

# *The Labor Movement, or the Problem of Today*

George McNeill

## Introduction

When George McNeill was 14-years-old, he led a strike consisting hundreds of mill workers at Woolen Textile Company in Amesbury, Massachusetts (40 miles north of Boston) in support of a “mutual benefit organization” for child workers. During the 1860s, McNeill formed the Eight-Hour-League, working for legislation limiting the average workweek to 40 hours. That would not happen until the New Deal in the 1930s (although several pieces of legislation came before). McNeill was instrumental in the formation of the Knights of Labor, the first national labor union. Like many other workers, George McNeill left the Knights of Labor after the Haymarket Riot in 1886 to join the newly formed American Federation of Labor (AFL).

McNeill spent his life fighting for working conditions still with us today, what he called “economic rights.” Eight-hour workday/40-hour workweek. Overtime pay. Minimum wage. Safer working conditions. Worker’s pension. He would not live to see any of these rights made into law. The year after the Haymarket Riot (1886), McNeill edited a volume of essays about the current state of labor and industry in the United States. McNeill wrote the title essay, excerpted below.<sup>1</sup> Carnegie wrote *Wealth* two years later, in 1889.

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## Primary Source

The problem of today, as of yesterday and tomorrow, is how to establish equity between men. The laborer who is forced to sell his day's labor today, or starve tomorrow, is not in equitable relations with the employer, who can wait to buy labor until starvation fixes the rates of wages and hours of time. The labor movement is the natural effort of readjustment, an ever-continued attempt of organized laborers, so that they may withhold their labor until the diminished interest or profit or capital of the employer shall compel him to agree to such terms as shall be for the time measurably equitable. These are the forceful methods of all time and may continue to develop manhood and womanhood by peaceful revolution, as laborers advance their line, or may cause a social earthquake, and become destructive by the organized repression of labor's right.

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<sup>1</sup> George McNeill, *The Labor Movement, or the Problem of To-day*, 1887, is believed to be in the public domain.

Before the solution of the labor problem can be reached, the nature of the complaint must be understood.

Primarily, the responsibility for strikes and outbreaks rests upon the wage labor system, a system that encourages cunning above conscience; that robs the producer and enriches the speculator; that makes the employer a despot, and the employee a slave, a system that shortens life, engenders disease, enfeebles the mind, corrupts the morals, and thus propagates misery, vice and crime...

Whereas labor produces all the wealth of the world, the laborer receives only as much as will keep him in the poorest condition of life to which he can be crowded down, for the shortest number of years; that he makes civilization possible, and is reduced to barbarism, building houses not to own them, carriages not to ride in them, growing food he may not eat, and weaving raiment he may not wear; that all of the arts and comforts that lift human life above the brute are present to tantalize, and not to encourage him; that steam, electricity, chemistry and productive machinery are competitors, and not co-operators, with him; that the conditions of his employment are debasing, and not elevating, demoralizing, and not self-controlling; and that, whereas he is the most important factor, he is treated as the least; that his home is in the tenement houses, back slums and alleys of the city, or the unhealthy lowlands of the suburbs; that his wife is forced from home, and his children from school; that he cannot, as a laborer, hope for thanks, honors or positions of trust; that he is practically debarred from representation or the public expression of his complaints. When at work, he belongs to the lower orders, and is continually under surveillance; when out of work, he is an outlaw, a tramp, he is a man without the rights of manhood, the pariah of society, homeless, in the deep significance of the term.

The laborer's complaint is not that brains rule, or that culture leads, but that conscienceless cunning and miserly acquisitiveness are rewarded better than constructive ability or open-hearted integrity. We complain that culture busies itself upon immaterial subjects, conning the olden lore, not delving for the unrevealed treasures that lie embossed in humanity; that learning interests itself with the science of things, and not with the science of men; that philanthropy is the maudlin moan over the needs of the beasts, and a scoffer at the woes of humanity; that cats, dogs and horses are better cared for than the children of the poor. We complain that our rulers, statesmen and orators have not attempted to engraft republican principles into our industrial system and have forgotten or denied its underlying principles.

We complain that statesmanship is narrow and partisan, the pulpit blind and ignorant, and the press the advertising channel of wealth; that the spirit and power of our institutions are being subverted from the high positions, by gradual limitation of the power of the ballot, making elections less frequent, appointments more numerous, terms of office longer, by decrease of opportunity for the intelligent comprehension of the rapidly increasing political duties, by the teachings of a false and pernicious system of political economy, that has no logical rule or law of action, or systematic arrangement of data, a system that, up to this time, has taught that the production, and not the distribution, of wealth was the greatest factor in civilization...

And, while we thus suffer, fortunes are accumulated, wealth and power are centralized. And while our masters are reveling in luxury, excelling the nobility of Europe in extravagant display, aping their manners and imitating their follies we are becoming crowded down to the level of the 'pauper' labor of the monarchical countries. These extremes of wealth and poverty are threatening the existence of the government. In the light of these facts, we declare that there is an inevitable and irresistible conflict between the wage-system of labor and the republican system of government, the wage-laborer attempting to save the government, and the capitalist class ignorantly attempting to subvert it.

The strike of the trainmen on the Baltimore & Ohio Railroad was the serving of a notice upon the people of this nation that wages could not be further reduced, a protest against robbery, a rebellion against starvation.<sup>2</sup> The trainmen were under despotic control. To leave their employ was to become tramps, outlaws; to submit was to starve in serfdom. They knew that the power of the railroad oligarchy exceeded and superseded that of the national and State governments. The railroad president is a railroad king, whose whim is law.

