

Ralph Chaplin Speaks

Speech by Ralph Chaplin given in front of a Lumber Workers Union

Ralph Chaplin

1950s

“Thanks, friends. I’m very happy and I feel very humble being here with you. Of course, there is this much about the story of the labor movement; in the pacific northwest in particular, and even more particular in the lumber workers out here. If you had a big mirror up here, look at yourselves, boys and girls everybody in that mirror. Your lumber workers, you know what you were in those days? There were no girls around, maybe just a few “rebel girls” who liked to lead in the singing. You were “timber-beasts!” They didn’t have homes, they didn’t have wives, they didn’t have families, they slept in muzzle-loading bunks. They worked 12, 14, 16 hours a day in all kinds of weather. So, what has happened? The evolution of the timber-beast into a human being and an American citizen. That’s one reason I say I feel happy and humble being here.”

(applause)

“It isn’t a question of saying to young people, “Oh we were great guys back in our days, we were the real men. We were giants in those days.” That isn’t it. We were no bigger, no smarter, no stronger than you are. We had youth! That labor movement was born out of the youth of a generation of young workers, who would not be kicked around. When they first started to face the predatory powers, particularly in the lumber industry, where the timber-beast was everybody’s dog, and the bull of the woods was his stooge. And the whistle punk was at the very bottom. They had to start from scratch. A new light came into their eyes and a new feeling came into their hearts, a new spirit dominated their lives; they found fellowship and companionship in solidarity with one another. It was either that, or go down, and not go down slugging. They preferred to go down slugging.”

(applause)

“Riding here from Tacoma, you’ll find one battlefield after another, where men gave up their lives and their liberties and gave up those precious hours of their youth to make it possible for you people to enjoy the conditions you are enjoying today. I can show you a bridge between here and Tacoma; where the United States Army caught on, back from overseas a pair of union loggers was dangling from hangman’s bridge, there at Centralia, a logger. Was he fighting for himself or his generation? He was fighting for every one of you, in this industry today! I can show you blood-stained trails all over that state! Is it history? It isn’t history, only the stuffed shirts make history. They are the ones who have their pictures hung up in the museums. They are the ones whose names are preserved on monuments. Well as far as I’m concerned I’m still the

untamed, uncured, rebel and I can't see that point of view for smoke. Some of you remember a book called "From Here to Eternity." In the midst of the narration of that story, is a recital of what happened at Spokane. When the free-speech fight was on in full force, we were riding boxcars in there from every part of the country singing songs along the way. As soon as people would get up to speak, [they would be arrested.] It was a free speech fight for what? For a man to get up and try to organize a Union! They weren't only trying to keep free speech out, they were trying to keep unionism out! Here was the Spokane jail, filled to overflowing, and you could hear them from miles away, singing Solidarity Forever and that little red songbook through and through. Out in the streets every they would go, the coppers keeping them moving, they were all singing. A singing organization. What happens when an organization sings? There is no absenteeism at the union meetings, there's nobody complaining about paying their union dues, there's nobody groveling at the feet of the boss, or at the feet of the labor boss. No there isn't much more I can say except this; one of the most stalwart men I ever met and could call a friend was Frank Little, who was left dangling, at the end of a rope, in Butte Montana, after the strike there on Anaconda Hill. [They were doing] pioneering work; clearing the ground for a stable union of miners. I am not saying to build up those men, only this. When you look at a tv set, when you get into your car with high-fins on the back of it, when you sit down and look at your family across the table, just remember that the history of your union ties in with the history of the work those people did. If there is ever a time when your enthusiasm and interest lags in your union meetings, just remember that you wouldn't have the eight-hour day if five men hadn't been hanged in the Cook County jail in 1886! Remember that all along the line it took dedicated men who would rather go down slugging than endure industrial serfdom. You go to any one of these towns with a strike history, take a little town I know all too well down in West Virginia with that horrible strike of 1912 occurred. There was actual guerilla warfare between the Baldwin-Felts guards and the miners. Down there if you read the history of the state of Virginia you wouldn't know there had ever been a strike. Read a history of the state of Washington and I dare you to show me a strike! Go to Centralia, go to Aberdeen, go over across the hump to Yakima. Ask anybody there who's gone through school or high school: Were there any strikes in this state? No! Labor didn't make history. Labor didn't improve these conditions! Men didn't give up their lives for this cause! Only the stuffed shirts, the big shots, if you please. Who bow from the waist real low and hang their pictures up in the museums. When you see the story of the IWW, in one volume complete, you're gonna read one of the most amazing stories that was ever put down with little black marks on white paper. Considering the going down and the grass-roots, building it up, and looking forward to the future, which by the grace of God you are going to have. Because labor must remain organized, either that or go under. And now goodbye, thank you a lot, and God bless you.

(applause)

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<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SvYIa8wJYTM>

“Ralph Chaplin Speaks” Transcript, Speech given by Ralph Chaplin published under Joe Glazer. Transcriber’s note: The original date and title of this speech are unknown to me. The mention of “high fins” implies it takes place in the late ‘50s but this is a rough guess. I have done a meticulous job going over the recording writing it down as faithfully as possible. At certain points, Chaplin misspeaks or slurs words so there may be some errors. Particularly the sentences starting with “I can show you a bridge between here and Tacoma” and “Considering the going down” were hard to understand. I hope you enjoy this transcript.

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