Unequal Opportunity, National Curse

Labor Day Address by Col. C. E. S. Wood, at The Oaks

My Friends: I am like some opera singers, not in very good voice today, and if the people back there can't hear me and will say so, I will try and reach them.

We are having an exhibition now of the prayer which an old Scotchman put up at the end of a long drought such as we have had. He said, "Oh, Lord, send us down refreshing shoors to bless this land," and as he commenced to speak the raindrops commenced to patter down and they came harder and harder and the old man said, "Nae sae hard, Lord, nae sae strong, Lord"; but they came harder and harder until he broke forth with, "Oh, Lord, this is ridiculous."

Now, I think after our own drought that to serve Labor Day up with such a deluge just at the time I want to talk to you is ridiculous.

But I haven't come here to tickle your ears with sounding phrases meaning nothing. I have come here to preach you a sermon. I am not particular whether it pleases you so much as that I say what I believe to be the truth. The Ancient Greeks had a fine habit of opening their assemblages such as this with an invocation to the gods, calling down the curses of the gods on any speaker who concealed his true thought, and I think what we need everywhere today, in pulpit, in court and on the political platform is the truth, without fear.

I know of no better subject to speak of on Labor Day than labor. What is it? What is labor? If you will imagine this earth peopled only by men as savage as the animals, living on the wild roots, dressing in the skins of the beasts they have slain, you can imagine a world without labor. Not quite. They labor to dig the roots; they labor to skin the beasts and tan the skins. Labor is man's effort. It is the great giant which picks up this ball we call the earth and shakes it between his hands until it pours forth inexhaustible jewels. Labor is the real creator. It creates everything. (Applause.) There is nothing, from the baby's rattle to the brass-band at a politician's speech (not this one) that is not the product of labor, except the speech. There is nothing useful, precious, luxurious—nothing, that is not the product of labor. Labor, I repeat, is the creator. It says, "Let there be light," and it tosses the furious rivers into their prisons and chains them to the wheels and the daylight blazes through the cities and the lower darkness sparkles with the stars which labor has created. It says, "Increase and multiply," and the tiny and delicate spears of wheat and all the herbage of the fields come up and by their necromancy work the miracle till the harvest piles up an hundred-fold and a thousand-fold for the children of man. Labor, the great creator, says, "Replenish the earth," and the machines which labor has created busy their fingers and pour forth a flood of all that is good, all that is luxurious for man. But when I say that labor has set in motion these machines, at once you will see that labor is not merely the labor of muscle, the mere bodily effort, but that labor is muscular effort directed by the mind, and more, directed by the soul, so that of labor we may say no less than that it is the expression of man's body, mind and soul.

It is true that under our system of society the manual laborer, the day laborer for wages, is the one who needs the most relief, but I want to emphasize to you that his cause is the cause of all. (Applause.) That we are all either laborers or parasites consuming the product of labor. (Applause.) You cannot escape that conclusion—If labor of body and mind produces all things, then he who produces nothing steals something from somebody. (Applause.) But the parasite who produces nothing, who steals something, is not the hobo, the pick-pocket, the burglar—these are all but a drop in the bucket and are themselves the product of this state of society. The hobo and the robber who dwell in the higher places, not only producing nothing but holding fast and closing the doors of opportunity, these are those to whom you had better direct your thought.

Now, if it be true that by labor all things come from the earth; if it be true that everything that we have comes out of the planet by labor, then you must see that the very first question is who is to own the planet? Who is to control the earth? Who is to control the opportunity to get at the earth and coin wealth by labor? The injustices do not lie between the mere hand-laborer, the day-laborer on the railroad track and the salaried man. The injustices do not divide themselves between whether a man works for wages, or works for a salary; whether he works with his hands, or works with his brain. The injustices lie deeper and different and do not divide themselves as between manual toil and brain labor. They lie in this: You have been told for generations, every time labor has got together, that your boys have the same chance; your boys can rise to the highest eminence. Andrew Carnegie was a stoker on a locomotive; Rockefeller was a bookkeeper in a commercial house. I want to tell you that the people who delude you with that sort of talk do not know anything about the trouble with society that keeps the poor poor and enriches others through poverty. The very evil is that of which they brag; that with which they seek to console you. The very evil is that the son of a laborer, or of anybody, can become an oil king or any other king and control the destinies of millions of human beings. (Applause.) And I want to tell you that these cheap and superficial demagogues of the newspapers and political forum that say to you, "All men have their chance. See how the son of the rich man goes down and out." I want to say that they do not know whereof they speak. I say it is an evil of society if the son of a rich man, having honesty and ordinary industry, finally lands at the pick-and-shovel because he finds no other opportunity open to him, but the great gates of God-given opportunity—the earth itself—barred from his entering. I will say that over again, because I want you to take it away with you. I am preaching a sermon and want you to take it home with you, that the evil of our present arranged society is that the son of the poor man may become a moneyed king, or any king, or that the son of the rich man may be ground into the earth. (Applause.)

