
Speech at the Columbia Theater, Atlanta, GA — Feb. 13, 1896

by Eugene V. Debs

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Eugene V. Debs, the head of the American Railway Union, spent yesterday [Feb. 13, 1896] rather quietly. He was called on at the Kimball House by members of his order and other labor organizations and he got out and saw something of the city. A large part of the day, however, he spent in his room at the hotel. Sometimes he had as many as a dozen callers in his room at once.

The other organizations of railway men did not take to him much. The Order of Railway Conductors in particular fought shy of him and did not hesitate to criticize the American Railway Union. Last night the conductors had two stenographers at the Columbia to take down the address verbatim.¹

The Columbia was crowded. All the boxes were occupied and about 60 [?] persons were on the stage....

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¹ The railway brotherhoods were extremely concerned about Debs' January to March 1896 speaking tour and repeatedly attempted to organize and fortify their own lodges in several towns on his itinerary a few days ahead of Debs' scheduled arrival. The ORC's effort to chronicle this speech was doubtlessly linked to the cooperative counter-organizing efforts of the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers, Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen, and Brotherhood of Railway Trainmen which attempted to undermine further development of the ARU. While the ORC employed two stenographers to record Debs' Atlanta remarks, the document remained one for internal use only, with no account of this speech ever published in *The Railway Conductor*, the brotherhood's official organ.

The orator of the occasion had a sympathetic audience. He spoke fluently, without attempts at eloquence, but occasionally indulging in bits of word painting which were graphic. He received frequent outbursts of applause for some sentiment or a humorous hit.

He began by stating that he was present to discuss some phases of the labor question which he declared touch the interests of all the people. He was quick to avow his faith in the future and said that he is persuaded that the ship of state will safely weather all storms.

Some of the things he said were:

“We now number millionaires by the hundreds and mendicants by the millions. Centralization of wealth in the hands of a few men absolutely dominates this country. But now we behold organizations of laboring men, imitative of the example of wealth, uniting and working together. There are those who say that labor organizations foment strife and sometimes engage in strikes. I admit that a strike is in the nature of a calamity, but now and then it becomes a question between a strike and a degradation of labor. In such a case I have said and say again, that I favor the strike. I would remind you that we live under a striking government. From Lexington to Yorktown it was a continuous strike against tyranny. The revolutionary fathers were agitators. George Washington was a demagogue in his day. Today he is a demigod. There were Tories in those days who said, ‘If you continue this agitation, we will have war.’ Washington said: ‘If war is to come, let it come at once.’”

Alluding to the inconvenience caused by strikes, Mr. Debs said:

“If an Atlanta merchant starts for the North and the train is tied up on account of a strike he condemns the strikers and denounces Debs. He does not know that the strike is the culmination of long continued wrongs and injustice and oppression. If a railroad corporation cuts its wages down to the starvation point and a strike results the company should at least divide the responsibility. Think of a man here in Atlanta who loses his position through no fault of his own. Unable to get work here he goes to Macon; has no success there; goes on; gets hundreds of miles away from home and becomes seedy.

“He feels degraded and by degrees becomes a tramp who does not want work. Instead of denouncing the tramp army, we ought to try to do something to redeem them. Our cannibalistic civilization needs reforming. There are millions of men tonight who have wives, sisters, and daughters in actual want. The one

idea today is to get money. Show me how much money a man has and I will show you how high he is marked on the social thermometer. I am not against the rich and do not intend to attempt to prejudice anyone against the wealthy, but I would have all men stand equal before the law.” (*Applause.*)

“Lincoln said that under our government man was of more importance than property. He said ‘Man before the dollar.’ We do see man before the dollar — but because he is worshiping it.” (*Applause.*)

“The world is beginning to think of the economic questions. Workingmen are beginning to think and they soon will begin to act. They will take their rights — by the ballot. Here labor is the prophet, the priest, and the king.”

Mr. Debs paid a glowing tribute to labor and what it produces. Continuing he declared that centralized wealth dominates every department of our government. It dictates legislation and then dictates the interpretation of laws.

