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Altgeld's great speech

A speech delivered by John P. Altgeld to the working men of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, on Labor Day, 1897. Altgeld's idea was that government ownership is the remedy for the nation's existing troubles.

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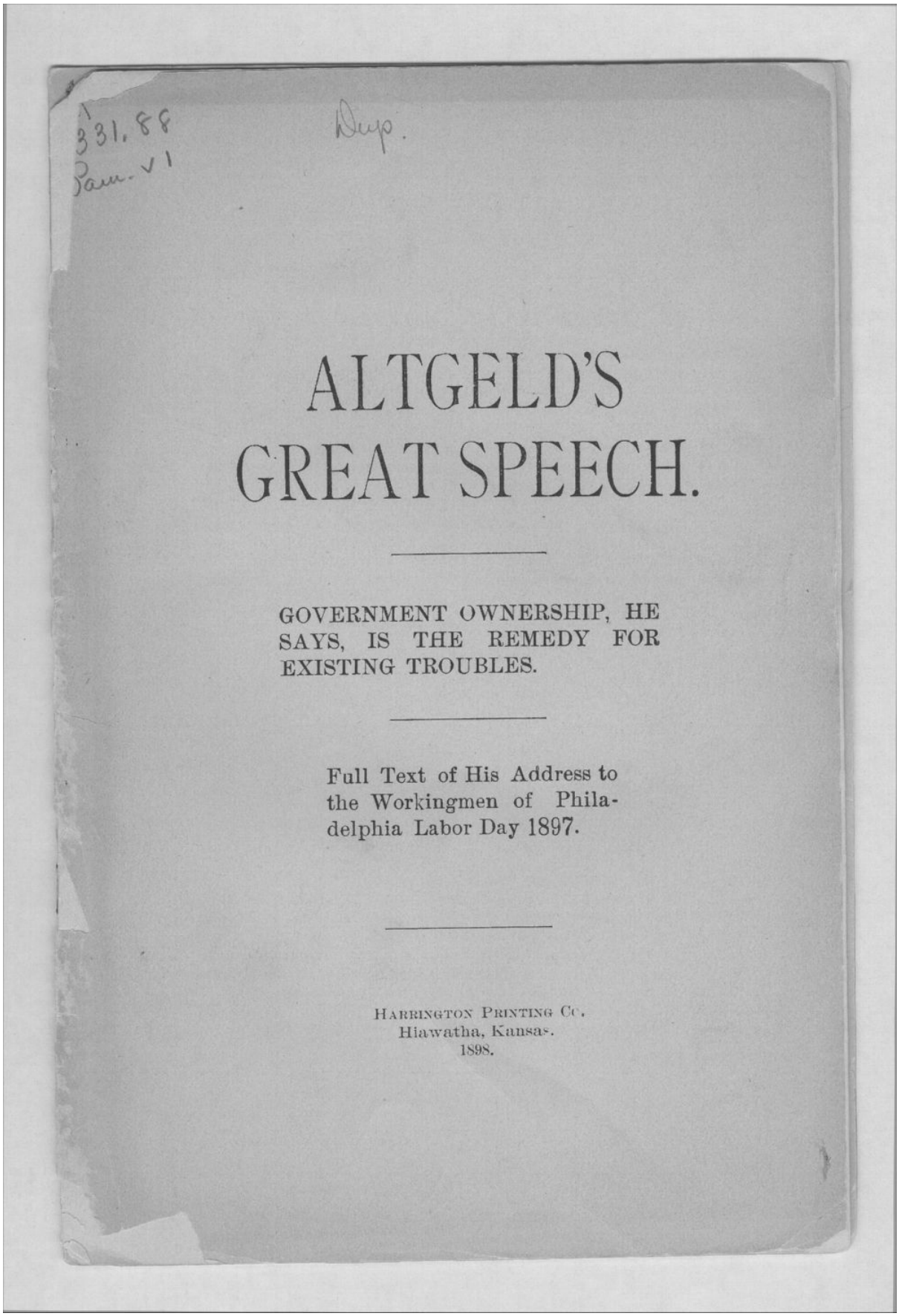
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ALTGELD'S GREAT SPEECH.

