

Labor is the Great Power:
Speech in Dixon, Illinois
[excerpt]
(August 8, 1905)

Through all the centuries past the few have ruled while the many have served; the few have worn the purple and wielded the scepter while the many have borne the burdens, lived in poverty, and died in despair. The primary being was a brute. He lived in a cave. His wants were few and he depended upon his brute force and his low cunning to obtain them. It has required thousands of years to lift man from that low plane and raise him to his present exalted place — but he is not yet a free and independent being. In this discussion I do not wish to appeal to your prejudices or to excite your passions; I will simply address myself to your reason.

Labor the Great Power

Labor is the great power that made the world what it is. Labor it is that fashions the ore of the hills into blade and tool; labor it is that gathers the fleeces and transforms them into myriad of fabrics; labor it is that bids the forest to fall and in its place builds the home and factory. Everywhere labor has been responsible for the advancement of mankind in every direction. Shall it then not come into its own? Is it not time that labor should receive its just reward?

A century and a quarter ago the inhabitants of this country were subjects. They obeyed the laws of the crown, whatever those might be. But there were a few who were in advance of their time, a few who were pioneers in progress, a few who dared to say that man had the capacity to govern himself. And so these few began an agitation.

Thomas Jefferson was one of these and he was denounced by the Tory press as a rebel. Patrick Henry, who delivered that immortal oration, was another, but he was condemned as one who would overthrow the existing institutions of government and was therefore an enemy of the people. It is a fact that when our forefathers began their struggle for freedom the majority of the people believed they were in the wrong. They did not see how

it would be possible for a nation to exist without a king. But in spite of the protest of the majority, these men continued to agitate until the American revolution broke forth and as a result for the first time in history man stood forth a coronated sovereign.

Then the people applauded. Then the minority became the majority.

Causes of Inequality

But though the American revolution made us political equals it did not make us economic equals, and if men deserve to be political equals, do they not also deserve to be economic and social equals? When they are such then caste and class will disappear.

The history of the development of man is largely the history of the development of the tool he uses to develop the land. In the early history of our country there was a reasonably fair distribution of wealth. There were no multimillionaires and comparatively few paupers. Today there are thousands on the one side and millions on the other side, and both are a menace to society. In the early days the employee owned the tools with which he earned his living; today the tool is owned by the employer.

Today the capitalist buys labor as cheap as he can buy it and the employee sells it as dearly as he can sell it. Society has been divided into two classes as a result of this and we are living today under the capitalist system. Under this system labor produces, not for its own benefit, but for the benefit of its employer. It has employment only so long as the employer can find a profitable market for the manufactured goods. The result is that when the capitalist has manufactured so many of his goods that there is no longer a profitable market in which to dispose of them, he closes down his shops and his mills and laboring men are left, often to suffer or starve in the very shadow of the wealth that his labor has created.

It makes no difference whether the tariff be high or low, the money standard be of gold or silver — overproduction is bound to result from the present capitalistic system and the outcome is in every case a panic. The first of these panics occurred in 1873. the men then left idle started roaming about looking for work with which to support their wives and children. The work could not be found. When 400 or 500 miles away from their own homes, these men, finding no employment anywhere and tormented by the thought that at home their families were suffering from want and privation, grew despondent; their self-respect deserted them, their ambition was

killed in their breasts, and they fell to the level of a tramp. But he did not remain a mere tramp. Enforced idleness made him degenerate and he became a criminal.

A Change Must Come

This is one of the results of the capitalist system. Every society has its period of growth, its maturity, and then its death. This is true of the present social system. It has fulfilled its mission and it will soon be put an end to.

In the feudal ages man worked five days for his master and one day for himself. The lords claimed an alliance with God and that they were the natural masters of the common man. They believed their system would prevail forever. But their age came and went and in the place of the lords came the tradesmen, who have since developed into the capitalists.

The capitalist system has run its race and a change is in sight. When your great-grandfather made a pair of boots, they were his. He received the full value of his toil in making them. Today you may make a thousand pairs of boots and you won't own a single pair of them. The capitalist owns the tool and you can use it only for his benefit. He operates his factory while there is a profit in it for him and then he closes it up, leaving the employees to suffer.

Andrew Carnegie is a capitalist. He owns the tool by which great quantities of steel are made. Carnegie didn't make that tool. He just owns it, and he appropriates all the profits accrued from its use to himself. When he has made more steel than he can dispose of profitably he closes the mills. He does not consult the men about it, for the capitalist system says that he can't take the men into account. It doesn't matter how much suffering may result from the closing of the mills, for under the capitalist system labor is the cheapest commodity in the world. Carnegie is a parasite, a profit-taker. If this body of men whom the capitalist employs has the brains to make and use this machinery, they ought to have intelligence enough to get some of the profit out of it.

