
Labor and Liberty:
Speech in Saginaw, Michigan
(February 5, 1899)

There are those who view with widespread alarm the proposition of self-government. There are those who fear the sun of the republic is to set in universal gloom. But I am persuaded that the grand old ship of state will breast all the storms and billows and safely reach the haven port. The social system is in the process of dissolution. A new system of order is evolving from competitive chaos. We stand upon the eve of the greatest change the world has ever seen.

Lamentable is the fact that the man who works longest and hardest has the least to show for his labors. The trouble is with the distribution of wealth. Those whose labor creates do not enjoy its benefits. Espouse his cause for him and you are denounced as an agitator and a demagogue; you are charged with trying to uproot and overthrow the institutions of the people. This has already been the case with those who paved the way for better conditions for the human family. Socrates was compelled to drink the fatal hemlock. The Savior of mankind perished on the cross. This has been so true of our own country. No President was ever so vilified as was George Washington. Samuel Adams, who organized the American revolution, was an agitator. Yet he it was who inspired the revolution which led to the independence of the country. He was denounced by the Tory press as an arch-rebel. Fortunate it was that at that time there was no government by injunction.

All progress is made possible through agitators. By them is given the choice between agitation and stagnation. The insufferable crime of chattel slavery polluted the soil of our country. It controlled the President, the houses of Congress, and the Supreme Court. It ruled the ministers of the gospel and controlled the press. All the forces of organized government and processes of law upheld it. It was founded on iniquity, as was the present wage system, under which men work and endure the ills and hardships of the competitive system.

Among the first to pay the penalty of this iniquity was Lovejoy, of Illinois, whose interest in the right of free speech caused him to be mobbed

and murdered. In his day there was still another — William Lloyd Garrison. A short time ago I was at Newburyport, Massachusetts, where he protested against this institution. I followed him, in fancy, to Boston and saw him pursued by another and larger mob. I saw him there face his pursuers and say to them that he would not retract. Then there was Wendell Phillips, the aristocrat, yet the greatest combination of heart and brain. he was hated because he rebelled against the degenerate, demoralizing institution of slavery. Gerrit Smith¹ and Harriet Beecher Stowe, too, are remembered. While writing *Uncle Tom's Cabin* the author was visited by friends, who pleaded with her not to give her book to the world, telling her that she would make herself infamous. Had she been stopped by the felling of the public pulse the book would never have dignified the literature of the world.

Such men and such women have made it possible for me to enjoy what little liberty is left to me and I propose to do what lies in my power to increase the liberty of every man, woman, and child to come. The world is not just, and it is a long way from generous, but it is getting better every day. The problem of the day is the economic conditions of the country. Some imagine it can be solved by overwhelming force, that a standing army will silence the protests of the workingman. But the industrial problem will not be settled until it is settled by the great principles of justice.

There are two social systems. Under the one only a few are to enjoy the wealth and the others are to serve as the hewers of wood and drawers of water. Under the other all are equal and all are to be recognized as entitled to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. I believe the spiritual truths now being voiced are to prevail throughout the civilized world. Only a few are cultured and the great mass of the people is ignorant. But civilization is awakening to the system under which this condition arises and the time is coming when men will stand together for the good of all the children of the civilized world. The times are cheering. Never has there been a time when men and women have been thinking so seriously. Most prominent is it that woman is enlisting for a higher humanity and civilization. Go where you will — counting room, banking ouse, editorial room, or the church — and you find women are taking an active part in the discussion of the great economic and industrial question.

I believe I shall live long enough to at least see the promise of a co-operative commonwealth. The laboring man will not much longer think

about the conditions, but he will act. He will not act in violence, but through the ballot.

There has been an industrial evolution during the past years. Many, especially the businessmen in the struggle of competition, are oblivious to the change. They fail to realize that the conditions are no longer as they were. In former years work was done almost exclusively by hand — by a simple tool under the control of the man who used it, and no being could doom him to industrial degradation and slavery. The tool was touched by the spirit of invention and began to expand into the machine. Little shops grew into factories, growing larger and larger. But the capitalist operates the machine for individual profit, not for the benefit of labor. There may be a generous employer who would pay good wages to his men, but they are not fixed by him. Rates are fixed by competition, which forces wages down until the final point of subsistence is reached.

