
**“Better to Buy Books than Beer”:
Speech at Music Hall, Buffalo, NY
(January 15, 1896)**

It has been said that centralization and combination is the watchword of this age. The centralization of wealth, the amassing of stupendous fortunes in the United States in the last half century is without parallel in the history of nations. In the march of progress we now count millionaires by the thousands and mendicants by the millions. We have passed the point referred to by the poet when he said:

Ill fares the land, to hastening ill a prey,
Where wealth accumulates and men decay. ¹

I do not wish to appeal to prejudice or to arouse passions. I wish simply to show that accumulated wealth in this country has created a power that not only dominates every part of the government is a menace to the very safety of the republic itself.

There are thousands of intelligent people who oppose labor organizations because they resort to the strike. They think it is not a nice thing because the horrid unions order strikes. As a general proposition, I am opposed to strikes. In my opinion a strike is in the nature of a calamity, but now and then there comes a time when men must make a choice between strike and degradation, and when that time comes I favor the strike with all the power at my command. (*Loud applause.*)

One hundred years ago Patrick Henry said, “Resistance to tyranny is obedience to God.”² On that principle we justify the strike. Every star in the flag of our Union stands for a strike. The shot fired at Lexington which was heard round the world was a strike. Were it not for that shot we would be British citizens today instead of sovereign Americans. There were those who were willing to accept colonial dishonor, but there were sturdy men who would not surrender rights at a sacrifice of manliness, honor, or patriotism. Washington, Franklin, Paine, and Jefferson — all were agitators.

I lay no claim to infallibility as to labor organizations. Their actions sometimes are rash, impetuous, and ill-advised. But I believe that the condition of the workers of this country has been infinitely improved

because of organized labor. And in organizing the workmen simply emulate the example of their employers. Railroads combine for mutual protection. General managers meet and decide to reduce wages. They determine the conditions of employment. That is called a conference. Railroad employees unite to resist the reduction. That is called a conspiracy. The difference between a conference and a conspiracy is the difference between a railroad manager and a section hand. (*Laughter and applause.*) If employers of labor and corporations have the right to combine, laborers have precisely the same right. It is more than a right, it is a duty, failing in which the laborers will be ground to atoms.

In our day every department of the government is dominated by the money power. This is not the statement of an agitator, unsupported by extraneous testimony. It was only the other day that Senator Vest of Missouri³ said that the United States Supreme Court had surrendered to the money power. The most startling proof of that assertion comes from the court itself, in its decision on the income tax, a measure designed to place the burden of taxation where it belongs. When the Supreme Court found the Income Tax Law to be unconstitutional its decision was a usurpation of the functions of Congress. I venture to say that if that law placed \$60 million of taxation upon the shoulders of the poor it would not have been found unconstitutional.⁴ (*Applause.*)

The money power is in absolute control of the United States. It has invaded the Supreme Court. It has invaded the church. It dictates legislation. It is the absolute master of the situation. It sometimes seems to me that the lust for gold has eaten the heart out of our civilization.

Judge Trumbull said the other day, "Any Federal judge can imprison any American citizen at his own sweet will." I charge that in so far as the Federal courts' relations to labor are concerned, it is despotism pure and simple. I solemnly protest against a form of government by injunction. (*Loud and continued applause.*)

Such procedure undertook to restrain us from doing what we didn't intend to do, and then jailed us for not doing it. The judge constitutes himself judge, court, and jury. When the injunction was served on me, in order to show my good faith, I sought the advice of two of the best lawyers in Chicago. They told me to proceed in the course I had been pursuing. I was within my constitutional rights. I was doing what any citizen had a right to do. I took their advice and got six months for it. (*Cheers, redoubled with laughter.*) I did not think it was a laughing matter.

What is the effect of the injunctive process? An injunction has all the force of law. It is not an enactment of Congress. It is not the will of

the people expressed through its representatives. It is an order of the judge. An injunction is the arbitrary decree of a despot. In Russia there is nothing which excels it.

Are the railroads ever restrained from reducing wages? On the Northern Pacific Railroad the employees were told if they stopped work, they were guilty of contempt of court. If you can legally restrain men from quitting the services of a railroad it follows as a logical conclusion that you can restrain railroads from reducing wages.

The nets of justice are so adjusted as to catch the minnows and let the whales slip through. We do not ask the courts to help us, but we do ask them to allow us to help ourselves. The railroad managers were permitted to combine to lower wages, and then to employ thugs and ex-convicts as deputy marshals to instigate riots, destroy property, and create public sentiment adverse to the strikers. Then it was an easy matter to overwhelm them. The public press, or a good part of it, fertilized public opinion by misrepresentation, falsehood, and other means, and upon reading what was published businessmen said, "That man Debs ought to be hanged." If the facts were as represented, I ought to have been. These are the newspapers which reach the whole people. The labor press is read only by laboring men.

