

Go Into Politics the Right Way:
Speech to the Joint Convention of the Western
Federation of Miners and Western Labor Union¹

[excerpt]

(May 31, 1902)

Mr. President and Men and Women of the Cause of Labor:—

I yield to no man in the desire for unity of the working class. So far as I am concerned, I am willing to make any sacrifice to secure that unity save one, and that is principle and honor. [*Applause.*]

With the withdrawal of the Western Labor Union from the American Federation of Labor I had absolutely nothing to do. If, however, the withdrawal was justifiable at that time, the years that have since intervened have simply served to vindicate the wisdom of such action. [*Applause.*]

I wish to say in the beginning that I have been on terms of personal kindness with the two gentlemen who are your guests on this occasion, the two representatives of the American Federation of Labor, and if I am opposed to them today, it is because of certain fundamental differences in reference to the labor movement, and not from any personal consideration.

Mr. Morrison² asks: If there is anything wrong with the American Federation of Labor, why no remain within the federation and right the wrongs from within, instead of opposing it from without? Why, gentlemen, did not the founders of the American Federation of Labor remain within the organization of the Knights of Labor and right the wrongs from within? [*Applause.*]

Let us discuss another point — the president of the American Federation of Labor — and my only regret is that he is not present here today. When I have anything to say to a man, I like to meet him face to face and give him an opportunity to speak in his own behalf. The president of the American Federation of Labor is also the vice-president of the [National] Civic Federation. Mark that, will you! You may say, “He is only acting in an unofficial capacity as an officer of the Civic Federation.” Samuel Gompers, president of the American Federation of Labor, becomes “Sammy” Gompers, vice-president of the Civic Federation. Mark Hanna is reported to have said on leaving the council room, “We have forgotten Sammy!”

and he was made vice-president — or does anyone think he was because he was a cigarmaker? Don't you know, and don't I know, he was made vice-president of the Civic Federation solely because he was and is the president of the American Federation of Labor?

You may tell me that ministers of the gospel are members of the Civic Federation, and I answer, so much the worse for the gospel. *[Applause.]*

Now, observe these ministers, these humble followers of the meek and lowly Jesus, the friend of the workingman, who, if living and here in Denver today, would stand for what I am advocating. *[Applause.]*

They appointed Bishop Potter to the Civic Federation; they did not appoint Father Hagerty.³ They know their business; they are taking no chances.

Twenty thousand workingmen went on strike in the city of Boston recently and the capitalists were very much alarmed. A class struggle was on exhibition. Secretary Easley⁴ of the Civic Federation promptly consulted with the capitalists and they sent their emissaries to consult with the leaders of the strike and asked them to order the men back to work and solemnly promised that justice would be done. The men returned to work, but their leaders were told there was no work for them. The strike was broken, the men were demoralized, and the manly men who had the courage to lead them were out of jobs.

Were I delegate to this convention, I would certainly favor the unity of the working class. But I would make some stipulations to the American Federation of Labor, and among the first would be, "When you cut loose from the Civic Federation, we will talk over matters looking to unity — but not until then." I would point to the fact that "your leading officers are members of the Civic Federation and your executive council have not repudiated their action in joining and accepting offices. In this case silence gives consent."

There is another matter to be considered. You may have been told what great things have been done for you. I am going to tell you what they have never done — what they never will do for you. It is conceded that the coal miners are thoroughly organized; they are also affiliated with the American Federation of Labor. We are told they are the most powerful organization in the world. What is the condition of these wage-workers? They live in miserable hovels, and their wives and children are half-clad and poorly fed. According to the official report of the Bureau of Labor Statistics of the state of Pennsylvania there are 146,000 coal miners in that

state. For the year 1901 — the year in which they were supposed to enjoy the fruits of their great victory — their average wage, according to the official report, was 78 cents a day! What do you think of that? How do you like it?

What is the condition of the workers in the South today? It is true they have not been organized very long — some of them — but in some parts they are very well organized; but they will never materially better their condition under the present industrial system. Today, gentlemen, there is not one state in the South that has a child labor law. Capitalists from the North went to the South and said, “If you will agree to remove certain obnoxious restrictions, we will locate our cotton factories in the South.” And today throughout the South, thousands of children in these cotton mills are being dwarfed in mind and deformed in body, debarred from the happy playtime and school-time of childhood and youth, grinding out for their capitalist masters the profits to satisfy their greed. These are the conditions prevailing in the South today.

