

# The Significance of Labor Strikes From the Point of View of Evolution of Religion

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The present situation in the industrial life of Pittsfield compels us to give our attention to as careful a consideration of what the conflict between employer and employee may mean as our time and capacity will permit. For many years now we have watched, as from a distance, similar events in other cities, and countries. But today the matter is brought to our attention in our own city, and in such a manner as to compel us to realize that after all we are dealing not with a question of academic theory, but with social facts that are real and powerful.

But while the existence of a strike in our own city brings the matter to our attention with such pungency, yet the very intimacy of our relations to it, make it the more difficult to consider from the point of view of a broad-minded grasp of its deeper significance to the evolution of American life. Our calmness and impartiality of judgement and analysis is in danger of being dwarfed and perverted by minor incidences and accidents, by personal inconveniences or other limiting prejudices. If possible, in what I have to say, I wish to be as critical and unbiased as a scientist watching an experiment in his laboratory. Above all else, I want to eliminate from what I say, as I try to eliminate from what I think, all those personal factors which play an important part in every problem of this character, which tend also to dwarf our judgement, and to make small and mean and contemptable judgements that might otherwise be worth of serious consideration.

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<sup>1</sup> While this manuscript is undated, there is reference in the text to the labor strike just initiated in Pittsfield. This strike started on December 19, 1918. Earl Davis was deeply involved in this strike. Seen as a fair broker, he was appointed by the War Labor Board to serve as the local administrator during the strike.

## Point of View

Not being a member of a trade-union it is impossible for me to think as a trade-unionist. On the other hand, not being an employer of labor or a manager of a factory, it is equally impossible for me to speak from their point of view. By the very nature of the case I am compelled to speak from the point of view of one who is deeply interested in the social problems of the day, and more especially from the point of view of those problems as they are related to the great changes that are taking place in the evolution of our modern life, and our changing attitude towards life's greatest value. Moreover, I want to speak from the point of view, not of one who has a cure-all remedy for all our social ills, but of one who tries to accept the present facts of life and society and tries to understand the direction in which we may be, or should be, tending and to assist in so far as possible in that development.

## The Situation

As I have already said, we are face-to-face with a strike in this city which directly affects a very large proportion of our population and their employers, and which indirectly effects the entire city. It is an acute fact in our life. But we cannot consider it in this city without recalling the fact that it is but a local expression of a great movement which has been in operation for more than a hundred years. Which has touched practically every industry and every large industrial center in the modern world. Within recent years, with seeming increase of intensity, these strikes have occurred with such frequency and in such magnitude as to place it beyond the shadow of doubt that they are but the surface manifestations of very fundamental changes that are taking place in our social order. You have but to recall some of the more important strikes of recent years, such as the Ludlow strike,<sup>2</sup> the West Virginia,<sup>3</sup> the great Garment

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<sup>2</sup> The Ludlow Colorado strike started April 20, 1914 between the coal miners and their union, United Mine Workers of America, and the mine owners. It is notable for the Ludlow Massacre where approximately 21 people, including miner's wives and children, were killed by private guards and members of the Colorado National Guard.

<sup>3</sup> In 1912 there was a massive strike in southern West Virginia. As both sides prepared to come to blows, the State Militia

Workers strike,<sup>4</sup> the Lawrence strike,<sup>5</sup> and almost innumerable others to say nothing of the strikes that are now in progress, and the threatened general strike of the railroad employees, to have impressed upon your minds that this is no superficial and unmeaning coincidence. The fact that it has appeared in Pittsfield does not change the general nature and character of the development in our modern life.

There are two lines of development which have taken place in the last two hundred years with which you are perfectly familiar, but which I recall at this time for the purpose of discussion. One is that almost hackneyed topic of the industrial change from the home industry to the factory. We do not have to go beyond the history of our own Pittsfield to trace the evolution of the process. If you will read of the industry of early Pittsfield you will learn of the very small industrial efforts in the way of smelting iron from the rough ore in these parts and manufacturing it in the small shops into such products as were useful in the simple and rugged life of those days. Later you will discover that small mills by the side of the streams were erected. The weaving and the spinning were gradually taken out of the homes and the goods that were worn were produced in the factory. In the earlier days these factories were conducted with the intimacy of relationship between the owner and the worker in a manner not always devoid of criticism, but still permeated by that fact of human contact, the absence of which we deplore so much in our modern industrial plant. But in time the mill by the side of the stream with its cottages and the owners house nearby, the existence of which we have some evidences in Pittsfield today, underwent a change which modified the character of the institution, and completely swept away the old relationships. I know of no better and no more interesting document that illustrates this change than one written in her old age by a woman in this city who had been a life-long mill-worker, and whose savings in the long years of toil were used for the purpose of publishing this little

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intervened, confiscating enormous quantities of rifles, pistols, ammunition, etc., from both sides.

<sup>4</sup> There were multiple garment worker strikes in New York City, including in 1910 and 1913.