Strikes are not always right, but as a general proposition they are. Only the other day Professor George Herron⁵ said the time would come when we would take a backward look, and pronounce the Pullman strikers sublime heroes.

In these times of hunger pangs, workingmen do not give up their positions to accept idleness and poverty without good cause. The world is unjust and it is a long way from generous, but it is growing a little better every day. Will the workman always draw his rags closer to him in order not to touch the silken garments he has made? Will his nostrils always be tickled by the odor of banquets which he has spread but cannot taste? Will he always scan palatial residences which he has erected but may not enter? No, not always. Workingmen are beginning to think. Soon they will begin to act. Not much longer will they supplicate for their rights, but they will take them, not by violence, not by lawlessness, but by a united ballot.

A weapon that comes down as still
As snowflakes fall upon the sod;
But executes a feeman's will
As lightning does the will of God;
And from its force, nor doors nor locks

Shall not labor come into its own? I do not doubt it.

Judge Dundy of Omaha sent a tramp to prison the other day for life for stealing a cent from a mail carrier. The same judge sent Mr. Mosier, a bank president, to jail for two years for stealing \$2 million from his depositors. What was the difference between the tramp and the banker? Two million dollars.

In many courts justice is a purchasable commodity. I ask no special privileges for the poor, but I do ask that they be allowed to stand side by side with the rich. Why should riches shield rascality any more than poverty? If a poor man commits a crime, punish him. If a rich man commits a crime — punish him. (*Applause.*)

When I was in jail in Chicago (*laughter*) there was a fellow prisoner of mine who was serving a year for stealing a coat worth \$2. He stole the old second-hand coat under as noble an impulse as ever entered the breast of man. His wife was nearly famished. She had not a coat on her back. He had no work. He had no means of buying a coat. The second-hand dealer had many second-hand coats. So he took one. The coat was not worth a dollar. But this is the question: Did that man go to jail because he stole the coat or was it because he had no money? I don't hesitate to declare that if I had exhausted every honest means to get a cloak for my wife, I'd get one, if I had to steal it, before I'd let her die for the want of it. (*Loud applause.*)

The Santa Fe Railroad, under the management of its president, Mr. Rinehart, was \$7 million short in its accounts. Yet Mr. Rinehart lives in Boston in social clover up to his ears. He committed a crime to which grand larceny is a glittering virtue. Yet he is not in jail. Why not? Because he is rich. The courts, very many of them, are not designed to punish the rich. I don't make this charge indiscriminately against all courts, remember.

What is the reason for this condition of affairs? It is because the corporations name the judges. It is almost impossible for a man to get on the Federal bench without the support of the corporations. And when he gets there he naturally belongs to the corporations.

Unfortunately for the country, there are thousands of workingmen who are the victims of conditions they did not create. We have not a government by the people so long as the best half of the people are disfranchised. I believe in political equality. We are not quite civilized so long as we deny to women the right to vote. It is her right to decide whether

he wants to vote or not. Our laws place women on a par with idiots, criminals, paupers, and Indians. If women have not the right to vote, where did we get the right? Many of our social and economic ills will never be cured until we get equal suffrage. Women have more honor than men. They have more intelligence. You couldn't buy a woman's vote with a drink of whiskey. Every magnificent man has had a magnificent mother. Most anybody will do for a father.

I don't believe that industrial problems are to be solved by force. I want to see the time when the workingman will make better use of his leisure hours. Let the workingman cultivate the beautiful graces of the home and fireside. There are no bad influences at the fireside. Better to buy books than beer. I want to be candid enough to say that I have tried both. (*Laughter.*)⁷

Goldsmith says that those who think must govern those who toil. I want the workingman to mix some thought with his toil, cultivate self-reliance, and do himself what he can to solve the labor problem. Capital is doing just the same as you would do if you were in its place. The workingmen should have home libraries. Five dollars will buy a good many books these days, and 50 cents will make a fair start. Get a primer on economics and learn a little every night. Keep up the study for a year and see if you have not done much to better your condition. Learn to depend upon yourselves, for it is not necessary to be rich in order to be a man.

If you want to be respected begin by respecting yourself. A man without an ambition and who does not want to amount to anything is the cheapest commodity on earth. If you want to be certain to have a great many friends, be sure not to need one. Save \$1 a week, or as much as you can. No man has so sure a situation as the man who has something in the bank. He is the last man to be discharged. Everybody is your friend then and ready to help you.

