

**ADDRESSES UPON THE LABOR
QUESTION; I TO THE WORKINGMEN
OF PROVIDENCE, R. I.; II TO THE
ALUMNI OF ANDOVER THEOLOGICAL
SEMINARY, JUNE 9, 1886**

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Addresses Upon the Labor Question; I To the workingmen of providence, R. I.; II To the alumni of andover theological seminary, June 9, 1886 by Edward Atkinson

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ADDRESSES

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LABOR QUESTION.

BY

EDWARD ATKINSON

OF BROOKLINE, MASS.

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1886.

THE SERVICE WHICH CAPITAL RENDERS WHEN EMPLOYED BY LABOR.

AN ADDRESS GIVEN TO THE WORKINGMEN IN PROVIDENCE, R.I.,
APRIL 11, 1886,

By EDWARD ATKINSON,

AT THE INVITATION OF MESSRS. JAMES NORMANDIE AND JAMES BOWIE,
Committee. Being one of a course of lectures upon the Labor Question instituted
by the workingmen of Providence.

LADIES AND GENTLEMEN, — After I had completed this lecture I was asked to give it a title, which puzzled me; but presently I chose two quotations, which, taken together, express its purpose.

The first is from an old lecture by Ralph Waldo Emerson:
“Mankind is as lazy as it dares to be.”

The second is from a cookery book by “An Old Bohemian:”
“If you don't sympathize with the poor, try it.”

We hear very much about the “dignity of labor;” but I am cynical enough to think that this phrase is apt to be used oftener by those who don't know what real hard work is, than by those who do. Any way, a laborer's life is a mighty hard road to travel and to keep your dignity at the same time.

On the other hand, honest workmen want the truth and the facts of life: if they are hard facts, so be it. Life is a struggle with a purpose. In our material work, we are all the time trying to overcome friction; but, if there were no friction, we couldn't work at all, because we should have no fulcrum. In the higher life, if there were no conscience — no possibility of going wrong — there could be no virtue, no manhood, no progress material or spiritual. Man would be like every other beast, — a mere animal.

I shall give you this evening some hard facts, and I doubt not some of you may be offended. You may be offended with me as

much as you please, but don't get mad with the facts. It won't alter them.

Remember, there are two sides to every question. What are the proceedings in a court of justice? Are not counsel engaged on each side of a disputed question? or, when one side is too poor to pay counsel, does not the court assign an able lawyer, and instruct him to present that side to the court and to the jury?

Now, I am not counsel for either side in this case. I understand, that, in your course of lectures, you desire all views to be represented. It would be impossible to crowd all the varying phases of the relation of labor and capital to each other within the limits of a single address. I shall therefore limit myself to one subject; to wit, *The service which capital renders when employed by labor*; and I shall only present that side as fairly as I can.

Perhaps that phrase has a strange sound, but I think you will presently appreciate the fact that laborers employ capitalists in their service just as truly as capitalists employ laborers: you can no more cut them asunder than the surgeons could cut the Siamese twins apart, lest both should die.

If I were addressing chiefly capitalists, my words would be a little different in form, but not in substance. I am myself neither a great capitalist, nor a laborer in the sense in which you understand that word. I am only an every-day sort of hard-working man.

I hardly knew how to begin this lecture, for the reason that I feel the responsibility very much of delivering a lecture, upon what is called the labor question, to men, most of whom distinctly classify themselves as laboring men.

For myself, I object to such a classification being made, except for purposes of convenience.

Every man or woman who takes any part in the production or distribution of useful things, belongs to the laboring or working class, whether the work be of the head or of the hand. I have said I claim to be a hard-working man myself; and this bit of work of addressing you, which will take only an hour or a little more, is the result of years of intense work in investigating the facts of life.

I shall assume that certain facts of life are to be accepted. For instance:—

1st, That private property exists. That it exists in the nature of mankind, and is older than any written or printed laws which

have been enacted by governing bodies, because it is founded in human nature.

2d, That a limited private ownership of land also exists in the nature of things; such ownership being limited by the right of the State to take land or any other private property for public use, with compensation to him who possesses it at the time of such taking, or to tax it.

I do not assume that all the laws or all the customs regulating such limited ownership of land are the best that could be devised. I think they are not always the best; but the way to better them is not to abolish, but to amend. I simply assume the fundamental idea of possession or of property in land or other things for private uses under certain conditions, being accepted as right.

These propositions are sometimes contested. But for the purpose of this lecture I may assume that you do not wish to waste your time in listening to a refutation of propositions which your own common sense has already rejected. You are not Communists.

You may be safely assumed to desire to become the possessors or owners of your own dwelling-places, with the land on which they stand.

You may also be assumed to claim the right to own the capital which you have created or paid for; whether it be in your own tools, in a share of the factory in which you work, or an interest in any other form of capital.

When you justify private property, you admit that capitalists rightly exist. The only question is — if there be any question — at what point the ownership of capital should stop; whether or not it should be forbidden, that, after a man had become possessed of one set of tools, he should be prohibited or prevented from becoming the owner of another set, which he cannot use himself, but which he may let to another man, for a share of the products, who otherwise would be without good tools.

That is all the difference there is between one man and another.