You are again flattered with the statement that this is a republic. That we have no ruling class—no master class. It is true we do not have a crowned king. It is true we do not have a birth-given aristocracy, but it is not true that we do not have a master class. It is not true we do not have a ruling aristocracy. And the reason for it is just, that the son of any man, poor man or rich man, may reach into that plutocracy and aristocracy, as Carnegie and Rockefeller have done, by monopoly of opportunity. The reason is just exactly the same that it was in ancient Egypt. We haven't changed a thing but the outer garments. We have chopped off the head of the king and taken away the raiment of the nobility, but we have left everything that makes aristocracy; that inevitably makes the ruling class, and that is the opportunity to control the sources of wealth. We have left that just as unchanged as it was in ancient Egypt. We have left it just as it was in feudal Europe. The land is still parceled out by the king called Congress tracts forty miles wide across the continent are given by paper title to several railroads. Title to land is still given on paper from the non-user to the non-user. The title to this earth here in Oregon today is exactly the same as it was in feudal Europe. They will tell you in these cheap and demagogic columns and on these demagogic platforms that every boy and girl has the same opportunity in our free land. I deny it. The man who came here twenty years ago under this system of paper title had the opportunity to forestall and buy up all the timber lands of Oregon, and I say to you that your child, born today, the young men coming here today, have not the same opportunity to get timber land as the man had twenty years ago, and that same thing applies to every valuable portion of the earth; whether it is a mine, the forest or the agricultural fields. Fifty years ago the anthracite coal of Pennsylvania and West Virginia was more open to those who could take it and hold it by paper title than today. I deny that anybody in the United States today has an equal opportunity with the coal barons who have monopolized the entire coal supply. And so I could repeat all down the line of natural opportunity. Equal opportunity never has existed under our systems of society. It shrinks and tightens and disappears just as time rolls on and population increases and the shrewd and early few can get their clutches, by these paper titles, on the earth and all its sources of supply. Don't fool yourselves that the monopolists are lawbreakers. They are not. They are lawmakers. Every monopoly that ever existed, the earth monopoly and money monopoly, the bonus privilege of tariff, and other bonuses, every monopoly that ever existed exists by the sanction of the law. (Applause.) They are law-makers, not law-breakers. And then they play you a farce. They play you a farce and you throw up your hands and are satisfied. You throw up your hats and are glad. They proceed to break up the monopoly of Standard Oil. They are going to unscramble the eggs. Now, Standard Oil was a union of the refining companies, a large majority, the great majority of all the refining companies, and they got together for economy's sake to simplify their organization, their up-keep and their machinery, for doing business. There are no doubt machinists here before me who know that the fundamental rule of mechanics is that the simpler the machine the better it is; so Standard Oil in simplifying its machinery produced economics that put down the price of petroleum products. It was a good thing. Now we proceed to unscramble it and, playing the vaudeville through the Supreme Court of the United States, see what we have done: Put them all back where they were originally under their old corporate organizations. We have increased the expense of doing the business and the price of petroleum products has gone up. Now, this is the thing for you to think of. In the unscrambling they haven't touched a single monopoly, a single principle of monopoly. They haven't changed the ownership of a share of stock. They have left the separate companies still owning the land; still controlling transportation; still controlling everything; haven't touched one thing but the mere machinery by which the monopoly did business. When you read these big head-lines in the newspapers about all this trust busting, I will ask you to think deeper and think always this: Are they getting to the root of the monopoly, or only monkeying with the machinery?

I will close in a moment, because I believe there is some other vaudeville stunt to be pulled off.