He collects tithes by reducing wages as remorselessly as the Shah of Persia or the Sultan of Turkey, and, like them, is not amenable to any human power<sup>3</sup>. He can discharge (banish) any employee without cause. He can prevent laborers from following their usual vocations. He can withhold their lawful wages. He can delay trial on a suit at law and postpone judgment indefinitely. He can control legislative bodies, dictate legislation, subsidize the press, and corrupt the moral sense of the community. He can fix the price of freights, and thus command the food and fuel-supplies of the nation. In his right hand he holds the government; in his left hand, the people. And this is called law and order, from which there is no appeal. It is war, war against the divine rights of humanity; war against the principles of our government. There is no mutuality of interests, no co-operative union of labor and capital. It is the iron heel of a soulless monopoly, crushing the manhood out of sovereign citizens...

The crisis that we are rapidly approaching is not local. No Mason and Dixon's line<sup>4</sup>, no color tests divide North, South, East, and West; wherever laborers congregate, whether in the factories of New England, or the sunless mines of Pennsylvania, one chord of sympathy unites them all. No demagogue's cant of race or creed will hold them from their purpose to be free. Justice demands that those who earn shall receive; that no one has a right to add cost without adding value.

Recognizing that the steps toward the attaining of the end must be slow, we demand, first, legislative interference between capital and labor; restraining capital in its usurpations and

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<sup>2</sup> The Great Railroad Strike began in Pittsburgh after Carnegie's mentor, Thomas Scott dramatically cut wages because John Rockefeller wasn't happy with the rate Scott offered Standard Oil to transport oil on the Baltimore and Ohio.

<sup>3</sup> Before the twentieth century, Europeans referred to Iran as "Persia." The "Shah of Persia" and the "Shah of Iran" were the same person. Much like an Emperor, the Shah wielded total authority over his domain and lived a notoriously lavish life (much like European Monarchy). The Sultan of Turkey wielded similar power over his Empire.

<sup>4</sup> The Mason-Dixon line refers to the border line between Pennsylvania, Maryland, and Delaware during the 1760s. It quickly denoted the line between the free state of Pennsylvania and the slave states of Maryland and Virginia.

enlarging the boundaries of labor's opportunity. The Constitution of the United States demands that each of the sovereign States shall have a republican form of government. A greater power than that of the State has arisen "a State within a State," a power that is quietly yet quickly sapping the foundations of the majority-rule. The law of self-protection is greater than constitutions, and legislative bodies are bound to interfere to protect the sovereign citizen against the insidious inroads of the usurping power.

Monarchal governments rest upon the ability of the ruler to maintain order by physical force. Republican institutions are sustained by the ability of the people to rule. The government has the right, and is bound in self-defense, to protect the ability of the people to rule. It has the right to interfere against any organized or unorganized power that imperils or impairs this ability. Upon no other argument can the free school system be maintained, institutions of learning, of science, and art be endowed by the State or exempt from taxation. It is the policy of the government to protect, not only her domain from monarchal interference, as set forth in the Monroe doctrine<sup>5</sup>, but to protect her citizens from the influence of cheap labor and overwork. For cheap labor means a cheap people, and dear labor a dear people. The foundation of the Republic is equality.

The cheap laborer is an irresponsible agent; the dear laborer, an independent citizen. The Mason and Dixon line was the attempted wall of defense against the cheapest laborer in the world (the chattel slave). The protective tariff was the pretended wall of defense against the competition of the monarchal serf (European wage-slave). The cotton oligarchy South, and their tools, defied the theory and policy of the government, by making the boundary line of slavery (cheap labor) of no effect. The cotton oligarchy north (lords of the loom) defeated the purpose of the Government to protect the laborers and made the tariff a wall of protection for invested wealth, without giving ample protection to invested time and skill.

Chattel slavery died at its own hand, the suicide of secession. The cotton lords and their tools have increased productive capacity, and decreased distributive ability, until it has met with the natural stagnation that foreshadows death. The equilibrium between production and consumption must be adjusted; and that can only be attained by the better distribution of wealth in the process of production. The demand of labor is for more wages and more time, more wages to obtain more comforts, and more time wherein to enjoy them. The measure that will soonest lift the laborer to a higher level of manhood and will at the same time tend to the employment of more laborers, will inaugurate a less spasmodic system of industry, and will set more "idlers to working, and more workers to thinking," is a reduction of the hours of labor, a measure that is based on sound economic principles, as well as sustained by the most humane considerations.

The labor movement appeals to the learned and powerful to waste no further time in the conceits of an unwieldy culture. Take lessons in humility and be wise in time. Civilization, in its onward

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<sup>5</sup> President James Monroe presented the first comprehensive foreign policy statement in his 1823 State of the Union address (written by Secretary of State John Quincy Adams). The Monroe Doctrine, as it came to be called, warned European Empires not to interfere with countries in South and Central America who recently declared their independence from European colonialism. In other words, the U.S. supported self-rule.

march, forces concessions from those who have. The Magna Carta<sup>6</sup> was the concession of the power that made all powerful. Art, science and machinery, when made to serve all the people, will accomplish miracles that the power of kings cannot evoke. The movement pleads for the protection of all the past achievements of labor. Through the system of wage-labor, humanity is marching from villain age toward cooperation. If its progress is aided by timely concession, its steps shall keep time with law and order. But if stubborn power resists its progress, history will repeat itself. The product of the world is man, not classes, humanity, not race. Civilization is measured, not by the wealth, power or culture of the few, but by the quantity and quality of the opportunities possessed by the many. Civilization is common property. The institutions that enable the many to read and write and speak their native language amply and correctly are communistic institutions, inasmuch as the results are common property, even when the buildings are under private ownership.

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<sup>6</sup> The Magna Carta was an agreement signed between King John of England and his barons in 1215. The charter (carta) secured several important rights for the barons, including due process under the law, freedom of religion, right to legal representation, and a limit on land taxes. While both sides signed the agreement, neither upheld it very long