Capital is a tool, an instrument, to be applied to production, to increase the abundance of things. It may be a hammer; it may be a plane; it may be a knitting-needle; it may be a knitting-machine; it may be a coined dollar; it may be a hand-loom; it may be a power-loom; it may be a factory or a railroad. These are all alike *tools*. One man can strike with a hammer which is his tool, who cannot direct the steam-hammer which is another

man's tool. The higher you rise in the grade of work from the use of the simple hammer worked by hand to the use of the great trip-hammer worked by the power of steam, the more complex and the more difficult becomes the work, and the more you substitute mental for merely manual skill. You will find, that, in the long run, the tools fall to him who can use them best, provided you do not interfere with the natural order and obstruct the course of events by attempting to stop a great tide which governs all the affairs of men.

There are two fallacies upon which the alleged antagonism of labor and capital, or of laborers and capitalists, is based.

The first fundamental error consists in the idea that there is a very large sum of wealth set off somewhere, and perhaps concealed and enjoyed by the few, of which the many have been in some way deprived in a wrongful or unjust manner.

The second fallacy is in respect to what constitutes labor. In other words, — as to what is the creative power by means of which what are called the natural resources of the earth are converted into the form of wealth or capital for the use of man.

I cannot submit to you, within the time of an hour's lecture, the details by which the first fallacy may be disproved. Suffice it, that, in my native State of Massachusetts, an exact estimate of the whole capital of the State can be made. Real estate is very fully taxed, and the sum of all the taxes is computed by the commissioner of the State.

The proportion of the tax which is assessed upon the land simply as land, and upon the buildings or other improvements upon the land, can be separated with sufficient accuracy to determine their relative proportions. Personal property is also taxed in such a way, that a fairly accurate computation can be made of that part of the personal property, or movable property, which is *in* the State, and that part which represents property which is out of the State.

The census of Massachusetts, taken by Col. Carroll D. Wright, is also taken in such a way as to check off the valuations made in other ways.

Now, there is a principle laid down in all the treatises on political economy, to this effect, — that the actual property of any large community, like the people of Massachusetts, aside from the land, never exceeds in its market value the market value of the products

of the same State for two, or, at the utmost, for three years. In respect to food, we are always within less than one year of starvation.

In 1876, after the publication of the census of 1875, I compared the facts disclosed with this theory. I was aided in making this comparison by Col. Wright, who is now the Chief of the National Bureau of the Statistics of Labor; and we conclusively proved, that if we could become possessed of all the railroads, mills, workshops, dwelling-houses, together with the goods and wares of every kind waiting for consumption, and could convert them back into the food, fuel, and shelter which were consumed or exhausted by those engaged in their production, the whole sum and substance of the State above the land would be consumed in less than three years. In other words, the people of Massachusetts have got ahead of old Time only three years since the Pilgrims landed upon Plymouth Rock, in their accumulation of capital.

I have treated the value of the capital or wealth, which has been put upon the land, as something distinct from the value of the land itself. Land has no value of itself, except for the capital which is put to work upon it. The peninsula of Boston is said to have been purchased from the Indians for a string of beads. Remove the capital from that peninsula, and it would not be worth more than a string of beads to-day.

What little original fertility the soil may have had is already removed.

Thus it is that all value, — that is to say, all things which can be sold for a price, or exchanged or bartered, obtain their value from the human effort or labor which is put upon them, including land itself; but the labor is that both of the hand and of the head.

It is not surprising that men should be misled in respect to the proportion of wealth as compared to product. These great factories and works impose upon the imagination, when they are looked at separately and by themselves.

It seems as if they were founded for all time, and that he who possesses them could forever control the work of other men. They are called "fixed" capital.

But let us consider this matter. Are they "fixed"? I suppose many of my hearers work in factories, and they know something about the conditions of a factory.

What is there in any of the factories in which you work, which has not been greatly changed in the last ten years?

How much machinery is there in any factory in which you work, which is twenty-five years old?

What is there in or about the factory which has any market value beyond a single generation of thirty-five years?

There is nothing constant but change, in the factory or workshop, — nothing fixed.

Which factory does either one of you try to get work in, — the old factory, in which the owner has been unable to gain sufficient profit from the sale of his goods to keep it up in good condition; or the new factory, in which all the machinery is of the very best and most modern kind, and in which the owner possesses so large and ample a capital as to enable him to buy his stock at the lowest price?

In which kind of factory can you earn the highest wages?

In which kind of factory are the goods made at the lowest cost?

Which man can buy his material at the lowest price, — the man who has plenty of capital, or the man who has plenty of debt which he cannot pay?

Where the best materials are bought at the lowest prices, the owner can pay the highest wages for their conversion, can he not? Now, can he make such purchases unless he has sufficient capital?

There is but one answer to each of these questions. Each one of you tries to get a place in a factory in which the machinery is kept up in the best way, and in which the owner has the best credit; because you know very well, that in such a factory you will be able to do the largest amount of work with the least labor for yourselves. You know very well, that in such a factory you will earn the highest wages; and you also know, that in such a factory the goods will be made at the lowest cost.

Now, then, that factory will be both profitable to the owner and profitable to the workman. Won't it?

Then, where do the profits and the wages come from? Don't they come out of the sale of the goods?

What fixes the price of the goods? Competition on goods. Which goods bring the highest price? The best goods of their kind.

Where are they made? In the best mill of its kind.

Doesn't the owner of that mill keep on the lookout all the time