Some claim that wages have not declined. But the coal miner in Pennsylvania who formerly got \$4 or \$5 a day is getting 50 cents a day. It is the same with the textile factories of the East and the cotton mills of the South. Machinery is being operated by women and children. In the day of hand work the man supported the family; there was no tramp then, the word had not been coined; but under the competitive system man has been reduced to a hunger-pang, his wife to a machine, and his child to machine oil. In those old days there were no trusts to close the doors of opportunity against the man. The laborer could look forward to laying aside his tools and becoming the employer; the clerk could look forward to becoming the proprietor. Now the clerk in the great department store is grateful if he is permitted to work even for \$6 or \$7 a week. There is no longer the opportunity to advance.

In the days of hand labor there was no overproduction. The results of labor were meager and it has been called a slow age, but there were no slums in the center of our population. There was no submerged one-tenth of the population.² There was a chance for all, but this is no longer true. Then a boy could learn a trade, but what avails him now to learn one? The machine invades the territory and after he has just learned the trade the machine comes in to do his work faster. Skill is eliminated by the machine. The machine is becoming more perfect and labor is becoming more common. The competition for work is becoming sharper every day. The more workers, the less the wages, and the tendency of wages is to go down but with a temporary rise. Under the present system they must go down until

they will just suffice to keep him. If we could work without food or shelter, wages would be nil.

They tell us that railroad engineers are getting the same wages they did years ago. But they are hauling three times as many cars. One crew of five men is now doing the work of three crews of 15 men. The same thing has happened to the printers. The linotype machine has thrown hundreds of typesetters out of employment and there is now being perfected a machine which will do the work of 20 operators. What is to become of the printer? Enter some other occupation? The machine is there, too, for the machine has entered every department of life. But there has been no betterment of the laboring man. The machine was evolved from his brain to allow him to devote hours to the improvement of the mind, but under the present system it has worked out simply to enslave the man.

Crime and suicide are directly traceable in a large measure to idleness of the rich as well as the poor. Excessive wealth is just as degenerating, just as degrading, and just as demoralizing as abject poverty. One gets more than he can use, while another is in a constant struggle from the cradle to the grave.

They say our system is rational and they quote the words, 'the poor always ye have with you,'³ and go along satisfied, never recalling that those words were uttered in rebuke. I don't wonder men don't want to work under this system. Who wants to be a coal miner? How would you like to go down into the earth 200 feet and occupy a cell for life for 60 cents a day? That is human slavery and in some ways worse than our old system of chattel slavery. [The chattel slave] had his animal wants supplied, was housed and fed and clothed, because he had a commercial value. The modern slave does not. He has his wages squeezed out of him. If sick there is none to send a doctor; if out of employment he must get along as best he can. The chattel slave had steady employment and didn't have to beg from door to door for permission to work. The chattel slave was sold to the highest bidder, but the wage earner has to go into the market and sell his work to the lowest bidder.

Work is becoming more precarious every day. All of the forces of nature, all her materials are ready for the application of hands and brains, but men are not permitted to work, for between them and labor stands the capitalist, who has organized labor for personal gain, no matter what becomes of the laborer. When the man sells his labor he sells himself and the purchaser becomes the master, the seller the slave. This system is

undermining the American home and when the American home falls the republic falls and the brightest light that ever gloated across the heavens of the nations goes out.

The system is rapidly reaching concentrated cooperation. A man no longer makes a shoe, but 70 men with machines make thousands of pairs of shoes. But we have this paradox: that the easier it is to make them the harder it is to get them. Competitive devices take from him the reward of his production.⁴ Formerly, when a man made a shoe, he could buy it back, but now the average worker receives one-quarter in wages of what he has produced. The worker and his dependents form two-thirds of the population and the remaining one-third cannot absorb the other three-fourths of his product, and so we have overproduction. Two years will see us struggling under the results of overproduction again. Panics are becoming longer and the intervals between them shorter. Politicians want to open new markets across the Pacific and they want to send to them the very goods our own people are suffering for. If the people of this country had the purchasing capacity equal to their productive power there would be no overproduction. We would shorten the labor day and instead of struggling through on the animal plane would develop the real man, have labor not competitive but cooperative, and make this the greatest civilization the world has ever known.