GOVERNMENT OWNERSHIP, HE SAYS, IS THE REMEDY FOR EXISTING TROUBLES.

Full Text of His Address to the Workingmen of Philadelphia Labor Day 1897.

HARRINGTON PRINTING CO.
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Altgeld's great speech

JOHN P. ALTGELD'S SPEECH.

"The most serious problem that confronts the people of America to-day is that of rescuing their cities, their states and the Federal government, including the Federal judiciary, from absolute control of corporate monopoly. How to restore the voice of the citizen in the government of his country, and how to put an end to those proceedings in some of the higher courts which are a farce and mockery on one side and a criminal usurpation and oppression on the other.

"Corporations that were to be servants, and begged the privilege of supplying cities with conveniences, or of serving the country at large, have become masters.

Burdens Borne By Labor.

"All of this falls with crushing force on the laborer, for his hands must earn the taxes the landlord pays—he is forced to depend on the public conveniences, and always suffers under bad government.

"An individual rarely has interest enough or money enough to bribe a city council or buy a legislature. But the corporations have both, and as the money all comes off the public, they offer temptations that are too strong for the average man to resist,

"Inasmuch as no government can endure in which corrupt greed not only makes the laws, but decides who shall construe them, many of our best citizens are beginning to despair of the Republic.

"Others urge that we should remove the bribe givers—that is, destroy this overwhelming temptation by having the government take all these monopolies itself and furnish the service which they now furnish, and thus not only save our institutions, but have the great profits, which now go into the pockets of private corporations, turned into the public treasury.

"But the corruptionists, the monopolists and all men who are fattening on the existing rottenness and injustice, cry angrily; 'Why, that would be socialism, rank socialism, and we are op-

posed to it.' Some of these men know the meaning of socialism and some do not, but they control all those men who cling to the skirts of wealth.

Not Yet Ready For Socialism.

"Socialism has been defined as a system of government in which the competitive system is entirely abolished, and the principle of associated effort is applied to everything.

"According to the standard authorities, socialism is an ideal state, founded on justice, and in which the benefits of modern invention and of monopoly shall be shared by all the people instead of being controlled by the few and used by these few to make themselves the absolute masters of the many. The word 'socialism' is used as a term of derision only by the ignorant or the servile.

"However, the world is not ripe for the application of socialism. There are as yet hundreds of things that can not be done successfully by the state, and that must be left to the individual.

"While reforms are taking place in Europe the private corporations in America are bribing Legislatures and City Councils, reducing wages, charging higher rates, and collecting dividends on millions and millions of watered stock. According to legislative investigation, the stock in the Boston Street railroad is over half water: in New York, in Brooklyn and in Philadelphia the ratio is 4 to 1.

"Every business reason applicable to the municipalities and governments of Europe is applicable here. We want as pure water, as good drainage, as cheap service as they have, and we want the same privilege of supplying ourselves as they exercise; and when it is apparent that by acting collectively we can do business more successfully, can serve ourselves better in every way, and can secure for the public treasury those millions which now go into the pockets of grasping individuals, have we not a right to do it? If we find that in this manner we can give steadiness to labor, and can elevate its standard and improve the conditions of all of our people, dare we not do it?

One Guard Against Corruption.

"Even if private corporations were to serve us cheaper and better than we could serve ourselves, we will be forced to take the corporations in order to prevent free institutions from being overthrown by corruption. This reason did not exist in Great Britan; yet the people took the corporations.

"So long as there was competition our people preferred to let it regulate everything, but competition is being entirely wiped out by pools and trusts and our people will be devoured by vultures unless the government comes to their rescue.

Postal Savings Banks.

"In Great Britain and in many of the Continental countries the governments maintain postal savings banks in which the poor can deposit their little savings from time to time and get a low rate of interest on them. In England this postal savings department, run in connection with the postoffice, performs a variety of service that is of the greatest benefit to the people. It provides a system for receiving the small deposits even of children, a cheap and safe system of sending small sums of money from one point to another, and it issues life insurance policies for small amounts. In this way the poor are encouraged to form habits of economy and thrift and also to make provision for sickness, accident and for old age, and can do this all at a very nominal expense and are never in danger of losing a life's work by a bank failure. or of having the insurance company break after paying it premiums for years.

