

President's Address to Labor

Following is the address of President Wilson to the American Federation of Labor convention, Buffalo, N. Y., November 12, 1917:

"Mr. President, Delegates of the American Federation of Labor, Ladies and Gentlemen:

"I esteem it a great privilege and a real honor to be thus admitted to your public councils. When your executive committee paid me the compliment of inviting me here I gladly accepted the invitation because it seems to me that this, above all other times in our history, is the time for common counsel, for the drawing together not only of the energies but of the minds of the nation. I thought that it was a welcome opportunity for disclosing to you some of the thoughts that have been gathering in my mind during these last momentous months.

CRITICAL TIME IN HISTORY

"I am introduced to you as the President of the United States, and yet I would be pleased if you would put the thought of the office into the background and regard me as one of your fellow citizens who has come here to speak, not the words of authority, but the words of counsel; the words which men should speak to one another who wish to be frank in a moment more critical perhaps than the history of the world has ever yet known; a moment when it is every man's duty to forget himself, to forget his own interests, to fill himself with the nobility of a great national and world conception; and act upon a new platform elevated above the ordinary affairs of life and lifted to where men have views of the long destiny of mankind.

"I think that in order to realize just what this moment of counsel is it is very desirable that we should remind ourselves just how this war came about and just what it is for. You can explain most wars very simply, but the explanation of this is not so simple. Its roots run deep into all the obscure soils of history, and in my view this is the last decisive issue between the old principle of power and the new principle of freedom.

WAR STARTED BY GERMANY

"The war was started by Germany. Her authorities deny that they started it, but I am willing to let the statement I have just made await the verdict of history. And the thing that needs to be explained is why Germany started the war. Remember what the position of Germany in the world was—as enviable a position as any nation has ever occupied. The whole world stood at admiration of her wonderful intellectual and material achievements. All the intellectual men of the world went to school to her. As a university man I have been surrounded by men trained in Germany, men who had resorted to Germany because nowhere else could they get such thorough and searching training, particularly in the principles of science and the principles that underlie modern material achievement. Her men of science had made her industries perhaps the most competent industries of the world, and the label "Made in Germany" was a guarantee of good workmanship and sound material. She had access to all the markets of the world, and every other nation who traded in those markets feared Germany because of her effective and almost irresistible competition. She had a "place in the sun."

GERMANY'S INDUSTRIAL GROWTH

"Why was she not satisfied? What more did she want? There was nothing in the world of peace that she did not already have and have in abundance. We boast of the extraordinary pace of American advancement. We show with pride the statistics of the increase of our industries and of the population of our cities. Well, those statistics did not match the recent statistics of Germany. Her old cities took on youth and grew faster than any American cities ever grew. Her old industries opened their eyes and saw a new world and went out for its conquest. And yet the authorities of Germany were not satisfied.

"You have one part of the answer to the question why she was not satisfied in her methods of competition. There is no important industry in Germany upon which the government has not laid its hands, to direct it and, when necessity arose, control it; and you have only to ask any man whom you meet who is familiar

with the conditions that prevailed before the war in the matter of national competition to find out the methods of competition which the German manufacturers and exporters used under the patronage and support of the government of Germany. You will find that they were the same sorts of competition that we have tried to prevent by law within our own borders. If they could not sell their goods cheaper than we could sell ours at a profit to themselves they could get a subsidy from the government which made it possible to sell them cheaper anyhow, and the conditions of competition were thus controlled in large measure by the German government itself.

BERLIN-BAGDAD RAILWAY

"But that did not satisfy the German government. All the while there was lying behind its thought and its dreams of the future a political control which would enable it in the long run to dominate the labor and the industry of the world. They were not content with success by superior achievement; they wanted success by authority. I suppose very few of you have thought much about the Berlin-to-Bagdad railway. The Berlin-Bagdad railway was constructed in order to run the threat of force down the flank of the industrial undertakings of half a dozen other countries; so that when German competition came in it would not be resisted too far, because there was always the possibility of getting German armies in to the heart of that country quicker than any other armies could be got there.

"Look at the map of Europe now! Germany in thrusting upon us again and again the discussion of peace talks,—about what? Talks about Belgium; talks about northern France; talks about Alsace-Lorraine. Well, those are deeply interesting subjects to us and to them, but they are not the heart of the matter. Take the map and look at it. Germany has absolute control of Austria-Hungary, practical control of the Balkan states, control of Turkey, control of Asia Minor. I saw a map in which the whole thing was printed in appropriate black the other day, and the black stretched all the way from Hamburg to Bagdad—the bulk of German power inserted into the heart of the world. If she can keep that, she has kept all that her dreams contemplated when the war began. If she can keep that, her power can disturb the world as long as she keeps it, always provided, for I feel bound to put this proviso in—always provided the present influences that control the German government continue to control it. I believe that the spirit of freedom can get into the hearts of Germans and find as fine a welcome there as it can find in any other hearts, but the spirit of freedom does not suit the plans of the Pan-Germans. Power can not be used with concentrated force against free peoples if it is used by free people.