The action of the Supreme Court in declaring against the income tax was referred to and Justices White, Harlan, and Brown were quoted. The last named said that the decision of the court was a surrender to the moneyed class. Harlan pronounced it little less than revolution.

“No anarchist could speak more vigorously in terms of stronger denunciation. No judge can reach the Supreme Court unless he is favored by the money power. Lyman Trumbull said: ‘It is no use — we are in the grasp of the money power.’ Governor Altgeld said that a federal judge usurps the authority and power of a tsar.”

Touching on the Pullman strike Mr. Debs said that first of all let it be understood that the Pullman Company owns the town of Pullman:

“From the cradle to the cemetery a citizen of Pullman is every minute of his life dominated by Pullman. Prior to the strike the wages had been reduced three times. The rents were 25 percent higher than in Chicago. When the strike occurred in May 1894, the Pullman employees owed \$70,000 rent. They could not move away. Pullman owned them. When the [grievance] committee finally reached Mr. Pullman, he said in a pharisaical spirit: ‘Haven’t I been a father to you?’

“I say I would rather take my chances as an orphan.

“The next evening the grievance committee was discharged and then the 4,200 employees quit work. There were women sewing carpets ten hours a day for 32 cents a day. The capital of this company was increased in a few years from a few million to \$61 million.”

Mr. Debs said that he saw children in Pullman begging for bread on the streets.

“I am not in favor of the destruction of anyone’s property. I am opposed to rioting and to lawlessness. The members of the American Railway Union did not engage in rioting. Not a member of the American Railway Union was arrested for rioting and lawlessness.”

Mr. Debs declared that no cars were burned until the United States deputy marshals were sworn in. He quoted from the Chief of Police of Chicago,² who said that the deputy marshals were mostly selected from the lowest classes — thieves, toughs, and cut-throats.

Alluding to the injunctions, Mr. Debs said that he took the first ones which were issued against him to two of the best constitutional lawyers in Chicago and asked them what right he had left under them, and the lawyers told him to go on as he had been, that he was doing no wrong.

“I took their advice and got six months. (*Laughter.*)
“You enjoy that a great deal more than I did.”

This sally provoked another outburst of laughter.

“When I was in jail I had a fellow prisoner who got 12 months for stealing a \$2 cloak. But the railroad wreckers go free. What is the difference between the poor thief and the rich one? One million dollars.” (*Applause.*)

In regard to what organized labor is doing, Mr. Debs said: “The working men have not taken full advantage of their opportunities.” The speaker advised the working men to read and study, and if possible save a dollar or two. Depend on yourself. Count one.

² The General Superintendent of the Chicago Police in 1894 was M. Brennan.

“Capitalists don’t quarrel about religion. They have no dissensions when they are working for certain ends. Labor organizations should profit by their example.

“There are many who have no use for the man who antagonizes existing conditions. I have lost the respect of thousands of people, but I have held my own.

“There is a great deal of discontent in the land. Some say it should be suppressed. General Miles said the other day that the unrest should be overcome by a large standing army. Labor should have a standing army of law-abiding but organized men.”

Mr. Debs said he wanted to see women enjoy political equality with men.

“Some declare that woman has not intelligence enough to vote. If intelligence were a requisite to suffrage, about seven-tenths of my sex would be disfranchised.”

In concluding his address, Mr. Debs said that he saw a promise of better things. He did not suggest any method for increasing wages or the profits in business, or of advancing the market price of the products of the farm or factory. He urged organization and a broader spirit of brotherhood among men.

At the close of his address Mr. Debs held a reception on the stage, and more than a hundred men came up from the audience and shook him by the hand. He will speak at 2:30 o’clock this afternoon and again at 8:00 o’clock at the hall of the Federation of Trades, 26-1/2 East Alabama Street. He will probably go to Macon tomorrow. The American Railway Union has no branch here, it is said, but has one in Macon.

Edited with a footnote by Tim Davenport

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