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Coal: An Interpretation of the Coal Strike, 1922.

LECTURE BY RABBI ABBA H. SILVER.

SUBJECT: COAL.

AN INTERPRETATION OF THE COAL STRIKE.

AT THE TEMPLE, SUNDAY MORNING,

MAY 21st, 1922 - CLEVELAND, O.

JOSEPH T. KRAUS
Shorthand
Reporter
CLEVELAND

As an introduction to my address this morning I can do no better than to read the opening paragraph of my address delivered here two and a half years ago on "The Right and the Wrong of the Steel Strike." I said then: "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 will 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 says aye, and nay when the people says nay, convicts himself of hypocrisy. A religious leader should speak his mind after thoughtful and prayerful study and reflection; if his conclusions are wrong, then society will easily detect the error of his conclusions and correct them. When the wrong is of the soul, then his ministry is a sacrilege."

"I shall approach the subject of the right and the 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 the laboring man. I shall

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approach it from the point of view of the public interest and social welfare. I shall try honestly and frankly to face the facts as they are."

There is an old Arabic saying that before a man would reveal a tale that was told to him, or before he would make his statement, he should permit that tale or statement to pass before the three narrow golden gates, and if they can pass successfully these three narrow golden gates, he may then proceed to reveal the tale or make the statement. And the first of these gates is Truth. Is it true? And the second one is, is it kind? And the third, is it needful?

Now, it is my supreme conviction that it is needful and imperative for a religious man to study and pass judgment upon the present coal strike. We shall try honestly to seek the truth, jealously to guard it when found, and we shall try to be kind. We shall try to avoid harshness, for the world today needs light and not heat; it needs information and not so much condemnation. But it needs more than information, it needs dynamic information; it needs the kind of information that is propulsive and impulsive, that drives and leads to action; and sometimes criticism is the very thing that leads to socially beneficent action.

I said two and a half years ago, and I repeat today, that I speak not as an employer of labor or as a

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laborer; I speak from the point of view of the public, and because I do so I want now to criticize the public first of all in this situation. Everyone today speaks of the public interest, and everyone is very zealous in guarding the interest of this innocent and abused and silent public. And yet the public is not as virtuous and as innocent and as blameless as we might wish to assume.

Why has the public, the great American public, been silent in this coal strike? Are there no moral issues involved? Are there no standards of ethical conduct involved? There are. Then why has this righteous public been silent? Why simply because it has not yet been hit. Its coal bins are still full, and it has been promised an abundance of coal for at least sixty or ninety days, and probably long thereafter, because it is said the production of coal from the non-union mines will adequately supply the demand, and because the public is safe in its wants the public is indifferent.

The fact that six hundred thousand men are striking for things which they regard as vital, the fact that they have made charges against the operators that go to the very vitals of our industrial ethical life, of peace and security in our economic organization,--that, apparently, does not concern the public at all. I suppose that the public is just as selfish and just as self-centered and just as indifferent to ethical considerations

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as capital and as labor. When the time comes and the strike drags out, and the public begins to suffer a bit, then perhaps the public will bestir itself, and, in righteous indignation, clamor for conferences and arbitration and government intervention, but until such time it is content to remain silent.

And I would then say a word with reference to our government. This coal strike has, again, to my mind, revealed the ineffectiveness and the timidity of our government in facing vital, serious, economic problems.

Let me recall to you the facts, let me recall to you the causes, the immediate causes, which led up to the strike. In 1919 there was a strike in the bituminous coal fields in this section, known as the central competitive field, which includes western Pennsylvania and southern Ohio and Indiana and Illinois. It threatened to be a very serious strike, and President Wilson intervened and forced the two parties to get into conference, and a bituminous coal commission was appointed to investigate. Upon the findings of this commission a basic interstate agreement was entered upon by operators and miners, touching upon the question of the scale of wages. This was in 1920. And the scale was to hold good for two years, up to March, 1922.

