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Labor Relations in Cleveland, 1920.



LECTURE BY RABBI ABBA H. SILVER, ON  
"LABOR RELATIONS IN CLEVELAND," AT  
THE TEMPLE, EAST 55th AND CENTRAL  
AVENUE, CLEVELAND, OHIO, MARCH 28, 1920.

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I am frequently asked why I choose to discuss industrial problems in my pulpit; why I do not limit myself to less controversial, and perhaps more pleasing, subjects--the kind that all agree to and no one takes very seriously. And I always answer that the industrial relation is the most vital in human affairs and human life, and the one that stands in most need of religious interpretation.

If religion cannot inform the many difficult relationships in the industrial world, then it stands convicted of irrelevancy. If religion fails to touch life at its most vital and significant points, then it may be a whim, and it may be a fancy, but it certainly is not a fact nor a force.

The prophets of Israel never hesitated in applying their religious convictions to the industrial problems of their day, and the most severe indictment of religious institutions today is that they have lost their prophetic vision and their prophetic courage, in that they have failed to challenge the social conditions about them, and insist upon the application of religious ideals



to the common, ordinary daily problems of human life. The prophets believed in religion creating the masterful moment for human opportunity, but religious institutions began to serve the masters of the moment. Religious institutions began to serve not man but men. Religious institutions in turn tolerated or recognized or defended slavery and feudalism and monarchy, and the divine rights of kings. And religious institutions, yesterday and today, are the tools of the ages and not the leaders that guide--the spiritual pathfinders of the world.

Occasionally you find a Bruno and a Savoranola-- a spirit that is inflamed with the divine touch of his mission and of his message--that breaks through the confining walls of his church or of his denomination, or of his institution, and speaks the fearless, prophetic word, and the world listens. But as a rule, religious institutions are content to be time servers. They are the agencies of power that is.

Because of that men are refusing to take religion very seriously. During the war where did the religious institutions speak authoritatively the word that emancipates and liberates? Nowhere. They became the tools of nationalism, sometimes even of chauvinism. The religious institutions blessed and consecrated the flags and the swords and the cannons on both sides of the trenches; and the same church that fought for Germany fought against



Germany in the war; and the Protestant was on both sides of the fighting line, and the Catholic was on both sides of the fighting line, and the Mohammedan was on both sides of the fighting line, and the Jew was on both sides of the fighting line.

Now, we should take religion seriously.

Religion, to justify its existence, must begin to influence human life at its critical and vital moments. Religion is not a mental sedative. Religion is not a drug to lull men into comfortable feelings of peace and complacency. Religion is not meant to teach men the song, "Now I lay me down to sleep". Religion is meant to urge and goad and drive men on to high adventure, to service and to sacrifice.

And so we believe that religion has a word to say as to the industrial problems; not because we are interested primarily in this group or in that group, in the employer or the employe, but because we are interested in man, in his moral and spiritual well-being and advancement; because we are interested in elevating and beautifying and sanctifying human life. That is why we are so deeply concerned in the industrial and labor situations, that more than other fact in human life mold and determine character in society.

And it is therefore with real pleasure that religious leaders and teachers have welcomed the effort



of the representative group of Cleveland business men to define a labor policy that would meet, as far as conditions at the present time justify and warrant, these religious demands of life--justice and service and the sacredness of human life. It is not that this report of the Cleveland Chamber of Commerce is in any way the last word or the best word or the most advanced statement on the subject of labor relationships, but it is that the spirit that animates the labor, the motive which prompted it, is praiseworthy and fine and helpful.

As a rule, documents that come from Chambers of Commerce are not worthy to be discussed in pulpits. As a rule, they are not very inspiring. Chambers of Commerce, as a rule, have not proved the bulwarks of human liberty in this land or in any other land, and pronouncements very frequently read like a peroration of our friend Ole Hanson or Guy Empey. Because of that this statement of the Cleveland Chamber of Commerce is so very welcome, because it is so unusual. It is free from that tone that is dominant in all other announcements or statements of business organizations.

The preamble of this program is interesting. It reads as follows: "In supporting for the adoption by the citizens of Cleveland this declaration of principles



aiming to establish a basis for proper labor relations in this community, the committee on labor relations in the Cleveland Chamber of Commerce recognizes the fact that the public interest is paramount. The public is composed of interdependent interests. The public interest in labor relations demands that justice is done to all."

That might sound very much like a platitude today, but it was almost a revolutionary statement ten years ago for a man to declare that the interests of Big Business is not paramount in our land, or that the interest of trade unionism is not paramount in our land. It was the rankest kind of heresy. There was a time when Big Business glibly said, "The public? Why, the public be damned." And there has come a time when labor is saying, "The public? The public is a docile lamb to be fleeced."