"In our country the poor people are left at the mercy of private individuals and private companies. The history of both, in banking as well as in insurance has been tainted with failure, bankruptcy and even frauds and, owing to the high charges, our poor people are deprived of the benefit of life insurance. The total amount which any individual can deposit in a savings bank is not large, and consequently it does not interfere with the general business of the country, and instead of paying interest on bonds held by the rich of foreign countries, the government pays interest to its own people.

Government Ownership of Telegraph.

Nearly every government in the world except ours, owns and operates its own telegraph and telephone lines, to the great advantage of its people. But we still give all the benefits to corporations.

"An examination shows that the total cost of the construction and equipment of the Western Union Telegraph line has been only between $25,000,000 and $30,000,000, and that owing to wear and tear, etc., it is now not worth over $20,000,000; yet it has issued stocks and bonds amounting to over $97,000,000, and it is paying interest on this sum. In other words, it is now paying

20 per cent on what the plant has cost and what it is now really worth. During the last twenty-five years it has paid $100,000,000 in dividends. All this money has come out of the pockets of the American people.

"If the government were to take the telegraph at a fair price and make it part of the postal system, and issue 3 per cent bonds for it, and were to maintain the present charges, the net earnings, after paying interest on the bonds would pay for the entire system in about five years. On the other hand, if it should decide to do as Great Britain has done, that is, reduce the charges so as to bring the service within the reach of all the people, the charges could be cut in two and the system still be self-supporting.

"In the United States the rate ior the shortest distance is 25 cents for ten words; and to some points of the country over $1. That is from two to ten times as high as in Great Britain or France.

As to the Coal Strike.

"In the spring of 1894 there was a strike on the part of the coal miners which extended nearly all over the United States, and which was so protracted that a coal famine ensued and many of the largest industrial establishments were obliged to shut down; and laboring men, who had no connection with that industry, were thrown out of employment, and there was much derangement of the business of the country.

"The strike was for living wages; the condition of the coal miner had for years been getting steadily worse; spasmodically he had struck against the hand that was crushing him and crushing his family, but all to no purpose; his wages were reduced from time to time, and, as the business depression spread over the country and industrial establishments became idle, there was a reduction in the amount of coal consumed and many miners were unable to do more than get half time, while others were entirely idle.

"During the strike in 1894 one of the largest operators in Illinois stated that he had some excellent men in his employ, who had families to support, who were sober and industrious, and who had not been able to make over $8 a month for a year past. The majority of the operators were not to blame; they had to compete in the market in order to sell their coal; they had their money invested in mines, and in mining machinery; they found that a few unscrupulous and conscienceless men had taken advan-

tage of the hunger of the miners and got them to go to work at starvation wages, and were thus able to put their coal upon the market at greatly reduced prices. This forced the honest, humane, honorable men engaged in the mining business to sell their coal at a similar price or go out of the business, and the result was that they likewise had to reduce wages. So that it was the unscrupulous and conscienceless men who fixed the wages.

Miners Lose Nothing by the Strike.

"This strike has interfered with the regular operations of the country upon which the welfare of society depends. The struggle has been protracted and does not promise to settle anything definitely, nor to furnish protection to the country against further disturbance of this character. True, the miners have lost nothing, for they had nothing to lose, and should the struggle go against them, at the end of it they will be just as well off as they were at the beginning.

"Mr. De Armit has the satisfaction of knowing that with the great power placed in his hands he has been able to force the weaker class a notch lower down in the scale of misery and degradation. The fact that the labor of this weaker class had created the wealth which was thus used to crush them did not help them; and if Mr. De Armit, Mr. Carnegie and their rich associates could exult over success they should feel as proud as a man who has whipped his wife or as a son who has thrashed his mother.