Among other things the two parties to this controversy, the operators and the miners, agreed to the

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following: that an interstate joint conference be held prior to April 1, 1922. The time and place of holding such meeting is referred to a committee of two operators and two miners from each state herein represented, together with the international officers of the United Mine Workers organization. In other words, prior to the expiration of this two year agreement they were to meet in conference to negotiate the scale for the coming year. Towards the close of last year Mr. Lewis, the president of the United Mine Workers, in consonance with this resolution, invited the operators to a conference. They flatly refused. They said: "We desire to say that we see nothing beneficial to the public or the coal industry in a meeting such as is indicated in your letter, and decline to meet."

Mr. Lewis sent another invitation and yet another. They were flatly turned down. And then the Secretary of Labor for the United States, Mr. James J. Davis, wrote to the operators on March 1st of this year, saying, among other things: "Failure to carry out this provision by either party to the agreement is a breach of faith and discredits the integrity of the joint industrial agreement, which becomes a reflection upon the party failing in the compliance of its pledged obligation." He urges them to go into conference, and states that he is writing at the request of the President of the United States. To which letter the operators replied, in

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substance: "Mind your own business. Our study of the situation absolutely convinces us (the operators) that our properties in this district cannot be operated on any wage agreements entered into in a four-state joint conference. We believe that we are better informed as to our economic competitive situation than any other person. We do not propose to have the best interests of this district again periled by barter and trade in a four-state agreement. (And this is significant) We think you will agree to the fact that there is no public necessity for undue activity on the part of the Department of Labor."

Mr. Davis wrote again, at the request of the President of the United States, reminding them of their moral obligation, and calling to their attention the danger involved in a national strike. The operators had said that they were afraid of indictments. Already some two hundred men, operators and miners, have been indicted in the United States District Court of Indiana because of a violation of the Sherman anti-trust law. And the Secretary of Labor told the operators that he has the word of the Attorney-General, Mr. Daugherty, that there is to be no prosecution, and that such a meeting is absolutely legal.

Now, they may have taken the word of the Attorney-General. He not only has the power not to prosecute people, but apparently he has the power to get people out of the penitentiary once they get in there.

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But they did not; and after the second rebuff the Secretary of Labor and the President of these United States decided to do nothing, and they have heroically adhered to their decision. I suppose when this strike drags out for another few months, and the public becomes restive and begins to grumble, or when election day approaches, then our government will decide to reopen its correspondence.

Apart from the fundamental issues involved in this strike--and I shall speak of them in a minute--there are two facts which challenge the concern of every right thinking citizen. First of all, a palpable, terribly serious breach of faith, which cannot be interpreted in any other way but an act of moral delinquency, is now being condoned by a silent and indifferent public and by a silent government. We have in the past criticized labor organizations for breaking faith and violating agreements and contracts, and we have no hesitancy in condemning even in stronger terms a breach of faith of this character. And then the refusal to meet, the refusal to go into conference, is, to my mind, another vicious anti-social practice.

At a time when even nations, warring nations, have seen the wisdom of deliberation and exchange of views around a conference table--and there have been seventeen such international conferences held since the signing of the Treaty of Versailles; and perhaps these conferences

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represent the only beneficial result of the war,--I say, at a time when whole nations are realizing the wisdom of negotiation by conference, it is criminal folly and stupidity on the part of any party to an industrial agreement to refuse to enter a conference. Two and a half years ago I said the same thing of Judge Gary and the steel industry, and I called his refusal then to enter into a conference Prussian and autocratic.

What are the real facts involved in this coal strike? There are two: wages and the union. The operators claim that the wages are too high, that the scale of 1920 represented the peak and that it must come down, and they insist upon a reduction ranging anywhere from seventeen to twenty percent. What are the facts? The miner receives from seven to seven and a half dollars a day for his labor. If he were to work a full working year, that is, 304 days, his income per year would be \$2280.00, which is a good wage; not a high wage considering the danger and the inconveniences involved in his trade--and there is no trade on God's earth that is so uninviting and so lonely and so unpleasant as that of a miner, working in darkness and dampness and dynamite smoke, away down in the bowels of the earth.

