

“No Masters, No Slaves” :  
Keynote Speech to the Joint Convention of the Western  
Federation of Miners and Western Labor Union <sup>1</sup>  
(May 26, 1902)

Ladies and Gentlemen:—

The privilege of addressing you upon such an occasion as this imposes certain duties and responsibilities which I could not disregard without betraying your confidence, insulting your intelligence, and violating the sanctity of my own conscience. You have a right to expect that I shall be honest with you, that I shall be honest with myself, and in this respect, at least, you shall not be disappointed.

We are in the midst of the mightiest industrial revolution the world has ever known. Humanity is trembling upon the verge of the greatest organic change in all history. The capitalist competitive system is productive of industrial masters and industrial slaves. We have the fruit of this system before us for inspection. It has given us millionaires and mendicants, palaces and hovels, rogues and rags. It has reduced the workingman, the producer of all wealth, to the very deadline of degradation.

The importance of organization is so generally conceded that it need not be discussed. In every great contest you have been divided, your members have been blacklisted, your unions have been destroyed, you have been left at the mercy of your masters. The time has come for the workingman in every department of industrial activity to realize that he has a class identity, that he has class interests, that if necessary for workingmen to combine upon the economic field where they are weakest, it is vastly more important that they shall combine upon the political field, where they are absolutely invulnerable. (*Applause.*)

Consider, briefly, the status of the workingman of this country. He has nothing but his labor-power in the very nature of the situation. If he succeeds in finding employment he simply succeeds in selling himself into wage bondage. Take the most successful wage earner in Denver, he does not know when some machine may be invented to displace him. He does not know where he can find another position if he loses this one. He goes up one street and down another. He leaves the city where he lives —

perhaps goes on the trucks of a freight train. In due course of time he becomes what they call a vagrant, a tramp; a victim of the existing economic system in which man's life is of absolutely no value; a system in which property alone is valuable; a system where private profit is more important than human life. (*Applause.*) He is idle, his wife may be in want, his children may be suffering. No matter; profit must be made. One hundred and forty-six thousand of these men are now on a strike in the East. Examine the reports of the Pennsylvania Bureau of Statistics for 1901 and you will find the average wage for the year of the Pennsylvania coal miner was 78 cents a day. They have been organized — they have been thoroughly organized. Some of them were foolish enough to imagine that they could in that organization conquer the capitalist. They were to strike on the first of April, but under the influence of the Civic Federation — a very useful annex to the capitalist class — failed to do so, and now after seven weeks the Civic Federation acknowledges its helplessness.

Not long ago I wrote a letter to the Eastern press in which I said: "You miners ought to get together, 116,000 strong, and you ought unanimously to pass a resolution to the effect that you propose to obey the law, that you also propose to exercise all the rights and privileges granted you by that law, including the walking of the free man upon the highways of the state (*applause*); and if it comes to pass that a miner is shot down, you ought to shoot back. If the mine operators of Pennsylvania insist upon a killing program, let it be an operator for a miner, and not miners only, as in the past. These 146,000 miners have been voting the Republican ticket. They gave the present Governor of the state his 280,000 majority and he is rewarding them for their fidelity in the old fashioned capitalist way. He is retuning bullets for ballots. When they learn to vote as they strike, when they assert their united power at the ballot box, when they vote their class into power, they will no longer have to starve upon the highways; they will no longer have for food the lead shot at them from the mouths of capitalistic guns. (*Applause.*)"

My heart is with the strikers. I hope they will win. I would, if I could, give them all the support of all the organized and unorganized men of the city of Denver and the state of Colorado. (*Applause.*) I would try to teach them, however, the better way. A statement in a local paper, made by a mill owner, says; "The mill owners will not suffer." No, they will continue to eat three square meals a day. They can draw upon their bank accounts.

The struggle is one between a human stomach and a steel bank vault. (*Applause.*)

The working man no longer owns the tools with which he must work. The owners of the tools are the masters of the slaves who are compelled to use the tools. The whole battle is being fought about the tool of production. I would have you understand its great importance in this struggle. There was a time when the workingman owned the tool with which he worked. That tool was long since touched by the want of invention, and the machine is owned by a combination of capitalists. The workingman in this process lost control of the tool with which he worked. He still has his labor-power; he cannot work without his tools and he is compelled to apply to the owner of his tool for permission to work — in other words, for permission to live. Not only this, this machine has become so perfect that it may be operated by the unskilled labor of a woman or the deft fingers of the child, so that they have to produce profit for their masters.