"But these things are now matters of history. The only question of interest today is how long shall this go on and where will it end? Hyenas are sometimes satiated and lie down to rest, leaving the world to others; but the recent years have demonstrated that the hunger of corporations grows fiercer with the feeding, and that if left to have their way the contest must become fiercer and the public will, at all times, be in danger of a fuel famine and a general disturbance of its industries. On the other hand, if the miners are to be reduced to such a state of helplessness and degradation that they will not have the spirit to strike, if hunger and nakedness are to become natural conditions among the adults, and ignorance and crime are to be the environment of the children, then we will soon have in our country a large population that will be a constant menace to free government and Republican institutions.

What the Government Might Do.

"Now, suppose that the United States government should say: "The constant recurrence of these disturbances of industrial and economic conditions of the country, growing out of disputes between the mine owners and the miners can not longer be endured; neither can I permit a large portion of the most industrious of my people to be reduced to such a low condition that they will be unfit to maintain free institutions. These people should have living wages, so that by industry, economy and prudence they can support their families and educate their children. On the other hand, the owner of the coal mines should have a reasonable income from their property. I will take these mines myself. I will buy them where I can, and where I cannot I will have their value ascertained by fair trial and pay the owner, so that every man will get a good, fair compensation for his property. I will issue bonds bearing a low rate of interest for these mines, and I will operate these mines as I now run the postoffice. I will fix a scale of wages which will give every man a fair wage for his work, as I now pay other government employes. I will fix the price of coal so that every man will know what it will cost him. I will fix this price so low that all the people of America can get their fuel at the cost of production and such slight addition as will pay the low interest, and in the course of years reimburse the purchase price, so that the mines will cost the public nothing. I will in the same manner take the anthracite coal fields, which are now operated as a monopoly, the price of such coal being arbitrarily fixed without reference to competition. I will sell that coal to the American people at the cost of production, with slight addition for the payment of the purchase money, thus enabling the people to get anthracite coal for much less than they now get it. This will give stability to the coal supply; it will elevate that large population that now depends on mining for a living; make of it a higher grade of citizens; it will reduce the cost of living to every American citizen and will be a blessing to the country.

Remedy for Mining Troubles.

"Having heard the government thus express itself, what would be the response of the country? I imagine that I hear coming from the great laboring masses, and from the manufacturers, and from the millions of citizens who love their country, and want it to reach the highest plane of civilization, an enthusiastic voice of approval

"But I also hear the insolent voices of the monopolists and their followers protesting that the government dare not do anything except furnish courts, sheriffs, marshals, and bayonets with which to crush the miner and silence every man who dare to insist that humanity has rights.

"My friends, these are the two voices heard in this land today. Which shall prevail?

Ownership of Railroads.

"Fifty-four of the governments of the earth own and operate their steam railroads. In the United States the roads are owned and operated exclusively by corporations.

"It has been estimated by some of the ablest authorities we have that if the government would take the railroads at a fair valuation and issue 3 per cent. bonds for them, these bonds would be taken up at once by the people, and that the actual saving effected in the rate of interest and in the operation of the roads would pay them in a comparatively short time, so that they would alone support the government, and thus solve the problem of keeping the treasury supplied.

"For years I was opposed to railroad ownership by government. I felt that private enterprise could manage them better than the public, and further, that the addition of such an army of men to the patronage of the government would be giving a dangerous power to any federal administration. This last objection has been partially removed by the application of the civil sevice law, and it is now settled that a system of railroad management could be established which would not interfere in politics—certainly not so much as the present systems interfere in politics. During the last campaign millions of dollars were collected from the railroads with which to debauch the public and the employes of almost every railroad in this country were forced, not only to march, but in many cases to vote against their will. But in recent years the question of railroad ownership in this country has changed and now presents entirely new problems.

"The question of putting an end to this wholesale corruption, putting an end to the selling of legislation, putting an end to the control of the government by corporations, is a question that will determine the existence of this republic. Unless we can check it there is no hope for this country. The only way by which we can stop the corruption at present is to remove the

temptation, and from present appearances the only way this can be done is to have the government take all these corporations and monopolies that are now destroying it. Every effort to enforce the criminal law against great offenders has ended in a farce. It is no longer a question of economy, it is not a question of policy, it is a question of existence.

"We are face to face with the question as to whether the government has the right and the power of self-preservation.

