

Speech on Legislation for the Eight Hour Day

Ferdinand Domela Nieuwenhuis

1889

It seems to me that our Congress is a great success as regards the meeting of socialist delegates from all over the world, but that it has barely succeeded at all from the point of view of the agenda, which we have begun work on almost on the last day, and about which apart from a few privileged people we do not dare to talk for more than five minutes. Well! I declare that I am not a magician who can cover such a broad and weighty topic in such a short space of time. That is why I relinquish my right to speak on the question itself¹, and only ask for your attention in order to add some comments on the speech of my friend de Paepe.²

I personally expect nothing from parliamentarianism, precisely because I am a member of a parliament and have witnessed all the playacting, and I ask all those here who are members of a parliament, starting with our chairman, Cunninghame Graham, who is a member of the English parliament, whether they expect anything from parliamentarianism, yes or no. The word 'parliament' is composed of two words, which according to a witty author perfectly explain its character. That is, 'parle' (speak) and 'ment' (lie). What shorter and more precise definition could you give? Parliaments are just talking shops, which is not only the fault of the individuals but of the system itself.

We have seen it here. Our Congress is made up of an elite, no parliament in the world can compare with this assembly, and I ask you whether it has not made exactly the same mistakes? We have talked a lot, even excessively, and in the end we have to vote and make decisions, which have been prepared in advance, without the time and opportunity to discuss them seriously. The fault is therefore in the system.

But let us suppose for a moment that we had triumphed all along the line, suppose that we had a workers' government exactly as we wish, tell me: do you believe that general conditions would change greatly in favour of the workers? If you ask my opinion I would say frankly that the worst trick the governments could play on us would be to embrace our projects, because for 20 or 25 years they would have killed off any revolutionary socialist movement among the workers. Fortunately governments are blind and do not understand the situation at all, but for us that is where the greatest danger in our movement for the eight hour day lies.

¹ The main item on the conference agenda was a motion demanding international legislation for an eight hour working day. The motion was proposed by August Bebel.

² César de Paepe, a leader of the Belgian Labour Party, had spoken in support of Bebel's motion, saying that 'international labour legislation is just as practical as the international post and telegram systems'.

For the workers — I am sure of it — the introduction of an eight hour day would be a tremendous disappointment, because the workers can do what they want, they can introduce the eight hour day, they can emigrate, they can abstain from marriage and practice neo-Malthusianism, or even stop having babies altogether, capital will always find ways to protect itself against increases in wages which will come at their expense, and will not release its prey unless they are snatched away by force.³

As long as capitalist production remains, wages will not rise above what is needed for the maintenance of labour power. The capitalists, the masters of the governments, will grant the eight hour day when they see that it is the only way to hang on, when they think they can survive through that concession, and as long as they stay the workers will stay slaves. However much the workers win, it will only mean that the chains of slavery are coated in velvet or silk, yet still chains. So the workers will see that the cause of the evil is not in working hours or in wages, otherwise the effects would disappear with the disappearance of the cause; no, the cause of the evil is *the imperfect and totally unjust division of the product of labour*. Well! Without suppressing the cause, you will never suppress poverty and slavery.

Carroll Wright, the American secretary of the Bureau of Labour Statistics understood it perfectly when he said:

“One of the most important questions which demand a solution, is how to divide an ever-increasing product between the producers in a more proportionate and fair way, since an imperfect division rather than overproduction is the great evil the social body suffers from. At the moment capital gets the lion’s share, and that is why the workers were obliged to organise and threaten to act against the capitalists. The conflict between capital and labour can only be resolved by the abolition of wage labour and its replacement by cooperation.”

There is the evil, and there the cure.