But no miner earns \$2280.00 a year, because no miner works 304 days a year. At most a miner works 214 days a year; that is to say, he loses on the average

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ninety working days a year because of enforced idleness, because of lack of employment; that is to say, his maximum annual income, making no allowances for illness, is sixteen hundred dollars; and in the year 1918, which was the year of the greatest employment, in the year of greatest prosperity, the annual income of miners in this central competitive field actually ranged from thirteen hundred to sixteen hundred dollars a year.

And when there is unemployment for a long period they starve. In West Virginia today there are seventy thousand miners who are on the verge of starvation, and we are compelled to organize there relief agencies such as are today being organized in Russia, in this land of plenty and abundance.

Now, why is a miner compelled to lay off on an average of ninety days a year? Why can he not work his full 304 days? Why, simply because the mining industry in the United States is over-developed; there are too many mines and there are too many miners. If these ten thousand mines were to run full force they would produce thirty percent more of coal than is required in this land for home consumption and for export. During the busy season--and coal has its seasonal variations like other industries--most miners work, but during the slack season vast numbers of them are laid off; so that lowering of wages takes place automatically.

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In 1921, while there was no actual reduction in the daily wage of the miner, there was an actual reduction in his net income as a result of increased unemployment; and a further decrease in his wages will force him to the edge of starvation, actually and really; and it will not help the coal industry one iota; it will not increase consumption because American industries, those that are not working, are not working because coal is too high.

Decrease in wages, then, is not a solution of the problem. A solution of the problem is to be found in this control of the over-development in the mining industry, this doing away with wastefulness and the increase of economy in production. The most that can be said for the side of the operators in this wage controversy is this: that an impartial governmental agency ought to be established--a commission--scientifically and impartially to investigate and discover the facts, the facts of the entire industry, so that if a reduction is absolutely imperative, it will be based not on whims or on guesses but on facts, and we will have the indorsement of public sentiment back of it.

But that is the very thing that the operators do not want. The miners have asked for a federal commission. Mr. Garfield, the fuel administrator during the war, demanded such a commission, impersonal and

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impartial; public sentiment favors such a commission. But the operators do not want it.

And now comes the union. The operators do not wish to negotiate with the United Mine Workers, with the union, just as the steel industry refused to meet with the union. They are ready to meet with their workmen in each field and each group individually, but not with a great organization. Their policy, apparently, is the same as that of the steel strike, and the same as the old Roman Empire--"Divide et impera"--divide and then rule, break them up in bits so that they are impotent, powerless, and then rule them.

They are also opposed to what is known as the check-off system in the mines; which is simply this: the operators have, for the past twenty-five years, been in the practice of taking from the miners weekly wage his union dues, and then turning those dues over to the union. They feel that is giving the union too much of a regular income, and they want to break that practice.

✓ Now, my attitude towards unions and unionism has been stated over and over again, and I need not restate it now. It is quite clear to me that in this day of vast industrial expansion and organization, in this day when everyone is organizing--capital, industry, the farmer, the professions--it is futile to expect the workingman to refrain from taking unto himself the additional safeguard

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and protection and weapon of organization; and it is furthermore a conviction of mine that it is of the greatest and best interest, ultimately, of the employer and of the public, that the laboring man be organized. Organization ultimately spells responsibility. It may not do so in its infancy. There may be abuses; power always lends itself at first to abuse, but ultimately an organized group takes unto itself automatically certain responsibilities, and in the future we shall have to deal with responsible individuals and responsible groups. And so this attempt on the part of the coal operators to defeat collective bargaining and unionism is a mistake; and if you want a proof of how much the miner needs his union, let me read to you a little description of the miner's life in a non-unionized coal field in West Virginia. STP

I venture to say--and I say it guardedly and mindful of every word I say--that there is no spot in the civilized world today where industrial feudalism and economic autocracy and exploitation hold such complete sway and domination as they hold in our neighboring state of West Virginia. There is a situation there which has led to what is actually civil war. At this very moment some five hundred men are on trial for conspiracy and murder and treason, as a result of acts of desperation, to which they were driven by the ruthless, consciousness operators. Here is a description of their life in these

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mining camps of West Virginia:

"No one owns his own house; he cannot acquire so much title to property. No one runs a store, operates a garage or sells groceries to his fellow townsmen. No one amuses them in a movie theater. There is no Main Street of small independent businesses, owned by different people, and making up that mosaic of commercial life that is typical of villages everywhere. There is little if any participation in common, group activities. No body of elected councilmen ever passes on repairs for roads; no group of people ever gets together and decides that the old school house is too ramshackle for the children or that the old church needs repainting. No family physician builds up a successful practice by competing with other physicians. No lawyer settles disputes over property rights among his neighbors.

