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The Right and the Wrong of Strikes, 1919.

LECTURE BY RABBI ABBA H. SILVER, ON
"THE RIGHT AND THE WRONG OF STRIKES,"
SUNDAY, OCTOBER 19, 1919, AT THE
TEMPLE, EAST 55th STREET AND CENTRAL
AVENUE, CLEVELAND, OHIO.

I assume that every thinking man is today deeply concerned with the general industrial situation the world over. I know that many thoughtful men are troubled with the great unrest that has disturbed the economic life of peoples the world over since the armistice. There is so much of radical economic experiment abroad in the world, so many wild and blind clamorings, so many strikes and cessations of work, at a time when work is of paramount importance to satisfy the needs of the world, so much of arrogance and bitterness manifested on all sides, that men who have the interest of society at heart are deeply concerned and frequently very much troubled.

I do not think that it would serve our purposes any if we exaggerate the condition of unrest. I believe that this condition is a direct outcome of post-bellum psychology. It is a result of the great backwash of a war that has uprooted hundreds of conventions and fixed conditions in society. I believe that we shall, before very long, return to a condition of saneness and moder-

ation, to a normal condition of relationships. I do not anticipate any catastrophes, or any calamities, or any radical reorganization of society; but I do believe, and I am quite confident that you will agree with me, that conditions today, while not alarming, are nevertheless critical.

It is true that things will right themselves, but things do not right themselves unless we help to set them aright. The thinking man and woman cannot assume today an attitude of indifference to these pressing and perplexing problems of society. The thinking man today must think harder than he has ever thought before, and think more honestly and speak his mind. One who does not think honestly and is afraid to speak his mind can be of little value to society at this critical moment. And no religious leader dare shirk these problems if justice and truth and democracy are part of his doctrine and part of his theology. Any religious leader who would refrain from passing comment or judgment upon a situation for fear of public criticism confesses himself to be morally bankrupt; and any religious leader who will say "aye" when the people say "aye", and "nay" when the people say "nay", convicts himself of cheap demagoguery and hypocrisy. A religious leader should speak his mind after thoughtful and careful and prayerful study and reflection and meditation. If his conclusions are wrong then society will easily detect the error of his conclusions and correct them; but when

the wrong is of the soul then his ministry is a sacrilege.

I shall approach the subject of the right and wrong of this steel strike, and the right and wrong of all strikes, from the point of view not of an employer, nor from the point of view of a laboring man. I shall approach it from the point of view of public interest and social welfare. The point of view of the employer and the employe are, of necessity and inevitably, prejudiced, colored and one-sided. I shall try honestly and frankly to face the facts as they are. I shall propound no theory for social readjustment; I shall endeavor to understand conditions as society confronts them today.

Now, I believe that society faces a situation and not a theory; and the situation is this: there are with today two established institutions which society must deal--one is organized capital, and the other is organized labor. We have no reason to think that organized capital will, before very long, disappear. We have no reason to think that our people, inspired by the remarkably unsuccessful attempts at nationalization of industries and government ownership in this land, will surrender the institution of private ownership and organized capital in industry. Certainly we shall not be inspired to such a course by the experiment in radical reorganization of the economic life of a people such as has taken place in Hungary and that is

taking place in Russia--experiments which have led to anarchy and chaos.

The organized laborer in America, if anything, is anti-Socialistic. He realizes, too, the value, the need at least, the fact, of organized capital, and is ready to deal with it. On the other hand, one who honestly surveys the situation must recognize that organized ^{labor} capital is a fact in our industrial life. I know that there are many honest people and many sincere people who do not favor trade-unionism and organized labor, but I have always thought, and I still maintain that the men who do not favor trade-unionism and organized labor must supply a substitute equally as effective to safe-guard and protect the interest of the laboring man; and as long as such a substitute is not produced, all criticism and denunciation of trade-unionism is not constructive thinking. It is not constructive thinking to say that because trade-unionism has abused its privileges and powers, it therefore must go. It would be equally fair to say that because capital has abused its privileges and its powers that it therefore must go.

The union came into existence to meet a crying need. It came into existence when the laborer realized that singlehanded he could not meet the conditions about him; that it was pitting the pigmy against the giant for the workingman, singlehanded, to endeavor to wrest favorable conditions for himself and his family from

organized labor. He found that his strength lay in numbers, in collective bargaining, and, in the last resort, in the strike. Had capital not been selfish and nearsighted in the past, trade-unionism today would not have that stranglehold on industry which it has; but men are naturally selfish, and men are naturally near-sighted, and their selfishness and Prussianism on the one side necessitated organization on the other side. X