On the other hand, if we, who are straightforwardly socialist, advocate furiously for labour legislation, it must be understood that this is a *concession* on our part, that it is because we agree with Saunders, the English factory inspector, that steps toward reforming society cannot be taken unless the working day is limited in advance and the legal limits strictly enforced. We will use it as a lever so that the proletarian giant, who has been floored and cannot protect himself against the kicks of his tyrants, gets back on his feet and recovers the use of his fists. This is the only reason I can imagine why a convinced socialist should take the trouble over something he knows in advance will not bring about a radical improvement. It seems to me that the ultimatum of the working class to the ruling class cannot be summarized better than in the quatrain of the English:

³ This is an abbreviated echo of the list of bourgeois ‘remedies’ given by William Morris in his report to the Congress earlier in the week:

“All kinds of schemes for the amelioration of the lot of the workman are set on foot or patronized by them: state-aided emigration, to get rid of the inconveniently many; feeble attempts at turning back the hands of the clock by establishing peasant proprietorship, or village industries; insurance of workers à la Bismark; the slightly improved form of joint-stockery called cooperation, many things down to mere philanthropy and the preachment of Malthusianism and thrift are tried in turn by those bourgeois beginning to be conscious of the volcano on which their society rests”.

Nieuwenhuis here appears to be suggesting that the legal eight-hour day would just be another such scheme.

Eight hours to work,
eight hours to play,
Eight hours to sleep,
and eight shillings a day

The gospel has a comparison which always comes to my mind when we discuss labour legislation: No one puts a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old garment, for the patch tears away from the garment, and a worse tear is made.⁴ Does that not apply to the question we are discussing? Capitalism, that is to say, the system in which the worker is separated from his property, his product, and his means of labour. Capitalism is our enemy and just as Cato proclaimed *Carthago delenda est*⁵ we will always and everywhere say *capitalism must be annihilated*.

When we wish for an eight hour day, it is only as a *means*, never as an *end*. A train cannot keep going forever without stopping for a moment to take on water. The less it stops the better, and we are looking for ways to have it stop as little as possible. For us the eight hour day is a station where we pause briefly to refresh ourselves to be able to restart the struggle stronger and better armed; it is just a weapon and as such a *provisional measure*. The workers must be aware that they have not reached the end of the struggle when they have won such legislation, but that then only can the real struggle begin. You do not have to be a socialist to agree with us on that point, and our socialist congress is very modest, even excessively modest, to make no more demands than that. That is why in demanding such legislation we must add: such legislation on a capitalist base is like a plant in rotten soil. We must say *individual property is the worst evil, and without suppressing it we will not have the cure we desire*.

If they offered me a place in a ministry — I do not expect it, and have no fear that they will — I would have just one condition, which is “do you wish to attack individual property?”. If the answer was yes, I would accept with hesitation but as a duty; if no, I would say *Get thee behind me, Satan*, go away, you wish to seduce me.

Plato was asked to propose a model constitution and laws for a Greek city. The philosopher said “Willingly, but will there be landowners among you?”. Of course, came the reply, all of us have fields and could enclose them with walls. “Then I have nothing more to say to you. Go and build your city, but others will rase it and you will not know how to defend yourselves.”

That philosopher should be our example, our model. As long as individual property remains the base of our society, poverty, slavery, misery and all their consequences will remain for the workers and the fourth estate, which is *nothing* but should be *everything*, will only be able to take up its rights and its rightful place by abolishing the individual form of property which has outlived its time. We will meet every proposal for international labour legislation with sympathy, but we will always reply — not enough, just a first step, *praeterea censeo* that individual property must be abolished.

We accept Bebel’s resolution, but only on these two conditions: to the maximum working day must be added a minimum wage, as well as an addendum stating that labour legislation is only a *transitory measure*, that an improvement in the lot of the workers can never succeed without

⁴ Matthew 9:16

⁵ Cato ended all his speeches with the phrase: *praeterea censeo, Carthaginem esse delendam*; “Furthermore, I demand that Carthage be destroyed”. Nieuwenhuis uses this *praeterea censeo* at other points to repeat “furthermore, I demand that private property be ended.”

leaving the framework of individual property as basis of society, and that our aim is and remains *the conversion of individual property into social property.*

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