The income of John D. Rockefeller is \$33,000 an hour. Just think of it. As much as a man working for \$1.50 a day could make in 74 long years. Thus it is possible for the capitalist to exploit the laboring man.

The middle class, once called the bulwark of the nation, is fast disappearing. The department store is crushing the small dealer; the bonanza

farmer is outstripping the common farmer. It is said that the time is not far distant when ten men will control all there is of value in this country.

Deplorable Conditions

It is impossible to impress upon the people of small western cities the truth of what I have said about the sufferings of the laboring people. In Dixon, for instance, you have no multimillionaires, but go to any large city and you will see the deplorable conditions of which I have spoken. Every large city has a slum and efforts are being continually made to wipe them out or to at least confine them to certain districts. From what are the slums recruited? From the cities. The big mercantile and industrial establishments that wear out the lives of innumerable girls and children, paying them from \$2 to \$3 a week, furnish the majority of the recruits to this undesirable feature of city life. Subject to temptations on every hand and able to earn only a miserable pittance they soon yield to the tempter and fall.

Why is it that the young are seized and destroyed by the hand of Mammon? Not because capital has no feeling, but because the present competitive system requires the capitalist to hire the cheapest possible help. He must buy labor as cheap as possible. The man is displaced and a woman employed at a cheaper scale. The woman is displaced in order that a child may be hired at a still cheaper wage.

Socialism

Socialism would establish cooperation instead of competition. Socialism is opposed today by the capitalist and the small merchant who has hopes of being someday himself a capitalist. They who oppose socialism believe that it would take from those who have and give to those who have not. Nothing is more untrue. We do not want your small capital, Mr. Merchant; we want the earth. We will simply leave you to the capitalist and when he gets through with you you will come to us of your own accord. There are thousands of socialists today who were opposed to the system yesterday.

Socialism is not anarchy; it is diametrically opposed to anarchy. Anarchy proposes the overthrow of government; socialism proposes the perfection of government. Socialism believes in all for all, not all for a few.

The socialist believes instead of enslaving his fellows he should consecrate himself to his fellows' service. Under the capitalist system men must fight each other for bread, under that condition men cannot love each other. Our economic conditions must always determine our conduct toward each other. Slavery was legal while it was considered an economic necessity; when it was no longer a necessity it was made illegal. Under the present system a man can't walk up to you on the street and rob or kill you, but he can rob and exploit you by more subtle means. Ruskin¹ says it is just as bad to rob a man with a long head as with a long arm.

Socialism finds no fault with the individual but rather with the system. The earth is or should be an equal heritage for all that inhabit it. A man ought not to be dependent on any other man for work and a livelihood. Socialism now has 8 million adherents, men and women in every part of the globe who are working for economic equality. Political liberty is of no great benefit without economic freedom, and so the workers of the world are organizing themselves for the overthrow of capitalism.

In 25 years there will be no capitalists, for we are on the eve of a great change. Workingmen should follow the example of the capitalist. The capitalist does not want competition, he wants cooperation with other other capitalists and hence we have the trusts. What is a trust? It is the 1905 machine. We talk about smashing trusts. We could no more destroy the trusts than we could force the rivers back from the ocean. The evil of a trust is not in the trust itself but in its operation for the benefit of a few. No man on the inside of a trust says it is a bad thing. It is only the fellow on the outside, who has failed to get on the inside, that is against it. We are not going to destroy the trust. We are going to take possession of it.

There is a single great question before us today. It is the question of capital and labor. The workers are separating from the party of the trusts and are organizing one of their own. Socialism favors the collective ownership of everything. It is the true friend of humanity. It wants to put an end to strife and bloodshed and war, for war is only the result of commercial conquest. I wish I could get just one appropriation from Congress and that would be for enough money to sink every fighting vessel in the navy.

Socialism will put an end to child labor. There are men enough to do all the work there is to be done in the country. Under socialism we will produce to use, not to sell, and labor will get all the profit to which it is entitled.

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¹ John Ruskin (1819-1900) was an English artist and social critic. He was an opponent of orthodox laissez faire economics, arguing that division of labor had led to the alienation of workers from their output, diminished pride of craftsmanship, and contributed to general dissatisfaction. A prolific author on a myriad of topics, Ruskin’s published collected works ran to 39 volumes.