It is too late in the day to expect the working man to surrender his one instrument of defense and throw himself again upon the generosity of the employer. Of course, a solution has been offered by many far-visioned business men who favor the organization within an establishment and within a shop. Shop organizations are good things if they are effective things. A shop organization that amply and completely protects the working man is sufficient to satisfy the working man in most instances; but in many industries that are so broadly centralized, such as the steel industry, where one hundred and forty-four mills are under one management and under one control, it would be asking of the working man too much to expect him to remain organized just within one shop and not join hands with his fellow laborers in the same industry in other shops. Nor can you expect to say to the working man, "We will give you all that you ask; we will give you higher wages and better conditions of

work; we will introduce every sort and kind of improvement in our plant, only do not organize." The business men here who may have tried this program of rapprochement may have realized that in most instances this has failed, and the failure is due not entirely to the preachings and teachings of labor agitators. The working man today, ~~synthetized~~^{sensitized} by this war, hates paternalism, however benevolent it can be and is. He does not wish to receive; he wishes to achieve. He desires to experience that sense and feeling of independence that comes from organization and from having some voice in the determinations of those conditions of industry which are vital to his interests. That, of course, is the basic principle of democracy, whether in politics or in industry; an autocracy may be more benevolent and more efficient, and, as far as material results are concerned, better for the subject than a democracy; but we would rather have an inefficient and blundering democracy, that would blunder through at a great cost to real achievement, than to have an angelic paternalism that would stultify initiative, and kill the sense of moral responsibility within the working man by giving to him but not developing the powers of achievement within him.

If organized capital is a fact, and organized labor is a fact, and a growing fact, the impartial and honest thinking man of today is faced with this problem: how can we make both of these facts synthetize--work in

harmony so as to work for the greater advantage of each and for the ultimate advantage of society. If the thinking man is honest he realizes that both capital and labor have abused their powers. One need not at the present stage of the game indulge in a narration of a catalogue of the abuses of capital. In the past, and, in some instances, in the present, that is too well known. But it is the part of honesty and fairness and disinterested humanitarianism to speak, and speak at length, and speak forcibly, of the abuses of labor at the present day. We have at all times championed the cause of labor,--when the cause of labor was the cause of the weak against the strong, of the dispossessed against the possessed, of the oppressed against the oppressor. We have at all times championed the cause of labor when the cause of labor was the cause of justice, and we shall continue to do so in spite of all opposition and in spite of all consequences, for to us the cause of labor is the cause not of one group or one class, but the cause of humanity.

Humanity must have an ever-growing, higher standard of living for its working class--more ^{comfort} ~~luxury~~, more opportunity for self-development, more education, more culture, so that civilization may progress. But when the cause of labor is unjust, when labor, blinded by power, sets about doing the very things for which we denounce capital, then it is hypocrisy and cheap demagoguery to give a wholesale and blanket endorsement of all the acts and

principles of trade-unionism today.

Of course, I know that such an exposition of the faults and abuses of labor will prove unpopular, just as unpopular as my championing of the cause of industrial democracy a year ago proved. But one feels called upon to do so because the issues involved are vital to society. We hate autocracy in capital, and we hate equally as much autocracy in labor. We cannot countenance unbridled selfishness in capital, but neither can we countenance unbridled unselfishness in labor. America cannot and will not be dominated by one group, however highly organized and however numerically powerful that group is; America cannot and will not be bullied, and America will not sacrifice the interests of the people at large and subserve them to the interests of any one group.

In recent years, and especially since the signing of the armistice, organized labor has acted in a manner so arbitrary, so despotic, so disregarding of public interests and public welfare as to trouble and confound its truest and best friends. At a time when the world is hungry, half starved, under-fed and under-clothed, at a time when the crying need of humanity is food and raiment and shelter, the minds of the laboring world are concerned not with the problem of greater production but with the problem of shorter hours of labor.

There has been too much of a desire for self-aggrandizement manifested in labor circles and too little

of a passionate desire to meet the needs of society, even at the cost of sacrifice. Labor has needlessly, thoughtlessly, criminally, in many instances, limited production, and thereby aggravated a situation which is fraught with so much danger, because it is bound up with so much misery and so much bitterness the world over. Labor in many instances has, in a spirit of bravado, and in a spirit of arrogance, broken contracts, entered into in good faith by both parties, against the advice of their saner leaders, and frequently, as in the case of the typesetters' strike in New York, against the express instructions of their superiors.

Within the month of September America was compelled to experience over two hundred strikes, and to be threatened with fifty more. Labor unions have, within recent months, been too reckless of the manner in which they plunged the country into strikes at the slightest provocation, without allowing time for mediation, for arbitration, for compromise; without manifesting any desire for patience and thoughtful deliberation; without taking the public into their confidence; without considering for a moment the hurts which these strikes would inflict upon the public. X

Labor has within recent years permitted irresponsible extremists and demagogues to assume the reins of leadership within its circles; men who lack the balance, the poise, the intellectual honest and integrity to wield a power so fraught with possibilities,--baneful

and benevolent. And because of this course labor has alienated the support, the moral support, the affection of the American public, which has almost at all times stood by the side of labor.