In this system it is not a question of male labor or female labor, of white labor or of black labor; it is a question of cheap labor. (*Applause.*) He who produces cheapest controls the market. Then entire burden of the profit falls upon the working man. This is the tendency today in every department of activity.

I am no reformer. So far as I am concerned I propose to end, not mend, this system. I don't like the term "reformer." It savors of suspicion. The most successful thieves I know pretend to be reformers. I like the term revolution. There is something in it that stirs the blood. I enjoy it. I prefer agitation to stagnation. The time has come for action. I believe the conventions now in session realize it and the delegates will put themselves upon record in a way to give hope and inspiration to the working class of the entire country. (*Applause.*)

The Socialist Party is not a reform party. It proposes to abolish the capitalist system to transfer from private hands all the means of production and distribution and turn them over to the people in their collective capacity. If the coal, for instance, is not the people's, whose is it? (*A voice: "Mark Hanna's!"*) That seems to be the opinion of the workingmen, for they have been voting that way. Thousands of the working men have consented to make him a silent partner in the leadership of the American labor movement. (*Laughter.*) If I were a dove I would as soon submit my case to a hawk for arbitration.

Now and then some splendid man occupying the pulpit dares speak out — it is not long before he is, like you, he is out of a job. You had a splendid example here in your midst in Myron Reed. (*Long, continued applause.*) It is gratifying to me it is a beautiful tribute, that he is remembered as he deserves to be, with gratitude and love. Myron Reed was a man of profound sympathies with the struggling and suffering poor. When the miners were on a strike in Colorado in '94; when they were besieged near Cripple Creek; and when the forces were being mustered to charge on the, Myron Reed stood in the presence of his fashionable congregation and said: "My heart is on Bull Hill. I have a deep sense that the miner was there first!" (*Renewed applause.*) From that moment he was doomed. And he did not wait to be crucified, he crucified himself. He espoused the cause of the working class. The "respectables," so-called, were turned against him. His former friends deserted him. He was in better company for it.

It takes a real man and a real woman to be a Socialist. When great principles have been involved in history and the majority were always wrong, the minority have invariably been right; and in the majority of events the minority have become the majority, and so it will be with the socialist movement. (*Applause.*)

I appeal to you workingmen to stand together today. Resolve that you will be true to your class. Then in the spirit of Andrew Jackson, accept the consequences of your act. Emphasize every industrial conflict by political action. The ballot is the weapon. It was found after a thousand years of blood and tears. It is criminal not to make use of it, or, worse still, to use it to forge our fetters more securely. I appeal to you to read and think and study, and above all if you have any prejudice against socialism to dismiss it. You were told that it was a bad thing. Who says so? Trace the statement to its source and you will find it is made by the man who lives out of your labor. (*Applause.*) Socialism is good for men. If it were not he would not be the man to warn you against it.

A sane capitalist ought to embrace socialism. He does not do it for the reason that in this mad, insane strife the strings of his heart have almost dried. His blood is no longer red. Through all his life he has been seeking to ruin the workingman because his salvation as a capitalist has compelled it.

When the work of the world is cooperatively done there will be no masters, no slaves. He therefore has a right to work, for only by work can he maintain himself. He would work by divine right. The machinery of the

world would be at his service. The machine is not yet ended. This will be its message:

Come to me, you wage workers; at your bidding I will work and I will produce; I will reserve from each day a certain number of hours that you may devote to moral and intellectual improvement; I will make it possible for you to live a complete life; I will make it possible for your soul to be emancipated from the domination of your stomach; I will make it possible for you to fertilize this earth; come to me. Work together cooperatively. I am at your service; I will produce not for profit, I will produce for use. I will produce to supply your physical wants; I will make it possible for every man to find the kind of work that nature intended that he should do; I will make it possible for every man to be an intelligent man. I will transform this miserable dungeon that covers you; I will make it a temple of sciences; I will make you workingmen the sovereigns of the earth. I will make the badge of labor the only badge of nobility.

*(Applause.)*

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