Public interest is paramount. Big Business is a social institution or it is a menace. And unionism is an industrial institution or it is a menace. Business must serve the needs of human life. It must make for increased opportunity, for the production of the goods and the commodities and the utilities that must satisfy the needs of the community, of the people of the land, of humanity. It is not primarily an agency for profit making. And the labor organization, whatever be its form or its composition, must make for production, must



make for the increase of the goods and the social surplus, must make for economic prosperity, or it, too, is a social enemy.

When our industrial revolution began there was a very popular philosophy current among men, especially among those who were interested. It came to be known as the theory of laissez-faire--let it alone. Let business alone; do not try to control it or regulate it or dominate it. Let it develop free and unhampered, and the greatest good will accrue to society as a result of this unhampered development of business. What has been the result? It has brought about increasing wealth, but it has also brought about increasing misery. The theory of laissez-faire has prompted business and industry to trample rough-shod over the elemental rights of human beings, and an industrial slavery was set up and all the political slavery came to an end in the last century.

And now people are asking for a similar philosophy of laissez-faire to be applied to labor and labor organizations. And we maintain, in spite of the unpopularity of our contention, in spite of losing the cherished affection of my dear radical friends, that such a theory is likewise inimical to the social well-being; that unrestricted power inevitably makes for the abuse of the same power, and that in the long run it will hurt the cause of labor.



Now, when I speak of a social control for labor, I do not of necessity mean a legal control. You know what little confidence I<sup>for one</sup> have in laws as such--in the dead letter of the law. The great things in life are not brought about by restrictions or prohibitions or laws, but by an inspired soul and informed mind. I believe in a social control that means an informed and an enlightened public opinion, that will check abuse of privilege and control and unbridled lust for power.

There are some well-meaning citizens who have a great deal of faith in legislation, and ever and again you will hear them clamoring for an anti-strike law, such as our friend Mr. Cummins endeavored to insert in the railroad bill; or for compulsory arbitration such as is now being experimented with in Kansas. I am happy to say that the Cleveland Chamber of Commerce has not committed a similar folly. It states clearly: "The Committee believes that the most powerful force to bring about these desired conditions is the opinion of an informed and enlightened public." And in its section on industrial disputes, it states, "Since the public interest is paramount, it follows that public opinion is and should be a potent influence for the settlement of labor disputes. Therefore machinery should be set up to develop and crystalize the opinion according to established facts, and until these facts have been established neither party should resort to strikes or lock-outs."



You cannot compel people to arbitrate because you cannot compel people to work; and you cannot punish people for not working, because you can punish people either by fining them or by jailing them. Well, the poor working man, as a rule, has not much to be fined, and when you jail him he cannot work. You cannot mine coal and forge steel when you are in jail. So that the notion of compulsory arbitration is not a very potent one to solve our problems. Besides, it was experimented with for fourteen long years in New Zealand and failed ultimately.

The one possible control and the one effective control in labor disputes is an enlightened and an alert and a demanding and an insistent public opinion. If the two parties to a strike are agreed to arbitrate, well and good, but if either refuses to arbitrate, or both refuse to arbitrate, then the public must of itself, and by the supreme authority vested in it, appoint a committee of investigation and learn the truth, and then publish the truth and make the truth effective; and public opinion will break any strike or break any industry or any monopoly of an industry that abuses its power, that is unfair, and does not play square.

But to have an enlightened public opinion you must have a free press. And there is the rub. Some of us have come to doubt whether there is such a thing.



Certainly during the last few years we lost a great deal of our confidence in our press. Most of our newspapers are owned by rich men who are vitally interested in most of the large industries of our land. And when a newspaper is not actually dominated by a rich man or a group of rich men, it is victimized by news agencies and news associations and syndicates and foreign offices and government bureaus, that have in the last five years published a veritable flood of mendacious lies and fed the American public with them.

Why, one need but review the sort of stuff the American public was fed about Russia for two years--the daily lies that were served to the American public by moneyed interests abroad, in order to prejudice them, to confound their reason, to distort the facts,--the Sisson revelations, the nationalization of women in Russia, the burning of towns and the slaughtering of hundreds of thousands of men. One actually loses faith in much that we call democracy.

The remedy is a much more difficult thing than the ailment in this case. We must either insist on getting honest newspapers, or on founding honest newspapers, or on resorting to our rather liberal weeklies or on supporting liberal newspapers. But the public must be put in touch with channels that will convey correct and honest and unprejudiced information, or all our industrial disputes will result in bad blood, because the public will not have an opportunity to bring its tremendous power to play upon any one



situation in these disputes.

The report of the Chamber of Commerce takes up, among the first of the declaration of principles, the subject of production, and makes the very correct and truthful statement that in the interest of society the workingman must not deliberately restrict production in order to create an artificial scarcity of labor so as to boost wages or bring about a continuity of employment. And equally the employer must not deliberately curtail and restrict production so as to create a scarcity in the commodity and boost the prices of that commodity.