The American public is determined to have labor realize that it will not side with labor all the time simply because it is labor; and that it will not favor strikes all the time simply because they are strikes. The American public gave unquestionable evidence of this fact when a group of men endeavored to strike a deadly blow against the safety and the integrity of American governmental institutions in Boston; and the American public smashed that strike. The American public will not tolerate any strike that is being forced, manipulated, thrust upon the people without having previously exhausted every channel for amicable settlement. The American public will demand of labor, as it is demanding in the case of the steel strike, that leaders manifest patience, that leaders manifest respect and highest regard for the wishes of the public. The American public will withhold its moral support from any strike that is not morally sound, and it is withholding its support from the present steel strike.

The friend of labor must insist that just as capital was compelled, by an enlightened and outraged public opinion, by organized labor, and by legislation, to remain within the law, that labor, too, through self-discipline, through an enlightened public opinion,

and, if necessary, through legislation, shall remain within the law.

Why has the steel strike proved so unpopular? The demands of the steel strikers, when analyzed dispassionately, are found not to be excessive. The conditions which they ask for are already established in many industries and have been for many years past. When all is said and done the crux of the question is the recognition of organized labor and the right of collective bargaining, and the American public has, if you recall industrial history in the past, endorsed the working man in these demands. Why, then, has the American public remained cold and indifferent to this strike? When one reviews the twelve demands of the working men, one is forced to the conclusion that most of them are not unreasonable. They ask, first of all, for the right of collective bargaining, and the committee of fifteen appointed by the National Industrial Commission in Washington, has, within the last two or three days, endorsed this position of organized labor and brought in this resolution: "The right of wage earners to organize in trade and labor unions, to bargain collectively, to be represented by representatives of their own choosing in negotiations and adjustments with employers in respect to wages, hours of labor, and relations and conditions of employment is recognized. This must not be understood as limiting the right of a wage earner to refrain from joining any organization, or to

deal directly with his employer if he so chooses."

The right, then, of collective bargaining has been endorsed by the public group represented in the National Industrial Council.

Their second demand is reinstatement of all men discharged for union activities; their third demand is for an eight-hour day; their fourth demand for one day's rest in seven; their fifth demand for abolition of the twenty-four hour shift; and their sixth demand for an increase in wages sufficient to guarantee the American standard of living; and their ^{seventh} ~~eighth~~ demand for double rate of pay for all overtime, holiday and Sunday work. These are not demands which any fairminded American will look upon as unfair and unreasonable.

Of the other five demands some are unreasonable, but all may be easily arbitrated and none can justly become the cause of a strike or of a lockout. The men ask for a standard scale of wages in all trades and classifications of workers, a thing which works to the detriment of the working man in most instances, a thing which checks initiative and enterprise on the part of working men in most instances. They ask for a check-off system of collecting union dues and assessments, and the principles of seniority to apply in maintenance, reduction and increase of working forces, two things which can be easily adjusted; and they ask for the abolition of company unions, which is unreasonable and unfair; and they ask for the abolition of

physical examination of applicants for employment, which also works against the public interest of the working man. But ^{these} ~~the~~ five ^{demands} ~~other reasons~~ can be arbitrated and ought to have been arbitrated.

Why, then, if this is so, do we refrain from giving the steel strike our wholehearted support? Because, in the first place, labor has recently created an unfavorable background to every strike, however just it may be. Its arbitrariness, its despotic exercise of power, its absolute unconcern for public welfare has prejudiced the same fairminded, good-natured American citizens against almost every strike. And in this particular strike the haste with which it was called, the disregard of the request of the President to abide the decisions of the National Commission, the disregard of the advice of their own superior officers, the fact that it was called at a critical time, when the cry of humanity is "production", and the fact that conditions in that industry were not so desperate, not so critical, that they needed an immediate remedy and an immediate correction; the fact that the laboring men could have been patient without suffering for their patience,-- these are the facts that account for the alienation of public sentiment from the steel strike. X

Were I not afraid of a reaction that may set in in the steel industry as a result of the collapse of the steel strike; were I not afraid of a reaction in industrial democracy in other industries; and were I

not afraid that a long, protracted strike, with all its attendant bitterness and misery, would throw the control of the steel trade unions into the hands of radicals and direct actionists, I would say without any hesitation at all that the steel strike ought to fail and deserves to fail. But I am afraid of such a reaction. X The steel industry has, in recent years, shown a laudable spirit of improving the conditions of its working men in many ways. It has introduced many reforms; it has enabled the working man to buy steel shares below the market price, pay for them in installments, enjoy bonuses at the end of five years, and all that;; but in spite of all that the steel industry has been one of the most backward industries in America in past years, and the steel industry today has many abuses which must be corrected and can be corrected.

