

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

### Evidence 18: Speech of Peter H. Clark, 22 July 1877

# A

#### Introduction

Peter H. Clark, principal of the Colored High School in Cincinnati, Ohio, and member of the Workingmen's Party of the United States, was one of the first black socialists in America. On July 22, 1877, he delivered a speech at a Workingmen's Party-sponsored rally in downtown Cincinnati. An extract from the speech, which was heard by thousands of assembled workers, appears below.

#### Questions to Consider

- What reasons did Clark give for supporting the strikers?
- According to Clark, what had provoked violence during the strike?
- According to Clark, what dangers did widespread poverty present?
- What remedy did he propose for poverty?

#### Document

. . . I sympathize in this struggle with the strikers, and I feel sure that in this I have the cooperation of nine tenths of my fellow citizens. The poor man's lot is at best a hard one. His hand-to-hand struggle with the wolf of poverty leaves him no leisure for any of the amenities of life, his utmost rewards are a scanty supply of food, scanty clothing, scanty shelter, and if perchance he escapes a pauper's grave [he] is fortunate. Such a man deserves the aid and sympathy of all good people, especially when, in the struggle for life, he is pitted against a powerful organization such as the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad or the Pennsylvania Central.

. . . The too-ready consent of the state and national governments to lend themselves to the demand of these wealthy corporations cannot be too severely condemned. Has it come to this, that the President of a private corporation can, by the click of a telegraphic instrument, bring state and national troops into the field to shoot down American citizens guilty of no act of violence? For you observe that neither at Grafton, Baltimore or

Pittsburgh was there violence offered to persons or property until the troops were deployed upon the scene. At Grafton it is noticeable that women, wives and mothers, were the chief forces employed by the strikers to keep others from taking their places.

. . . The condition of poverty is not a favorable one either for the individual or for the nation. Especially it is an unfavorable condition for a nation whose government lies in the hands of all its citizens. A monarchy or an aristocracy can afford to have the mass of its citizens steeped in poverty and ignorance. Not so in a republic. Here every man should be the owner of wealth enough to render him independent of the threats or bribes of the demagogue. He should be the owner of wealth enough to give him leisure for the study which will qualify him to study and understand the deep questions of public policy which are continually demanding solution. The more men there are who have this independence, this leisure, the safer we are as a nation; reduce the number, and the fewer there are, the more dangerous the situation. So alarming has been the spread of ignorance and poverty in the past generation, that whole cities in our land—whole states, indeed—are at the mercy of an ignorant rabble who have no political principle except to vote for the men who pay the most on elections days and who promise to make the biggest dividend of public stealing. This is sadly true, nor is the Negro, scarcely ten years from slavery, the chief sinner in this respect.

That this evil of poverty is partially curable, at least, I am justified in thinking, because I find each of the great political parties offering remedies for the hard times and the consequent poverty. Many wise men, learned in political economy, assure us that their doctrines, faithfully followed, will result in a greater production of wealth and a more equal division of the same. But as I have said before, there is but one efficacious remedy proposed, and that is found in Socialism.

The present industrial organization of society has been faithfully tried and has proven a failure. We get rid of a king, we get rid of the aristocracy, but the capitalist comes in their place, and in the industrial organization and guidance of society his little finger is heavier than their loins. Whatever Socialism may bring about, it can present nothing more anarchical than is found in Grafton, Baltimore, and Pittsburgh. . . .

Future accumulations of capital should be held sacredly for the benefit of the whole community. Past accumulations may be permitted to remain in private hands until, from their very usefulness, they will become a burden which their owners will gladly surrender.

. . . Every railroad in the land should be owned or controlled by the government. The title of private owners should be extinguished, and the ownership vested in the people. All a road will need to meet will be a running expense and enough to replace waste. The people can then enjoy the benefit of travel, and where one man travels now, a thousand can travel then. There will be no strikes, for the men who operate the road will be the recipient of its profits.

Finally, we want governmental organization of labor so that ruinous competition and ruinous overproduction shall equally be avoided, and those panics which sweep over and engulf the world will forever be prevented.

. . . Let us, finally, not forget that we are American citizens, that the right of free speech and of free press is enjoyed by us. We are exercising today the right of to assemble and complain of our grievances. The courts of the land are open to us, and we hold in our hands the all-compelling ballot.

There is no need for violent counsels or violent deeds. If we are patient and wise, the future is ours.

Source:

Philip S. Foner, ed., *The Voice of Black America: Major Speeches by Negroes in the United States, 1797-1971* (New York: Simon and Shuster, 1972), 451-457.