"If what is called the referendum in legislation shall be adopted it will tend to protect us from further corrupt legislation, but it could not remove the monopolies and the injustice that now exist in our industrial system.

Government by Injunction.

"The corporations discovered years ago that to control the construction of the law was even more important than to control the making of it. As the federal judges hold office for life, and are independent of the people and surrounded by moneyed influence, the corporations have constantly labored to secure the appointment to the federal bench of men who they believe would be their friends; that is, men who, by nature, education and environment, would be in sympathy with them and they now fly to these courts like the ancient murderers fled to cities of refuge. They do not buy the courts because it is not necessary.

"Some years ago congress passed the interstate commerce law for the purpose of protecting the public against overcharge and unjust discriminations. The corporations opposed this law and have succeeded in getting the federal courts to destroy it by construction.

"Again, congress passed an income tax law to compel the concentrated wealth of the land to bear its share of the burbens of government. For 100 years such laws have been held to be constitutional by the supreme court, but this time the great corporations objected and the supreme court at once came to their rescue and held the law to be unconstitutional. The favor or the opposition corporations has come to be almost the sole test of the constitutionality of a law.

"Congress has passed some anti-trust laws for the protection of the public, but they are simply sneered at by the federal courts, and today the formation of trusts is almost the only industry that prospers in this country.

"Nearly all efforts to curb corporations or to bring great

offenders to justice have been failures. In many cases the law and the courts seem to assume an apologetic attitude when facing men whose forms have been made rotund by ill-gotten millions, while in many other cases both the law and the courts become terrible in their majesty when dealing with men whose forms are bent, whose clothes are poor and whose stomachs are empty. The fact that the bony and industrious hands of these men helped to create the capital that is now setting its heel on their necks and crushing their families does not help them.

Courts Used by Corporations.

"Not content with the law as they found it, the federal courts, in their eagerness to serve the corporations, have usurped the functions belonging to the legislative and executive branches of the government and have invented a new form of tyranny called government by injunction.

"During the entire century in which this continent was developed, when our railroads, our factories and our cities were built, no government by injunction was heard of, nor is it heard of in any other country today. The law of the land was ample for all purposes. Life and property were protected, order was maintained, law was enforced and our nation became the wonder of the earth. And the law of the land as it existed for over a century is ample for every purpose today.

"But when the great leaders of industry began to pass away then there came to the front a class of manipulators who knew nothing about the art of building, but who have learned the art of legalized robbery and these manipulators and plunderers demanded a new form of government. The former leaders allowed the laborer a little of the bread he toiled for, but the new manipulator wanted all.

"The laborers were entirely at the mercy of these men. They first got hungry and then restive—a whip was needed to restore contentment and the federal courts promptly furnished it.

"Government by injunction operates this way: When a judge wants to do something not authorized by law he simply makes a law to suit himself. That is, he sits down in his chambers and issues a kind of ukase which he calls an injunction against the people of an entire community or of a whole state, forbidding whatever he sees fit to forbid, and which the law does not forbid, and commanding whatever he sees fit to command—for when the law forbids or commands a thing no injunction is necessary.

"Having thus issued his ukase, the same judge has men arrested and sometimes dragged fifty or a thousand miles away from their homes to his court on a charge of violating the injunction—that is contempt of court. And the men, after lying in prisons awhile, are tried, not by a jury, as is required by the constitution when a man is charged with a crime, but they are tried by the same judge whose dignity they are charged with having offended, and they are then sentenced to prison at the mere pleasure of the judge, who is at once legislator, judge and executioneer.

"When the Czar of Russia issues a ukase he leaves it to other men to enforce, but not so with these judges.

"Let us cite just a few examples out of a number.

Instances of Injunctions.

"Several years ago it was charged that the Northern Pacific railroad had been robbed by the men who controlled it of over $60,000,000. These same men went before Judge Jenkins of Milwaukee and got him to appoint three of their friends receivers of the road, and these receivers, instead of collecting the money alleged to have been wrongfully abstracted, proceeded to cut down the wages of the operatives without any notice to them, and for fear these operatives might get restless these receivers went before the same Judge Jenkins and got him to issue an injunction forbidding the operatives from leaving the employment of the railroad. About the same time a large number of employes on a California railroad refused to go to work because they were not paid, and Judge Ross, who was operating the road through the court, issued an order commanding them to go to work and threatened to send them to jail if they refused. Since that almost everything that a corporation lawyer could think of has been covered by these injunctions.