There are men still working twelve hours a day in the steel industry, and there are men still working seven days a week in the steel industry, and there are men still working in twenty-four hour shifts in the steel industry; and there has been and there is today-- and I have lived in a steel town and know whereof I speak--a ruthless and systematic suppression of free speech and the right of public assemblage exerted in many steel towns. These abuses cannot and should not be tolerated in an age of a growing industrial democracy. Certainly the uncompromising attitude of Judge Gary in refusing to see representatives of the

working men, his uncompromising hostility to unionism, his blank refusal to arbitrate, does not inspire one with any great confidence that a reaction will not take place. I have no hesitancy in saying that the position of Judge Gary is absolutely indefensible. The working man has a right to be represented by his own men, by men of his own choosing, just as the steel industry exerts the right and privilege of calling in outside talent to represent it on any occasion it may find necessary; and the refusal to arbitrate, at a time when men laid down their lives in order to compel arbitration among nations, where issues much more vital and universal were at stake, spells of a certain amount of Prussianism and autocracy which does not augur well for industrial democracy in America. I am afraid of a reaction in other industries as a result of a collapse of this strike, because I know that there are quite a number of heads of industries who are waiting for an opportunity to use this failure as a fulcrum to remove unions within their shops and to regain those concessions which were forced from them during the war. I am afraid that this may pave the way for a reaction; and I am afraid of the growth and spread of radicalism and I.W.W.-ism and extremism in labor circles. These men are waiting for an opportunity to prove to the working man that his union is ineffective. They tell him, "Don't place your faith in an organization that fails and has failed now. Why don't you resort to force, to direct

action? Why don't you follow our Creed and gain the result you are after?" And it will be a sad day if industries like the steel industry and the mining industry and other essential and basic industries of our land should fall into the hands of men of this type.

The American business man today does not have a choice between organized labor and unorganized labor. His choice is between trade-unionism and industrial unionism--between the American Federation of Labor and the Industrial Workers of the World; between working men who are content to work with capital and working men who look upon capital as their *greatest - their* ~~only and greatest~~ enemy.

This, then, is the problem that I believe the thinking man of today faces, recognizing the abuses of capital and labor, recognizing the fact of organized capital and organized labor: what is there to be done to make them work in harmony? Can they be made to co-operate? The sane, the steady, the level-headed opinion of America says unequivocally that they can and are being made to co-operate. It is only the radical, the extremist, the visionary, the man who lives in a world of his own making that maintains that they cannot and never will be made to co-operate. We know that they are co-operating, and we know that if proper measures and proper education are introduced, ~~that~~ the process of

co-operation will continue to the ultimate end of industrial peace.

What is necessary? Who is going to work out the solution? The American people are working out a solution. It is not based on books or book theories; it is based on conditions; it is realistic; it takes into account things as they are. And this is what the American people are working out, and this is how they intend to solve this problem: the American people are determined so to regulate and control organized capital by an enlightened and critical public opinion, and by legislation, if necessary, as to make it impossible for capital to abuse its powers; and the American people are determined so to regulate and so to organize and control organized labor by an enlightened and critical public opinion, and by legislation, if necessary, so as to make the power of organized labor unbaneful to American life. The American people are determined to proceed upon a campaign of education to make the employer of labor realize that his best and highest interests are conserved if he meets his working man on a footing of absolute equality; if he permits him a voice in the problems of those conditions in the industry which are vital to him. And the American people are proceeding on a campaign of education, first, for the public to be alert and critical and not to be swept off its feet by the clamor of a strike, but to judge sanely and critically of the justice and the injustice of the

strike, and then to educate the laboring man to the fact that you cannot shirk work, and you dare not shirk work; that work is a thing holy, and that you cannot have food and the comforts of civilization if industry is destroyed and production is crippled.

This program for years to come, ~~for~~ decades to come, will gradually evolve and develop itself until it will embrace all our industries, I am quite confident, and we shall be paving the way for industrial peace.

In conclusion let me say, then, that any man who, at this day of triumphant democracy, sets about fighting trade-unionism without first finding an equally effective and beneficent substitute to protect the interests of the working man, and to insure him further progress and development,--that man is an enemy of society, and I care not who he is. And any man who, at this age of unrest and great need for the wherewithal of life, sets about through inflammatory speeches or literature inciting labor to destroy capital and cripple production, and inciting them into unnecessary and unjust strikes,--that man is an enemy of society, and I care not who he is. Society will repudiate them both. That man alone is a friend of humanity, the friend of capital and labor, who at this day sets about honestly and conscientiously to bring about a greater co-operation, a closer identity of interests, a greater mutual sympathy, an understanding between capital and labor. He is the friend of humanity.