Now, both sides have sinned in the matter of production. Much has been said about the sins of the laboring element in restricting production, especially during the last steel and coal strike, but not enough, I am afraid, has been said concerning the sins of the producer--the employer. It is almost an established fact today that the coal barons have deliberately conspired to restrict the coal output. It is almost an established fact that the vast packing interests of the United States have, by fair means or foul, kept out the immense meat products of the Argentine, capable of feeding two hundred millions of men, from reaching American markets so as not to force down the cost of meats.

This last week I read the statement where the



Sheffield Milk Company, of New York State, issued a statement to the farmers of the state urging them to restrict the production of milk or the prices in New York would of necessity have to come down, and the District Attorney makes the significant statement that two million five hundred thousand quarts of milk are daily produced in excess of what is sent into New York; that these quarts of milk are kept out of New York by somebody so as not to force the price of milk down.

Now, this brings us to the very interesting law of supply and demand. The law of supply and demand is a statement of fact, not a moral certitude. But even if the law of supply and demand were a moral, sound and salutary law, it has so often been tampered with and thwarted, that it has become in many instances the subterfuge of the scoundrel and the excuse of the knave. We stock our warehouses and cram full and pack our shelves to the bursting point and export, and then we say we regulate industry in our land by the law of supply and demand. We buy real estate not for purposes of use and building, but for purposes of speculation; and because the community is not wise enough to tax unused land pitilessly and force it into use, land values jump out of reach of the average salaried man, and then we say the law of supply and demand regulates business and industry. And we say that the law of supply and demand ought to regulate wages when there is an overabundance of labor; when the market is glutted wages



should and must of necessity come down.

I am pleased to see that the Cleveland Chamber of Commerce did not resort to this law to justify at any time a deliberate reduction of wages based on the law of supply and demand. For there are many other elements that go into the determination of wage, and some of these the document clearly and definitely states. "While the law of supply and demand," it reads, "in relation to all classes of employment must inevitably influence wages rates, in fixing rates of wages for both men and women the following factors should be taken into consideration: cost of living, opportunity to advance, standard of living, savings, loyalty, productivity, its quality and quantity, initiative and individual skill, nature and hazard of the work, importance of the work performed, punctuality and steadiness, and continuity of employment."

Society cannot permit the law of supply and demand to work blindly and pitilessly, because society is interested in the human factor--in man himself. It cannot, it dare not, it must not make man a commodity. It is interested in preserving the standard of living for the American workingman. And when the law of supply and demand tends to make for a deterioration of the standard of living, then society must insist upon an arbitrary increase or maintenance of the wages and the standard of living, even at the cost of limiting the returns on capital. It



was Mr. Roosevelt, I believe, who said that the rights of property are secondary to human rights, and when they conflict with human rights they must give way to human rights. We are interested in men as men, not only in men as agents of production.

The document speaks well about hours of labor-- one day rest in seven, and Saturday half holiday. It speaks of the eight-hour day, but does not speak as authoritatively and as definitely as I should love to have it speak. It merely recognizes the fact that the **eight**-hour day has been accepted as a standard in many industries. It speaks well and finely about conditions of work. It lays emphasis upon proper sanitary conditions, preventive measures against industrial accidents. It asks for the proper facilities for light, heat and ventilation, to make work as pleasant as possible. I should have liked to have them say a word about old age pensions. I should have liked to have them say a word about insurance against unemployment during days or months of illness.

The document is fair. Its weakest **points**, however, and the very things that cause most of our industrial troubles, are its definition of collective bargaining and its attitude on the open and closed shop, and its silence on profiteering. When I say the weakest point, I mean from the point of the objective of this program, namely, to bring about industrial peace.



The document recognizes a certain form of collective bargaining. It calls it "representative negotiations." In other words, that the employe should have the right to select representatives from their midst to bargain or discuss matters with the employer. "They may even," so the document reads, call in an advocate or an advisor to meet with them in their negotiations with the employer.

It apparently does not recognize nor grant the contention of trade unionism, that the employes have a right to be represented by whomever they choose to delegate, whether those be of that particular shop or not. Of course, this was one of the main obstacles in the last steel strike and the one that caused the greatest of difficulties.

The document does not recognize the closed shop, and therein, of course, it differs radically with the attitude of trade unionism. The employer is free to choose the open shop or the closed shop. The employer must not discriminate against a man because he is a member of a union, but neither must the employes make employment in any particular shop dependent upon membership in a union. But, of course, there ~~is~~ again you have that vast, perplexing and difficult problem of the open and closed shop not solved.

