

Module 05: Industrialization and Its Discontents: The Great Strike of 1877

Evidence 17: Speech of Albert Parsons, 23 July 1877

A

Introduction

In the search for causes of the Great Strike of 1877, many commentators blamed the Workingmen's Party of the United States, a socialist, pro-labor party that had first organized a year earlier. The Workingmen's Party, which initially numbered no more than 3,000 members, certainly played a role in encouraging strikers in several western cities, but historians agree that it had no prior knowledge of the strike and little influence on the events in most locations. Two prominent exceptions were Chicago and St. Louis, where Workingmen's Party officials helped transform the railroad strike into a general strike that paralyzed both cities.

In Chicago, the Workingmen's Party organized several large rallies to publicize its platform and cheer on striking workers. One of the speakers was the printer and radical labor leader Albert Parsons, who had moved to Chicago from his home in the South. As the speech here reveals, Parsons was an eloquent public speaker who promoted worker solidarity.

Questions to Consider

- According to Parsons, what demand had striking workers made?
- What specific proposals did Parsons make to address the state of the working class?

Document

We are assembled here as the grand army of starvation. Fellow-workers, let us recollect that in this great republic that has been handed down to us by our forefathers from 1776, that while we have the republic we have hope. A mighty spirit is animating the hearts of the American people to-day. The American people are bowed down with shame and hunger. When I say the American people, I mean the backbone of the country—the men who till the soil, who guide the machine, who weave the material and cover the backs of civilized men. We are a portion of that people. Our brothers in the State

of Pennsylvania, in New Jersey, in the States of Maryland, New York, and Illinois, have demanded of those who have possession of the means of production—our brothers have made demand that they may be permitted to live, and that those men do not appropriate the life to themselves, and that they be not allowed to turn us upon the earth as vagrants and tramps. While we are sad indeed at our distressed and suffering brothers in the States mentioned, that they had to resort such extreme measures, fellow workers, we recognize the fact that they were driven to do what they have done.

We are assembled here to-night to consider our condition. We have come together this evening, if it is possible, to find means by which the great gloom that now hangs over our republic can be lifted, and once more the rays of happiness can be shed on the face of this broad land. . . .

There never can come good times in this country until the idle men have employment. What are we going to do with the idle men? Are we to take them and shoot them? Are we to let them drop dead? . . . Fellow workers, there is a way to get over this by peaceful means. Say, for instance, there is work for a hundred men. There are two hundred men to do it. If the one hundred men work for fourteen hours a day, let us reduce the hours to seven, and that will give work to the two hundred. Let us reduce the hours or work to one-half and then form a combination, and then demand the wages we want. In order to do this we have to combine in some kind of a labor organization. And if we can form a combination we can get as much for six hours work as we formerly got for twelve. We have got to make a law on the subject of hours. Every boss and capitalist and monopolist and railway king and every man who is interested in labor will be opposed to us in this movement. And also the idle rich, who live upon our strength.

Let us understand our position. If we reduce our hours of labor, the bosses and capitalists will immediately purchase another machine to replace us. Let us, then, immediately reduce the hours of labor once more, and in that way we can keep pace with them. Let us remember that we can make it possible for the wealth-producing classes to enjoy civilization by reducing the hours. It will then become possible for the working classes to learn something of poetry and pictures, but a man who works for fourteen hours can never be anything else than a downcast, ignorant man. If we become

organized we can carry on the struggle successfully. . . .

Let us fight for our wives and children, for us it is a question of bread and meat. Let the grand army of labor say who shall fill the legislative halls of this country. Now if we do this we can go to work and unite as one people; can go to the ballot-box, and say that the government of the United States shall be the posses[s]ors of all the rail-way lines in the country. If the people go to work and take possession of the railroads and telegraphs we extract the sting from the mouths of Jay Gould and Tom Scott, and they can no longer sting us to death. We take out of their hands the means by which they now enslave us. Let us not forget the fact that all wealth and civilization comes from labor, and labor alone. Let us not forget that while we work ten hours a day the capitalist puts the value of seven hours of it in his pocket. It rests with you to say whether we shall allow the capitalists to go on, or whether we shall organize ourselves. Will you organize? Well, then enroll your names in the grand army of of labor, and if the capitalist engages in warfare against our rights, then we shall resist him with all the means that God has given us.

Source:

"Illinois: The Voice of Labor," *Labor Standard* 3, no. 14 (11 August 1877), 2.