"It is not quite accurate to say that no one does these things. The coal company does them all. It owns all the houses and rents them to the miners. It owns the store, the pool room, the movie theater, and often helps to build the school and the church. It often owns the Y. M. C. A. building, if there is one. The company employs the physician and collects a small sum monthly from each miner to help pay him. The company owns all the land and everything upon it. It therefore controls the life and activities of the little community. It is

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responsible for the sanitation. The company's ownership sometimes extends to the roads, so that it can control ingress and egress. In some counties the company is the employer of the deputy sheriffs (and that is significant) and is therefore responsible for police supervision. In Logan County (where this civil war of a year and a half ago took place) the operators paid out \$61,000.00 last year in salaries for deputy sheriffs. Now, these deputy sheriffs appointed by the company will enforce the law, but not the law of the state or the land but the law of the company.

"The results of this general mode of life is that many mining towns are unsightly, unhealthful and poorly looked after. Houses are slapped up, seldom repainted and allowed to go unrepaired. Garbage is collected with indifferent frequency, perhaps once during the hot summer months. There are towns in which the tin cans cover the ground in every yard, and the whole aspect is one of dreariness and the ugliness of neglect. Children find no playground but the railroad. There is not even a sidewalk. Once in a while you pass belching coke ovens, spewing their fumes and smoke from their open tops directly at the windows and doors of the houses close by.

There is no escape from it for them. Its paternalism touches their lives at every point. They

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cannot initiate or take part in any of those little ways of controlling one's environment that are the common pride of normal small towns from New England to the mountains of the West.

"One way of exercising some measure of control over the conditions of their life and work has been open to them. That has been through affiliation with the United Mine Workers of America. By belonging to a labor union strong enough to negotiate with the organized groups of their employers, they have been able to insist that one of their own men weigh what they produce. They have been able to affect wages and hours. They have been able to exert collective pressure for a greater degree of safety in the mines and thus reduce the number of maimed and broken men. In various ways they have been able to find an outlet for those impulses of self-expression that lie dormant in every man."

I could go on and read concerning conditions there; I know them for I have lived them. ~~To~~ To say, then, that the cause of the miners in this strike is a just cause would be to say nothing more than the absolute certain truth; but to say that would mean little. The important thing is this: that the public, that ultimately pays the bill for every industrial dispute, the public which is responsible for the security of life and the happiness of the citizens of this land,--that the public

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must bestir itself and demand, first of all, that the two parties return to conference. They must reopen negotiation. That if the operators cannot work the mines because of their determination not to negotiate, that the government must step in and work them.

There is no group in this country, capital or labor, however great, however well organized, however financially powerful, that is superior in authority to the government or to the will of the people. The public must bestir itself and demand further that a commission of experts be appointed by the government to study accurately, scientifically, the entire industry; the conditions of production, the cost of production, the cost of distribution, the cost of labor, the conditions of life, so that whatever action is taken in the future will be based upon knowledge and fact and not upon struggle, conflict or guesswork.

And, lastly, the public must bestir itself and demand, in deference to the spirit of fair play and decency, that constitutional rights be safeguarded everywhere--in West Virginia as well; that freedom of assemblage and freedom of speech and the right of men to organize when they see fit to organize--the elemental rights of American citizens--that these be jealously safeguarded by our government.

There are clear moral and ethical issues

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involved in this controversy, and the astounding thing of it all is that the vast American public is so little educated up to these conditions, and has so little of the ethical impulse as to be almost totally indifferent to the situation.

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