

SUPPLEMENTARY STATEMENT

BY

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IN REPLY TO GOVERNOR ALLEN'S QUESTION

The following statement was issued May 30th by Samuel Gompers, president of the American Federation of Labor, in reply to a question propounded by Governor Allen of Kansas in the course of the debate between Mr. Gompers and the governor:—

In the debate between Governor Allen of Kansas and myself in Carnegie Hall, New York, May 28, Governor Allen propounded a question which I said I would answer if time permitted and which I found myself unable to answer during the debate because it would have developed a line of argument foreign to the question then at issue. It was impossible, within the time specified, to undertake a discussion of every phase of what the world knows as the labor problem.

Governor Allen asked a question which required no effort in the asking and were I so minded I might put to him countless questions equally easy to ask. His question, really three questions, follows:

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When a dispute between capital and labor brings on a strike affecting the production or distribution of the necessaries of life, thus threatening the public peace and impairing the public health, has the public any rights in such a controversy, or is it a private war between capital and labor?

“If you answer the question in the affirmative, Mr. Gompers, how would you protect the rights of the public?”

“And, in addition, I wish him to define for us, if he will, who had the divine right to forbid the switchmen to strike in their ‘outlaw’ strike; who controls this divine right to quit work?”

In the first place the language of the question is improper, as I stated on the platform in Carnegie Hall. To describe a strike as a “private war between capital and labor” is to come perilously near applying the language of either thoughtlessness or ridicule to a struggle of humankind toward the attainment of an ideal.

Employment, as employers would have it, is something offered by them to workers. Employment, to employers, has meant the purchase of something which would result in profit. Employment, to employers, has been a means to an end. It has been an impersonal thing, like buying steel, and the aim has been to secure the best possible terms.

Employment, to workers, has been and is, vastly different. Employment, to workers, is the means of sustaining life. Workers have labor power to contribute to society. The reward which they secure

for their labor power fixes the manner in which they may live. By the day's pay is measured the meagerness or the fullness of life for them. The wage is translated immediately into pounds of meat, suits of clothes, rental of homes, snatches of rest and pleasure and glimpses into books of learning.

Employment to the employer is the basis of profits. Employment to the worker is life. These viewpoints conflict from opposite angles. They will conflict so long as industry is conducted for profit alone. This conflict will not be ended by statute law. It can neither be argued out of existence nor legislated out of existence. Learned men, like Governor Allen may try, but learned men have through all time attempted to deny truth and disown facts. Learned men laughed at Fulton and his steamship, they laughed at Newton and they persecuted Galileo.

The strike is the only effective weapon by which the workers may compel consideration of just demands. It is a weapon the use of which entails serious consequence, but the question of life, which is the question at issue, is a serious question. It is much more serious to strikers than it is to Governor Allen or members of employers' associations.

The freedom of workmen in enjoyment of the right to strike means the freedom of men to make life better, safer, happier—the right of men to elevate the whole tone of society and to force abolition of abuse, injustice and oppression.

Workmen grow less oppressed and more free as

they increase their organized power. When few workmen were organized their grievances were but lightly considered. Those countries offer to workmen the least of life where workmen are poorest organized. China, India, Japan—these are glorious havens of Governor Allen's kind of liberty, but workmen there must accept what is given them.

There is no denial that strikes of magnitude temporarily affect the general public. Governor Allen's public seems to be for the most part an employing and non-union public. The real public includes all union men and women and is in fact fully one-fourth union.

The question propounded by Governor Allen is an inquiry as to whether the public has any rights when strikes affect "production or distribution of the necessaries of life, thus threatening the public peace and impairing the public health?" In such cases the public, including union men, has rights and the striking union usually is first to recognize those rights. Few strikes affecting production or distribution actually threaten the public peace and fewer become a menace to the public health. Strikes in which there has been a threatening of the public peace usually have been strikes in which employers or public officials influenced by employers have created the breach of peace by the use of thugs, armed guards and detectives. The necessity for order and obedience to laws governing conduct is impressed upon every striking organization by its leaders. The

conscience of employers and of officers of the law has frequently not been so clear.

Labor has no desire to cause inconvenience to the public, of which it is a part. The public has no rights which are superior to the toiler's right to live and to his right to defend himself against oppression.

When but a few were organized, when employers were able to dictate and enforce their will, there was no great outcry against strikes. So long as labor was ineffective and unable to protest there was little concern for labor.