I believe the wage system, which is only another name for the feudal system, must disappear. Machines are displacing men. There is only one remedy, that is for each man to work fewer hours and give the rest a chance. If four hours' work a day will clothe and feed the world, let four hours be a day's work. Some changes must be made. Some monopolies must be taken over by the people. The United States is the only civilized country that does not own its telegraphs. What is true of the telegraph is true of the telephone. It is true of railroads. The people should own them, or they will own the government. They asked me in Chicago if I believed in government ownership of railroads. I replied that I preferred it to rail-

road ownership of government. All these changes will come with education. that is the lever that will lift up all into the light. The middle classes in this country are fast disappearing. Soon there will be but two — the extremely few, who are the extremely rich, and the extremely many, who are the extremely poor.

I've lost the respect of many persons, but I've managed to keep my own. People say I ought to be influenced by public opinion, but when I reflect that it was public opinion that kept alive the institution of slavery, I'd rather be excused. Public opinion is invariably unreliable. Public opinion has sanctioned every great outrage which has ever been perpetrated. Every few hundred years public opinion gets right, but that is too long for anybody to wait. The minority is usually right.

I propose to keep on good terms with myself. I would hate to be like the man who woke up in his room one night and exclaimed, "My god, there is nobody in this room."

Every great reformer has been under the ban of public opinion. Washington in his day was called a demagogue. Today he is a demigod. The difference between a demagogue and demigod is but a century. Christ, who taught the redeeming doctrine of mutual love, perished on the cross. Every reformer who has loved humanity better than himself has perished as a martyr. I hope to see the time come when the world will be civilized to the extent that it will permit a man to be true to himself. I hope to see the time when a man who is honestly trying to better conditions will be appreciated before he is dead and turned to dust for 100 years.

Every man who is trying to be right and is trying to do right is my brother. If we had more justice we could get along with less charity. Charity is humiliating, charity stunts. An employer who gives his men 50 turkeys performs a commendable act, but I don't want to get my turkeys in that way. The form of charity that gives a Christmas turkey to each employee is more degrading than the pennies dropped into the hat of a beggar. What the workingman wants is a charity that will enable him to help himself.

Published as "Strong and Mild: Eugene V. Debs Delivered an Intelligent and Forcible Address at Music Hall," *Buffalo Evening News*, vol. 11, Second Edition, (Jan. 16, 1896), pg. 1. This imperfect stenographic account checked to and combined with another published as "Full House: Music Hall Crowded to Hear Mr. Debs' Address," *Buffalo Enquirer*, Jan. 16, 1896, pg. 6.

¹ Opening couplet from *The Deserted Village* (1770), by Oliver Goldsmith (1728-1774).

² A frequently repeated, usually misquoted maxim of the revolutionary war, commonly misattributed today to Thomas Jefferson or Susan B. Anthony. The original motto, proposed for use by Benjamin Franklin as a member of a three member Congressional committee named in July 1776 to design a Great Seal of the United States, was "Rebellion to Tyrants is Obedience to God." Jefferson, a fellow member of the committee with Franklin, liked the slogan so much that he made it part of his personal seal, thereby erroneously gaining credit of authorship. Patrick Henry was not involved.

³ George Graham Vest (1830-1904), a former member of both the House of Representatives and Senate of the Confederate States of America, was a Democrat elected to the US Senate in 1878, serving there until 1903.

⁴ The income tax was ruled by the Supreme Court to be an unconstitutional direct tax in the 1895 case of *Pollock v. Farmers' Loan & Trust Co.* It was only with the adoption of the 16th Amendment to the Constitution in February 1913 that the income tax was legalized in the United States.

⁵ Rev. George D. Herron (1862-1925) taught as endowed professor of "Applied Christianity" at Iowa College (today's Grinnell College) from 1893 until his forced resignation in 1899. He was an active speaker on behalf of the Socialist Party of America during its early years, later emigrating to Europe and flipping to a position of social patriotism during World War I.

⁶ Stanza from "A Word from a Petitioner" (1843), by John Pierpont (1785-1866).

⁷ Debs's imaginative excuse for checking in to jail a day late the previous June owing to having eaten "bad cucumbers," while appearing to observers to be hungover from overindulgence in alcohol, remained a running joke among his detractors into 1896. Playing upon this, this aphorism and quip seems to have first delivered at his speech in beer-loving Milwaukee one week earlier. Its repetition in Buffalo made the news wires.