As to profiteering the document is entirely silent. I, for one, believe that some form of profiteer-



ing is essential, not so much as an increase in remuneration but as creating the attitude of mind on the part of the employe, that he is not merely a tool in the industry but an actual partner therein. It gives him a sense of independence, of pride, of ownership, that is most helpful and salutary in paving the way for industrial peace and amicable understanding between employer and employe.

The document, I feel, while it will not bring about industrial peace, will yet pave the way for the settlement of many industrial disputes that are brought about by little things that irritate. The human element--that is the factor that must be reckoned with tremendously in the days to come in business. Many a strike has been called because some slight sensibility of an individual or a group of individuals has been violated or hurt. The document will be helpful to those reactionaries in the business world who, I understand, have resented this action of the Cleveland Chamber of Commerce, who rely upon bayonets and cannot be budged but by bayonets; that group of business men who still cling desperately to that autocratic view of industry--"I shall be the boss in my own establishment, and I shall run my business as I choose." Well, industrial autocracy perished with political autocracy. No man is absolute master and boss or tyrant of his industry or of his business, because every industry and every business is a social institution, and you and I,



the public at large, are vitally and deeply concerned in the management, in the administration, and in the peace and in the productivity of every industry and every institution, and the sooner that tyrannical and autocratic philosophy perishes and passess out of American industry, the sooner will the day of peace come near.

The church joins hands in this commendable work of this organization or of any other organization. The Catholic church, I understand, more than a year ago published a labor program that is in many ways far in advance of this document. The Protestant churches published a similar document, and first of all, before both of these organizations moved, the Central Conference of American Rabbis issues a declaration of principles which, though it is little known to most of you, was yet the pathfinder for all other religious organizations to follow. And why did we do it? Because we believed that industry may be made the greatest agency for the advancement and the perfection of human life; because a man spends most of his waking hours in the shop and in the factory and in the office; because it is there that character is molded and the outlook of a man determined; because industry may make or mar human life and human character; it may advance or retard civilization. And because we are interested in men we are deeply concerned in industrial problems.

We believe in work, but we believe that work must magnify man, that the focus and the center of consideration



is not production, and not prosperity, and not efficiency, and not self, and not exports and imports, and not a great bank balance,--but man. We believe that human rights are prior to property rights; we believe that the guiding spirit in every human relationship and in every human profession is service. No profession,--medicine, law, ministry, business, work,--is justified in and by itself unless it serves the crying, urging needs of the on-rushing, growing and developing human life.

We are not anxious to bring about a millenium. We are not even so childish in our economic education to believe that within a day, with the establishment of a new form of government or of society, with the inception of new laws, society will be perfected and peace and amity will be restored and every man will come into his birthright. We are not as naive as that. We believe that civilization crawls, gropes, staggers and falls, and gropes on again--that it does not leap from peak to peak.

We believe that our industrial organization has not yet said its last word, that competitive life has within it certain virtues and certain elements of greatness that may yet be developed and become helpful in social organizations, and we are anxious, deeply anxious, to make that virtue effective and potent in human life.

The religious man comes to industry today as he came twenty-five hundred years ago in little Judea, and hears, "You must be a servant of society; you must submerge



yourself, your own interests, your petty selfishness into the social ~~weal~~ and the social well-being, or society will break you." There is no one institution that society cannot dispense with if that institution becomes harmful and hurtful to social life. No institution is of itself divine--remember that. Not even democracy, nor the soviet system of government is divine, much as it is advertised to be. No institution is of itself sacred or divine. Capitalism, democracy, autocracy, feudalism--any system of society--is good or bad in proportion to the good or bad it brings into life. If it works helpfully it is good, it is sacred, it is divine; if it works to the hurt of society, it is bad, fundamentally bad, and must go.

Now, industry today, I believe, is finding its soul, and I believe that the American business man is becoming conscious not alone of his obligations and duties to society, but conscious of the fact that our industrial organization must wake up to the realization that it is untried and that it must justify itself. I believe for one that it will. I believe that capital and labor will, in this land at least, work out a program of cooperation that will make for the well-being and the happiness of both. I want to see the day come, and it need not be far removed, because this is not a land of curse, this is not a land of scarcity where we must tear and claw one another for the pittance in order to live.



This is a land blessed by God with plenty, with abundance. There is a social surplus enough to make every human being who works and is honest and industrious comfortable and happy. It is only the stupidity and the blindness of men that has kept tens of thousands away from their patrimony and away from their just deserts.

I believe that the time will come when every man, figuratively speaking, will dwell under his own vine and his own fig tree; when every man will have the opportunity to go as far as he is urged and his power will take him; when every man will receive the just returns upon his investments, whether these investments be labor or capital.

I believe that we can bring about a new Heaven and a new earth if we so wish. Religion will continue to point the way, to supply the courage and the inspiration. We do not want a religious organization to dominate society, but we want religious ideals,--justice, service, the sacredness of human life, to take hold completely and dominate social life.

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