Now, to return to the coal miners — and my heart goes out to them — I would willingly give five years of my life, and I mean every word of it, if I could only bring any substantial relief.

Recently they met at Scranton and agreed to strike if their demands were not conceded. The strike was not called. On the 1st of April [1902] they were ready, but they were prevailed upon to submit their demands for arbitration and settlement to the Civic Federation. They asked for 30 days to consider, but they knew in advance the demands of the miners would never be granted. They knew this on the 1st day of April. Why was not the Civic Federation honest enough to say plainly and at once, “We can’t do anything for you; you will have to fight your battle alone.” When the 30 days expired they asked for a few more days’ time and, finally, the statement was made that the Civic Federation was powerless and could do nothing for them.

Do you suppose that Mark Hanna is an idiot? He is anything but that! He knew on the first day of April, as well as later, that the Civic Federation could not do anything for those struggling miners. What is the result of these delays? Every miner knows that on the first day of April they would have struck as one man. When finally the strike was declared it was carried by a bare majority. They saw that they were betrayed, and many said, “The best thing to do is to go back to work.”

These mines are mainly owned by a few plutocrats and they say that they are going to run their mines as they choose. I tell you they haven't the right to own these mines and reduce workingmen to wage slavery. This slavery succeeds the black slavery of the South, and the boss succeeds the overseer with his whip and lash.

By the strike these plutocrats suffer some inconveniences and loss of profit, but in the final results they will not lose anything. These coal barons live on the Nob Hills; have carriages and yachts and vaults filled with gold; they can live sumptuously, but the miners go hungry, and it would require the genius of a Dante to depict their haggard condition. These miners have not even the right to walk on the public highways! Their wives and children live in penury and want and misery. No sooner had the strike been declared when 2,000 special police were sworn in, doubtless to guard the public highways "where even a dog has a right of way." Read the records of Homestead, Virden, Hazleton, and Coeur d'Alene — the story is ever the same!

Now when the operators have stamped out this strike and crushed, I want to know what the American Federation of Labor is going to do for them? What can it do for them? It is our right to know if they have still some relief in store — some balm in Gilead? If they have such, let them tell us what it is. If not, we will tell them what we have and what we propose to do. *[Applause.]* We are going to begin right here! We are going to begin right now in this western country. I tell you the day of trade unionism in its antiquated form is past. Not that I am opposed to trade unions, but I want them up to date; I want them equipped with a rapid-fire gun in this modern warfare instead of the old blunderbuss. They will have to change their methods before they can emancipate the downtrodden workingmen and women of the earth! That is their true economic mission. I want the trade unions to organize thoroughly and to assert their rights upon the economic field and to do all they can to keep them there! *I want the trade unionists as such to stand together upon a political platform!*

I do not ask them to become a political organization; I wouldn't allow them to do so, if in my power to prevent. But I do want them to use their political power at the right time and the right place, and in the right way! *[Applause.]* The leaders of the American Federation do not want any political action; they advise trade unionists to keep out of politics while they use their official prestige to boost themselves into political jobs! The old

parties are satisfied to have you keep out of politics. They know that without such action you have no power.

Did you see the injunction recently issued by Baker — Judge Baker⁵ of Indiana? Well, he is an old man, almost worn out. Now, they have got to have some more of the same kind of judicial material, some more of the same kind of stuff, when old Baker shuffles off this mortal coil. This old corporation judge has a son precisely like himself. Now, Roosevelt has appointed to the federal bench of Indiana this son of baker — Judge Baker, the infamous tool of the corporations. Every time he had a chance he attacked workingmen in the interest of the capitalists. The other day they had a local strike in Indianapolis when the employers rushed to Judge Baker for an injunction and he said: “I want you not only to ask for an injunction, but to ask for damages and I will grant both the petition for injunction and damages.” Think of a judge, when an injunction is asked for asking the petitioners to also demand damages against half-fed working people! And the son of this man, another just like him, Roosevelt has appointed judge, and they are both on the bench of Indiana today; both ready to serve injunctions in the interest of the capitalist and corporations!

I am a socialist! That is to say, I am a “ripe” trade unionist. There are two kinds of trade unionists — those who are green and those who are ripe. I ought also, perhaps, to mention a third kind — those who have become rotten. [*Applause.*] Those are the fellows you want to keep your eye on.