"Recently a judge in West Virginia issued an injunction forbidding the right of free speech and actually forbidding men from marching on the highway no matter how peaceable they might be. There are a few noble men on the federal bench who have refused to prostitute their courts at the bidding of corrupt greed, but they will in time have to follow precedents set by the others.

"It will be noticed that these injunctions are simply a whip with which to lash the back of labor. It is also apparent that if they succeed they must ultimately destroy the interests in whose behalf they are now issued and that they are therefore short-sighted. For if the laborers of the country are ever reduced to

the helpless condition of the laboring classes in some European countries—a condition in which they will have no purchasing power—then the great American market must disappear and our great railroads and industrial properties will not be worth 50 cents.

Laws Set At Naught.

"Glancing at this proceeding we find that it entirely supersedes government by and according to the forms of law as guaranteed by the constitution, and it substitutes government according to the whimes, caprice or prejudice of an individual, and is therefore a clear usurpation of power and a crime.

"Second—When the law forbids or commands something no injunction is necessary; when, therefore, an injunction forbids or commands something, that is not forbidden or commanded by law, it is legislation pure and simple, and therefore a usurpation of power, and a violatfon of the constitution and a high crime within the meaning of that instrument.

"Third—It is the function of the legislature to define crime and to declare what acts shall be punishable, and when therefore, a judge undertakes to do these things he usurps the functions of the Legislature.

Liberty In Peril.

"Fourth—The law has created special tribunals and special machinery to enforce the criminal law, and courts of chancery have no power to arrogate this to themselves and substitute contempt proceedings for the forms prescribed by law. In those cases in which an injunction is made to cover what is already forbidden by law it is simply a device to rob a man of a trial by jury, for when he is charged with violating the law he must be tried by a jury: according to the forms of law, but when charged with violating an injunction he can be railroaded to prison without any ceremony.

"Fifth—All of these proceedings in the Federal courts are an attempt to do things that belong exclusively to the police powers of each locality, in the administration of which these courts can not interfere without being guilty of usurpations.

"Sixth—But depriving men of a trial by jury and robbing them of their liberty and imprisoning them without a trial, according to the forms prescribed by law, is a violation of the constitution and a high crime.

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Rights of the Laborer.

"Even in conservative England they recognize the rights of the laborer. They recognize the fact that the days when competition regulated wages are passed.

"Courts there disdain to use their machinery as a mere convenience for corporate greed. The government of England is monarchial. Here we boast of Republican government and free institutions. Shall we allow the individual of this country to be robbed of snch rights and protection as a monarch would give him?

What to do With the Judges.

"Shall the corporations of this land be permitted not only to devour our substance, but also to destroy our liberties?

