the course of human events, become necessary that blood shall be shed, and I may go down to my grave a slave, but at the resurrection I do not want to hear the clanking of chains on my children.

What little brain I may have is not for sale. It is not on the market, and the plutocracy has not enough money to buy it. They may exile me and those I love, but I will not part with my manhood. The judiciary has put a padlock on my lips and has forbidden me to walk on the highway, but it is of no avail; the liberties of a free people cry aloud for protection, and my voice shall not be still. What I am doing is not for humanity, but to still the cry of my own conscience. The duty we owe is first to ourselves. Let me say to you that with unity of purpose there is power enough in this convention to revolutionize the country in twelve months.

Not long ago I was with Mr. Martin in the mining districts of West Virginia. Everything there is owned by corporations, and the miners have become so fearful of their power that they do not know whether they own their own souls. A miner started to tell me of the misery I could see they were suffering, and when I asked him his name he slipped away. He was afraid.

The mining companies employ preachers by the year to preach to the miners, and in their sermons to tell chance visitors of how fatherly the care of the company for the miner is. Fatherly care in paying him off in checks on the truck store which belongs to the company, where the miner is swindled in the prices he pays and always kept in debt to the company. They have a schoolhouse there, too — a schoolhouse where there have been no children across its threshold for five years. And it is right that there should be none — in the name of God, why do they want to educate the children in order to make the realities of their life more horrible to them than it is now? The more ignorant they are, the better it is for them while condemned to such abject misery.

Did you ever notice that whenever the plutocracy have any real dirty work to do they always employ a preacher to do it for them, and the preacher never finds a case so bad but what he is able to excuse it on some text built from the life of the Man of Sorrows who was acquainted with grief? I saw a procession of hungry children in West Virginia, and at their head was an American flag, and I said if the American flag typified such poverty and misery its color should be as black as the raven's wing.

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.*)

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 government by injunction and the judges who issue them.

I hope in the 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. But I cannot tell. Certain it is there are thousands of our citizens who are suffering, and certain it is this cannot last. The time will come 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 front and say to you: "Come on." (*Renewed cheering.*)

I shrink from that bloodshed. (*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 or hang me; but, in the language of the revolutionary heroes, I do not propose to part company with my self-respect, independence, and manhood.

We no longer have a republic — there is not a vestige of it left. 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.

Let us do our duty, one and all. Be true to yourself; be true to your family; be true to your country.

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¹ The stenographer of the *St. Joseph Herald* has this as "\$45,000."

² 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.

³ Debs was co-signatory of a call for a conference of labor leaders to be held in Chicago on September 27.