I told you I came to preach a sermon, careless whether I pleased you or not, and I have one more desirable thing to say because I believe it to be the truth. I don't think we will ever get anywhere out of this black slough of despond in which men and women are weltering by the millions until we find the truth and know it.

You have been tickled in your vanities at just such meetings as this, with the talk of the dignity of labor. I have heard it myself; and I want to tell you that under our present system of society there is no dignity in labor. None. Dignity comes from the soul, and our whole system of society in relation to labor is soulless. Dignity comes from the service rendered and why the work is done, and the reward it receives, and I want to tell you that the service rendered today is only to produce profits for the masters and that never was dignified. It is no more dignified today to work for a pittance and a starvation wage, grudging!; and hatingly, with your eye always on the clock, than it was to work in the galleys of ancient Greece, chained to the galley benches. As much dignity in the galley-slave as in my labor and your labor. (Applause.) There is as much dignity in the miners of Colorado going down into the dark and dangerous caverns of the earth, whipped by starvation, as there was in the poor slaves of ancient Rome going down into her mines, whipped by the lash of the Centurion. The dignity of labor comes from the freedom of labor. From the service that is rendered; from the results achieved. From the reward which the laborer receives and from the respect in which he is held. I will tell you that you get lots of such platitudes about election time about the nobility of labor and respect for labor. There may be respect for individual men and women. A high soul commands respect anywhere. It can be sent into the mines of Siberia, but it is the soul that lends dignity to the labor, not the labor to the soul; and I want to tell you that when they talk about the respect for labor, though there may be respect for individuals, the social system today looks upon labor not with respect but with contempt, and it ought to, because we are all slaves and slavery never is entitled to respect and dignity. We are all slaves, except a very few who hold the gates of opportunity, and these few, when the higher reckoning of the soul is taken, will be found themselves to have been slaves to their own slavery, for I tell you that where any is debased and degraded by the system of society, all consenting to that system are debased and degraded. (Applause.) There is none of us can escape our responsibility, and when the higher count is taken and the higher reckoning is made those who have taken an unholy profit from the sweat of the laborer will themselves be found to have been slaves.

In conclusion, I want to say to you that this dignity of labor is an idol. It is like some of the other idols which the old kings and emperors and the present ruling-classes have fed out like soothing-syrup to keep labor quiet. It is like that other idol, patriotism. Patriotism! What does patriotism mean today in Europe? It means fine young working men of Germany, producers of the earth, go out and kill the fine young working men of France. Workers of Russia, go down and cut the throats of the workers of Austria, with whom you have no quarrel. I know the people are crazed with the bloodlust and the people are back of their kaisers and their czars. And it is that I speak of: that they have no more sense today than they had in the time of the Wars of the Roses, than to be misled by this idol called patriotism and not to see that they are playing the game of their rulers and that the whole deluge of blood and devastation was set loose upon them by the wave of the mailed fist. And that will not be all. Half a century hence—a century hence, the wreck of this devastation will be seen. The lands will be filled with cripples and idiots. The tax will bear down on the backs of the workers, those same workers whose fathers went out to be killed. There will be the blood toll and the tax toll and the race-degeneration, because all the young men who should be fathers of the coming generation are now in the field, food for powder. And let us not be too complacent and too conceited. What would patriotism have meant with us here a little while ago? It would have meant young men of the United States—and they would have hailed it, too, with shouts, young fools, and would have gone willingly — it would have meant come out and for the excitement of it be killed in Mexico and let our taxpayers sweat for the investments of the Hearsts and the Otises and the Morgans. Is that a cause to die in? I tell you we should examine what these words "loyalty" and "patriotism" mean to us here; now; today! What do they really mean we are to die for? When they mean that we are to die for the common cause of humanity; when they mean that we are to give our children's blood that the souls of men and their bodies may be released from bondage and set eternally free, then I will bareheaded follow that flag. (Applause.)