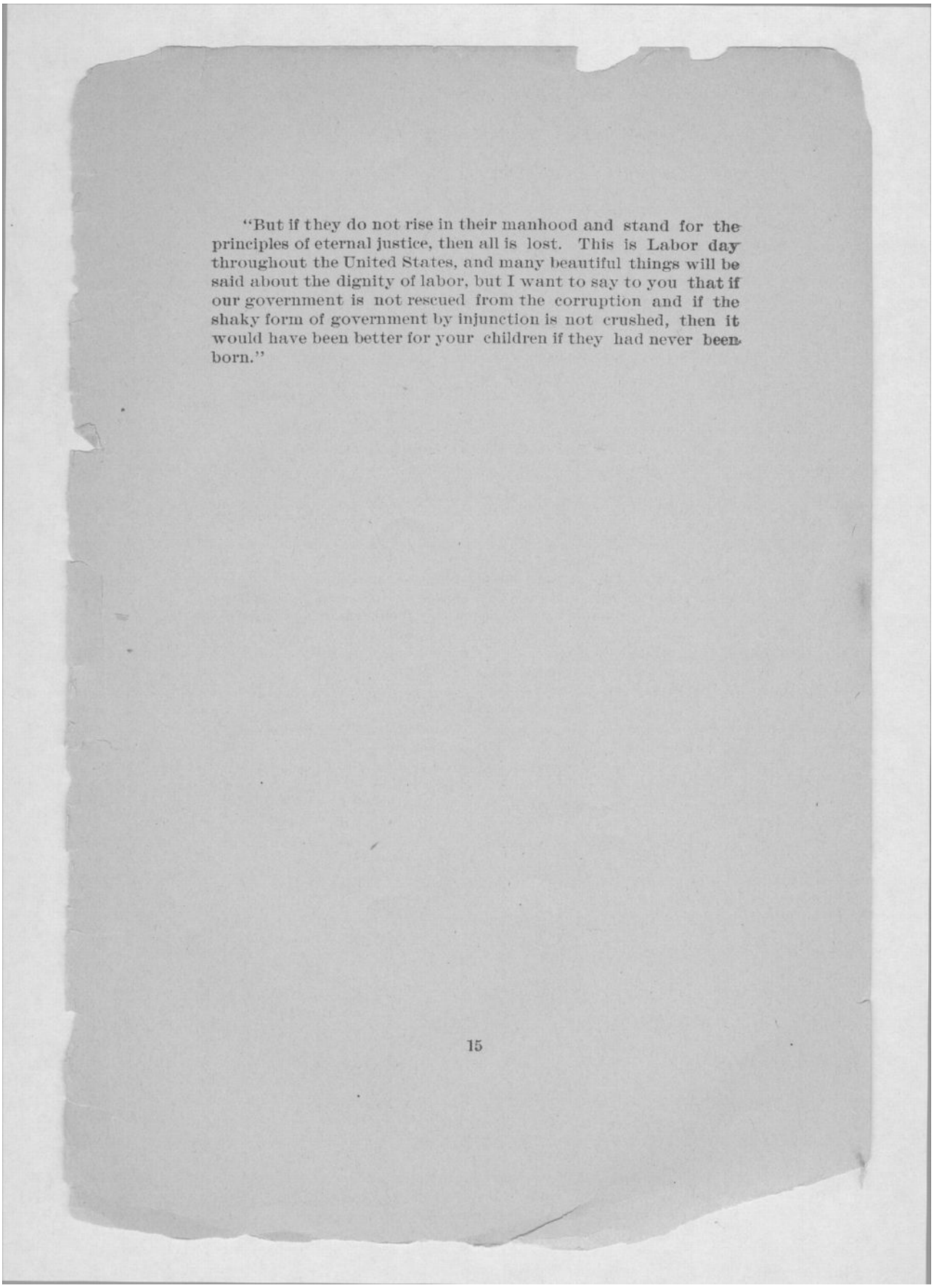
"My friends, let us save our institutions; government by injunction must be crushed out.

"If the government takes some of the great corporations, then there will not be so many corporation men appointed to the bench. But the constitution has pointed out a way to end these usurpations without having the government take the corporations, and that way is by impeachment. Every one of these judges, whether of high or low degree, who has been trampling on the constitution and usurping power not given him, is subject to impeachment.

"The American people can remove every one of them and consign them to that infamy which is now embalming the memory of Jeffries. But this cannot be done so long as Congress is made up largely of men who are mere corporation conveniences. It will be necessary to send men to Congress who will be true to the people. This may not happen at the next election, nor yet at the next, but it must come, and some soon.

"Providence has ordained that nothing shall go on forever. Our fathers said that every lane had a turn. We have been traveling in a lane that has run in the same direction for thirty years, and we are approaching a turn. Yea, my friends, do not despair. A turn in the road is already in sight, and if the American people are but true to their nobler instincts they will soon be restored to their inheritance, while justice and liberty, equal rights and equal privileges will cover our land with a halo of glory and give our people a new century of prosperity and happiness.

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"But if they do not rise in their manhood and stand for the principles of eternal justice, then all is lost. This is Labor day throughout the United States, and many beautiful things will be said about the dignity of labor, but I want to say to you that if our government is not rescued from the corruption and if the shaky form of government by injunction is not crushed, then it would have been better for your children if they had never been born."

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