The great concern of most newspapers and public officials who propound ready-made remedies is that labor should labor. Stripped of its adornment that is the essence of the outcry against strikes. Workers must work. And while workers work the newspapers and oratorical public officials will be silent about them. This is not prediction; this is record.

So far as labor is concerned, the right to strike must be and will be maintained, not only as a measure of self-defense and self-advancement, but as a measure necessary to public progress. There is no escaping some inconvenience during strikes, particularly for those who engage in striking. The strike has won its right to a post of honor among the institutions of free civilization and the temporary inconvenience it has caused is but a small price to pay for the permanent benefits it has brought.

Every strike against deterioration is a check upon

avaricious employers pressing the unorganized still further down. Every strike for the improvement in the condition and standards of those engaged in industry has its reflex and influence for the uplift of all.

American workmen are the world's finest workmen, far removed from the impoverished and illiterate peasant populations of the oppressed areas of Europe. American workmen, through organization and protest—through the strike—have paid back to America in fitness for citizenship a thousand fold for the suffering strikes have caused.

Throughout the debate Governor Allen expressed the same ill-conceived notion which is so often unsoundly uttered, that is, that there is a public wholly separate and apart from employers and employees, when, as a matter of fact, other than those who may be paupers or charges upon the community, every one is either an employer or an employee.

Strikes are caused by the refusal of employers to reach agreement with workers—often by the refusal of employers to negotiate at all with workers. It becomes necessary for the workers to cease working, to withdraw their service from the industry. Instinctively the workers put life before property, social welfare before material gain for the employer. It is the duty of the public to throw the weight of its influence on the side of the protagonists of progress and justice—the workers.

As to the third section of Gov. Allen's question, re-

lating to the switchmen, it is absurd. Labor is damned if it does and damned if it doesn't, which reveals the insincerity of the critics. Labor believes in and practices majority rule—democracy. In the case of the switchmen a minority, goaded by employers beyond endurance, defied the majority. That is all there is to that. When the governor talks of divine right he leaves the issue and resorts to inconsequential. Strikes are ordered by the majority vote of union memberships, they are not ordered by officials at will. When officials issue strike orders they do so as the result of a vote of the membership authorizing such an order.

The hope of the public, the hope of the workers, the hope of all for peace and progress, for continuity of production and for safety from oppression, lies not in a state-erected machine, but in acceptance by employers generally of the machinery of collective bargaining. Trade agreements reached through collective bargaining offer the only safeguard that will work. The public rights are not safeguarded by laws that aim to prevent strikes. For roughly forty years the glass bottle blowers have not had a strike. The trade agreement between organized employers and organized workers has made the strike unnecessary. For about the same length of time and for the same reason the stove molders have had no strike. Many trades have had peace for ten and a dozen years. The very newspapers that seem most interested in behalf of the public are published day

by day, year after year, by virtue of the trade agreement reached through collective bargaining. Their labor turnover probably ranks close to the lowest in American industry.

Industrial peace is desirable. Industrial greed is what prevents it. The workers will struggle and organize and strike when necessary to prevent industrial injustice. The strike—the withdrawal of their service—is the one final effective weapon that they possess. The state can offer no substitute, the public can hope for no state-made substitute, for the struggle is in industry, not in politics.

When employers agree to abandon their old concept, then will industrial warfare begin its decline. When industry ceases to be operated for profit alone, then will there be time to relax that eternal and militant vigilance which has saved the workers from the abyss and given them a position of power and an intelligence fitting to our Republic and our time. The workers will not sacrifice human progress for an abstraction which is called public welfare, a term which is misused to mislead the very public upon which sycophants and politicians fawn.

Public welfare cannot exist except upon a foundation of liberty and democracy.

The ridiculous assumption that menace to public welfare lies in strikes undoubtedly serves well the purposes of employers who wish to continue autocratic practices, who wish to continue to control prices, who wish to maintain the right to curtail pro-

duction as it best serves profit to do—but clamor cannot always masquerade as wisdom.

The first step toward conservation of the rights of the public lies in a real and intelligent understanding of industrial problems by all of the people and in the possession of that understanding the people will see that public and general welfare cannot be conserved by denying fundamental liberties to the useful members of society.

The right to strike, with all its disadvantages, is an agency of progress, a buttress of manhood, of health and vigor, a promoter of public thought and education—an instrument for good, democratic in concept and essential to freedom. Its greatest justification is found in its results.