No, my friends, there is no dignity in labor today. When it is free; when society depends on a mutual, intelligent, voluntary co-operation, when, as Stinemetz, of Cornell University, claims, four hours a day will be enough for any man or woman to work that society may be supplied with the things for use, not for sale in profit—four hours a day enough; when that has arrived and labor is free and labor is respected because it is rendering voluntary service to society and no matter how low in the scale each one knows that he or she is giving his or her share of service and is looked upon not with contempt but with respect, then indeed there will be the dignity of labor that there ought to be and which inherently there is, for I tell you labor is God. It is the creator of all things and should have a dignity as high and immaculate as God himself. Then I look to see labor lead in smiling leisure. Leisure is man's angel and gate-keeper unto Paradise. Out of your labor comes the things — the material things — but out of leisure has come all man's contemplation and all his dreams. It is the gateway to progress, and no society will ever be founded right until every man and woman has time to lie down by the banks of the purling rivers, under the willows, and question his or her own soul. I want to tell you that we live practically in a dungeon today. That every child that is born is born disinherited. The earth is possessed by a few and the channels of society's commerce are closed by monopoly. And yet every little baby that is born is entitled to be born into his mother's treasure-house. She has hung pictures on the skies for him and the hills weave themselves in draperies of amethyst and sapphire and draw thin veils about their heads as brides. She paints for him all the glories of the sunset, all the opalescent colors of the desert—for every place is full of beauty. She gives him in all seasons a very picture-house of beauty. The soft, tender green of Spring and the golden cloud of Summer, with the rich stubble-fields through which the bejeweled pheasant-cocks run with their brood. They are free, but the children of men are not. Even Winter is beautiful because to the east of us nature, the gentle mother, throws down upon her lap the white blanket of snow which keeps the frosts from entering the fields and preserves the moisture, that the crops may be abundant; and here with us, instead of snow, she sends the silver lances of the rain which are themselves golden for they pour wealth upon us and put it in the ground for our use. And so nature goes on, from season unto season, from cradle to the grave. She is willing; she is abundant; she is generous. Only man denies his brother.

And the night is as full of beauty as the day, so it can be said there is no hour without its reckoning of beauty. The pageantry of stars and the moon, the great queen of the sky that eternally paces through the galleries of the night, attended by her glorious company of stars. And the night has its music, even as the day has: the crickets' song and the katy-dids and the little soft-voiced owls and the cry on high of the night jar, and all things bless man to a sweet repose. The great enveloping dusk of night invites lovers and shields them with the tenderness of Mother Nature which man never shows, but would crush them and their babies in the wheels of his factories. And I, as a last word, leave with you, the representatives of labor, as I claim to be a representative of labor, not in my profession because I hope the time will come some day, in a better state of society, when the lawyer and the soldier will not be known but will have passed away as dead things. In what I am doing here and now, in what I have never shirked to do, to tell you the truth, I think I may claim some brotherhood with labor, and I leave it to you to hand on these thoughts to the little children, pass them on until the revolution comes. If you are the creators, as you are, of all the material things of earth, be also the creators of the new order of things when every child shall be born into his inheritance. (Applause.)

SHORT PARAGRAPHS

If you don't want to step on a "live wire" don't tell Fred Bourne, the hustling business agent of the linemen, that you have a Home phone in your residence or place of business. He can prove to you beyond any doubt that you don't need that phone any more than you need another pair of legs. He's loaded.

If any of our readers happen to have a couple of thousand acres of land they want cleared this Winter, they should call up Secretary Christensen of the Municipal Free Employment Bureau. He says he has plenty of experienced men looking for that kind of work.

C. F. Caulfield, of the Electrical Workers' Union, and incidentally Deputy Labor Commissioner, is a very busy man these days — and nights. "The Kaiser has nothing on me when it comes to trouble," said Carl the other day.

Eugene Smith, business agent for the inside Electrical Workers, is at work on the organization of a new fraternal society. He has confided to a few friends that it is to be called the I. O. of B.

If you can't think of something good to say about the business agent of your union, "for the love of Mike be reasonable," and don't say anything.

The Initiative League meets Wednesday evening, September 23, in the Central library to consider measures before the people.

As a prevention of wars we suggest the adoption of the "pay-as-you-enter" system.

The Garment Workers' Union will give a social in the near future.

Work is the secret of success. It it the worker who succeeds, not the workee.

WIN FIRST POINT.

At Iantic City, N. J., Sept. 19.—The Glass Bottle Blowers' association won the first point in its wage conference with the National Association of Glass Bottle Manufacturers when the latter agreed to retain for another year present shop rules and wages.

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