I have no sympathy with the expansion policy.⁵ I personally was not in favor of the war. I recall the words of Victor Hugo, "Peace is the virtue of civilization; war is the crime." We claimed that this war was commenced in the name of humanity. The first thing we did was take Puerto Rico without the consent of the governed, and yet that is the great principle underlying our own government. The inhabitants of Cuba had been the victims of tyranny and exploitation for centuries. It was not of the ruling class of Spain alone, but of the United States. It was not the common people of Spain. But it was the common people of both countries that had to enter the war; it was the workman who had to fight workman. If we are in complete control of Cuba it will not be five years before it will be Mark Hanna's plantation. What will we have done for Cuba? Simply given them a new set of masters. I believe it possible to settle all questions without war. At the first call the workman hastens to the front. In the rebellion he rushed to the front to save the republic, and how much of it belongs to him today? All war is degrading and demoralizing and I hope to see the time

when workingmen will cease to fly at each other's throats at the behest of their masters.

Competition is cornering herself. The corporation is being absorbed by the trust and the next stage will be a trust of trusts; combination is coming to be master of the age. People are becoming aroused and will learn that capitalism is but one link in the chain. As capitalism is the outgrowth of feudalism, so socialism is the outgrowth of capitalism. the change will come naturally. Socialism is still offensive because people do not understand it. It is only a cooperative industry in which every man receives the equivalent of this production. Work will then be a pleasure. Why shouldn't we be coal miners if by so doing we can work three hours a day under the best conditions and have hours for the improvement of the intellectual and moral life?

We are not opposed to private property, but to private property in the means of life. The basis of industry is to be cooperative. But no human being shall have private property in the means of production, and the economic problem shall be solved; there will be economic as well as political freedom and the declaration of independence shall be realized.

In this country we still have the ballot. A revolution can be brought about by this method. For this purpose we are organizing the people. To this we must come and to it we are coming. The signs of the times are cheering. Men are being impoverished, the businessmen are being crowded out by the big department stores, and when at last the time comes they will vote out competition and vote in cooperation. As competition declines cooperation increases. If not for cooperation the government wouldn't hold together five minutes. The railroads, which are now operated for private profit, will then be managed by the people. I would take possession in the name of the people. You say it is confiscation. how did these men now in control get the property? They froze out the smaller stockholder. His property was confiscated by the large holders. The large corporations absorbed the individual, the trust the corporations, and the people in time will absorb the trusts.

If we are fit for political equality we are fit for economic equality. If one man is an economic slave, the other will be the economic millionaire. The failures of the past year represent the disintegration of the middle classes. It is either become a millionaire or a mendicant — with the chances one to a million in favor of the latter.

In the humanizing process I want to see woman have every right that man enjoys. Some say that woman should not have the right to vote. I believe if she did many of the ills which we claim would disappear. Woman has more integrity, more honesty, than man. You could not buy her vote for a drink of whiskey.

I can only outline the work we should do, not complete it in detail. Arouse the workingman to the consciousness of this true power and brush from his knees the dust of servitude. Have faith in yourselves and the justice of the great cause of labor. Brush jealousy and envy aside and stand together in one great brotherhood. Every man should be a missionary in the field of labor. Disseminate intelligence. There is no darkness but ignorance and slavery. Reach down and lit up the men who can't read or he will drag you down. Books are better than beer. Under the new system you will become a man. The people collectively can do all things. I can sum it up in the three words — read, think, and study.

We are not going to extend the powers of government, but to limit them. At present it is coercive — a huge police system; under the new it will be perfectly administrative. We shall have the initiative and referendum. When a law becomes oppressive we will repeal it. Corruption will be unknown, because you can't corrupt the whole people. Then will we have an industrial, economic, and political republic and liberty shall triumph.

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¹ Gerrit Smith (1797-1874), an anti-slavery activist and politician from New York, was elected to a single term Congress in 1852 on the ticket of the Free Soil Party. Smith was a financial angel of the abolitionist movement.

² Allusion to the ranks of the unemployed.

³ From *John*, chapter 12, verse 8.

⁴ Invented in the middle 1880s, the linotype machine allowed an operator sitting at a type-writer-like keyboard to generate finished sections of hot lead type line-by-line, eliminating the need to place letters of type individually.

⁵ That is, the broadening of national control over foreign colonies and their markets.