To me, it is the most pitiful spectacle to see representatives of workingmen lobbying in legislative halls and begging to have some law for the alleged benefit of labor put on the statute books for some 2x4 judge to declare “unconstitutional.” You don’t want lobbyists in the outer halls; you want your members in the legislative seats to make laws for you.

“Just keep out of politics!” they insist, but I am here to tell you *to go into politics — but go in the right way!* In the matter of politics it is safe to follow the example of the capitalists. A successful capitalist knows his business. Lobbyists and attorneys are not employed by individual capitalists, but by corporations. Labor must organize in the interests of labor and follow the political example set by the capitalists. These same capitalists organize a corporation and then push it into politics and every one of them advises you to “keep out of politics.” Mark Hanna has been in politics all his life and he is worth \$20 million, and the Pennsylvania miner, who is not in politics, gets 78 cents a day — and a grave in the potter’s field.

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What did the federation do for you in the strike at Leadville? You appealed for help and spent \$100 in your efforts to obtain it, and after a dreary waiting you got a \$5 contribution from the East. It is well enough for them to ask help from the West, but it is in order also to ask if the helping hand of the East has been visible in the western country. If it has I do not think there are any witnesses to the fact and it would take a magnifying glass to discover it.

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I ask no man to be responsible for my words. I am not infallible, but I will simply say in conclusion, if I were a delegate I would refuse the proffered official hand and I would reduce to writing my cause for so doing, and if this is done, and I know you are able to do it, it will challenge the approval of any right-thinking men not only in the West, but all over the United States. I know that organized labor in the East is rife with discontent; I know that the most progressive trade union elements in the East are opposed to the reactionary policy of the American Federation of Labor, which you are not asked to endorse. If you take decided action it will strengthen their hands. They have every reason to believe you will, and the report will echo from the Atlantic to the Pacific. But if you want to turn the hand back on the dial of labor; if you want to strike another blow at the heart of labor, subscribe to the present policy of the American Federation. If, on the other hand, you are keeping step with the inspired music of progress; if you can see, if you can hear, if you can feel — in other words, if you are not totally dead to all the appeals of your fellow men — adopt, by a unanimous vote if possible, but adopt, a vigorous and progressive policy and after adopting that policy fling your banner to the breeze and appeal to the workingmen of the country to rally beneath its folds. Wipe out the limitation implied by your name and let the Western Labor Union become the American Labor Union.⁶

I admire the western spirit. I am with you in this and will face the East on this proposition. Now, if the American Federation of Labor really wants to unify, let it cut loose from labor's enemies; let it procure a divorce between Samuel Gompers and Mark Hanna! [*Applause.*] Let it declare for independent political action along class conscious lines and then — all hail! — we will then say the hour has struck for union. The East and the West will be wed and we will have an all-embracing organization. We will

conquer, grasp the reins of government, and establish the socialist republic! [*Prolonged applause.*]

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¹ From May 26 through June 8 a joint convention of the Western Federation of Miners, Western Labor Union, and the Hotel and Restaurant Employees’ Union was held in Denver, bringing together 300 delegates to form a broad new national labor organization, the American Labor Union. In an effort to forestall this effort, the American Federation of Labor dispatched two of its top officials to Denver — Secretary Frank Morrison and Thomas I. Kidd, a member of the organization’s executive council. For two hours the pair attempted to make a case for keeping politics out of union activity and for affiliation of the ALU with the AF of L. With time at a premium, rather than hearing a protracted series of statements by delegates, the floor was yielded to Gene Debs, present on the floor as a guest of the convention. Debs delivered the following reply, speaking for about an hour. This condensed version of the speech is extracted from a stenographic report.

² Frank Morrison (1859-1949), a member of the International Typographical Union and close associate of Samuel Gompers, was secretary of the American Federation of Labor from 1897 to 1935 and secretary-treasurer from 1936 until his retirement in 1939.

³ Thomas J. Hagerty (c. 1862-192X), a socialist “labor priest,” addressed the Western Labor Union’s joint convention immediately after Debs.

⁴ Ralph M. Easley (1856-1939) established the National Civic Federation in New York City in 1900 and served as chair of the group’s executive council for the rest of his life.

⁵ John Harris Baker (1832-1915) was a Republican member of Congress from 1875 to 1881. He was appointed a federal judge by President Benjamin Harrison to fill the bench seat vacated by the promotion of Debs nemesis William A. Woods in 1892.

⁶ The Denver convention to which Debs spoke changed the name of the Western Labor Union to the American Labor Union.