PEACE RUMORS

"You know how many intimations come to us from one of the central powers that it is more anxious for peace than the chief central power, and you know that it means that the people in that central power know that if the war ends as it stands they will in effect themselves be vassals of Germany, notwithstanding that their populations are compounded of all the peoples of that part of the world, and notwithstanding the fact that they do not wish in their pride and proper spirit of nationality to be so absorbed and dominated. Germany is determined that the political power of the world shall belong to her. There have been such ambitions before. They have been in part realized, but never before have those ambitions been based upon so exact and precise and scientific a plan of domination.

"May I not say that it is amazing to me that any group of persons should be so ill-informed as to suppose, as some groups in Russia apparently suppose, that any reforms planned in the interest of the people can live in the presence of a Germany powerful enough to undermine or overthrow them by intrigue or force? Any body of free men that compounds with the present German government is compounding for its own destruction. But that is not the whole of the story. Any man in America or anywhere else that supposes that the free industry and enterprise of the world can continue if the Pan-

German plan is achieved and German power fastened upon the world is as fatuous as the dreamers in Russia. What I am opposed to is not the feeling of the pacifists, but their stupidity. My heart is with them, but my mind has a contempt for them. I want peace, but I know how to get it, and they do not.

COL. HOUSE'S MISSION

"You will notice that I sent a friend of mine, Col. House, to Europe, who is as great a lover of peace as any man in the world; but I didn't send him on a peace mission yet. I sent him to take part in a conference as to how the war was to be won, and he knows, as I know, that that is the way to get peace, if you want it for more than a few minutes.

"All of this is a preface to the conference that I have referred to with regard to what we are going to do. If we are true friends of freedom, our own or anybody else's, we will see that the power of this country and the productivity of this country is raised to its absolute maximum, and that absolutely nobody is allowed to stand in the way of it. When I say that nobody is allowed to stand in the way I do not mean that they shall be prevented by the power of the government but by the power of the American spirit. Our duty, if we are to do this great thing and show America to be what we believe her to be—the greatest hope and energy of the world—is to stand together night and day until the job is finished.

LABOR MUST BE FREE

"While we are fighting for freedom we must see, among other things, that labor is free; and that means a number of interesting things. It means not only that we must do what we have declared our purpose to do, see that the conditions of labor are not rendered more onerous by the war, but also that we shall see to it that the instrumentalities by which the conditions of labor are improved are not blocked or checked. That we must do. That has been the matter about which I have taken pleasure in conferring from time to time with your president, Mr. Gompers; and if I may be permitted to do so, I want to express my admiration of his patriot's courage, his large vision, and his statesmanlike sense of what has to be done. I like to lay my mind alongside of a mind that knows how to pull in harness. The horses that kick over the traces will have to be put in corral.

"Now, to stand together means that nobody must interrupt the processes of our energy if the interruption can possibly be avoided without the absolute invasion of freedom. To put it concretely, that means this: Nobody has a right to stop the processes of labor until all the methods of conciliation and settlement have been exhausted. And I might as well say right here that I am not talking to you alone. You sometimes stop the courses of labor, but there are others who do the same, and I believe I am speaking from my own experience not only, but from the experience of others when I say that you are reasonable in a larger number of cases than the capitalists. I am not saying these things to them personally yet, because I have not had a chance, but they have to be said, not in any spirit of criticism, but in order to clear the atmosphere and come down to business. Everybody on both sides has now got to transact business, and a settlement is never impossible when both sides want to do the square and right thing.

SETTLEMENT HARD TO AVOID

"Moreover, a settlement is always hard to avoid when the parties can be brought face to face. I can differ from a man much more radically when he is not in the room than I can when he is in the room, because then the awkward thing is he can come back at me and answer what I say. It is always dangerous for a man to have the floor entirely to himself. Therefore, we must insist in every instance that the parties come into each other's presence and there discuss the issues between them, and not separately in places which have no communication with each other. I always like to remind myself of a delightful saying of an Englishman of the past generation, Charles Lamb. He stuttered a little bit, and once when he was with a group of friends he spoke very harshly of some man who was not present. One of his friends said: "Why, Charles, I didn't know that you knew so and so." "O-o-h," he said, "I-I d-d-don't; I-I can't h-h-hate a m-m-man I-I know." There is a great deal of human nature, of very pleasant human nature, in the saying. It is hard to hate