<sup>5</sup> The Lawrence Massachusetts textile strike of January to March, 1912 was known as the "Bread and Roses" strike.

pamphlet called, *The Recollections of a Mill Worker*.<sup>6</sup> In a very simple straightforward way she tells the story of this change, and without being conscious of what she is saying, she pictures the transformation in the Pittsfield textile industry from the neighborly, friendly relationships of the employer and the worker, to the cash-nexus basis of labor and capital.

Of the more complete and larger aspects of this change, which has taken place, we have a particularly good illustration in the Pittsfield Works of the General Electric Co. Here we have an illustration of a great industrial corporation developed to a point that almost staggers our imagination. The General Electric Company. is an industrial corporation employing about forty-thousand men and women. They have large plants in several cities in this country among which Lynn, Pittsfield and Schenectady are most familiar to us. A plant in Japan and interests in plants in European countries, takes it beyond the national borders and makes it a corporation of international character all over the world. This vast property, which fulfills so great a function in the intricate modern life, represents the combined efforts of many minds and hands. Great learning, great ability, and a tremendous amount of work, far beyond our comprehension, has contributed to this great industrial corporation. The ownership of the company is probably as widely distributed as its factories, offices and workmen. And this indeed is one of the important and significant facts in the organization of this corporation, and practically all corporations. Just who and just how many, are the owners of the capital stock of this company, I do not know. But the important fact to be noted is that but very few of those men and women who are employed in this great company have any ownership rights in it. Nor, indeed, do they know the men and the women who own the plant that they run. In fact, it is probable that the managers of the various plants themselves, do not know personally more than a very few of the owners of the plants that they manage. To bring it down to the concrete situation here in Pittsfield, we have a large industrial plant, one of several owned by the General Electric Company. It is managed by a man who may or may not own any stock

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<sup>6</sup> Earl Davis likely refers to *Recollections of a Mill Worker: An Introduction and Comprehensive Review of the Cotton and Woolen Industry of New England ... Practical Experience as a Mill Worker from Childhood*. William J. Oatman, Printer, 1906. Google list the pamphlet as 22 pages in length.

in the company. So far as I know there may not be enough General Electric stock owned in the city of Pittsfield to cover the value of one of the departments of the Pittsfield works. The plant could still be run if there were not a cent of stock owned in Pittsfield. The fact remains that the controlling part of ownership is located outside of the city. Not only because of the fact of numbers of both employees and owners, but also because of the fact of absentee ownership, the personal human relationships that once obtained on the small factory are gone. With it too is gone the possibility of that ameliorative oversight which existed when the owner knew and shared largely in the interests of life, the joys and sorrows, of the workers.

This industry has left the workmen in a position where, for the purpose of protecting themselves and furthering their own interests, they have organized into trade-unions, which have become, after a hundred years of varying experiences, very powerful and very flourishing institutions, organized upon a national or even international basis. After many years of conflict, in which there has appeared no little bitterness with a fair proportion of mistakes and errors on both sides, we have come to a point where the conflicting interests between the workers, who operate the factories, and the owners and their representatives in the management, who control the factories, often come to an open break. Sometimes this break is brought about by what is known as a lockout. But more frequently by what is known as a strike.

The essence of the strike, when all the accidentals and incidentals are stripped away, is seen to be based upon the idea that the employees have the right to make a collective bargain with the employer, and that they have the right to refuse to accept the terms which are offered to them by the employer. The right of collective bargaining, and the right of collective refusal, means the right to strike. And while circumstances have often obscured the real nature of the strike, the fact remains that in the large it means simply the refusal by the men as organized to work for a given employer. That strikes have frequently been accompanied by fights and bloodshed does not alter the basic fact that in essence it is simply the organized effort of workmen to maintain what seemed to them their just rights in the employment in which they are concerned. Such then are the cold facts. Whether they are good facts or bad facts is not our immediate concern.

Side-by-side with this industrial development, which I have described and more closely related than we at times imagine, there has taken place another development within the past hundred years or more. Perhaps going back to the French philosopher Rousseau we can trace the appearance of an idea which has profoundly changed the character of our conceptions of life and its meaning.

This idea is in general that which we associate with the word democracy. It has back of it a point of view of life entirely different from the point of view which obtained in Europe throughout the period of known history. The first expression of this idea in a significant political document was found in the Declaration of Independence that "all men are created free and equal," or to put it in other words, no individual, be he king or prelate, and no class, be it secular or ecclesiastical, has any especially delegated authority to rule or dominate the life and destiny of fellow men. That the general tendency of modern society has been in the direction of the realization of a social order based upon these principles is not seriously [in doubt]. There have been, as there are today, groups and institutions in society, survivals of previous ages, that still oppose the further extension of the principle of democracy. They assert the right, or maintain the fact, of their own particular class or institutions to certain privileges or responsibilities not common to all. In spite of the opposition, the advance in the principles of democracy has been one of steady, though slow, achievement. Acting from the point of view of these principles of democracy, we have established our educational system, we have developed our political machinery, we have advanced in the ideas of religious toleration, we are developing the science and the practice of sociology, we are spreading ideas and principles which lead men to the firm conviction that the place of any institution in society, whether it be political, industrial, or ecclesiastical, must be measured by the constructive influence which it has in meeting the physical, mental and spiritual needs of man. In response to this, we are developing a sense of the dignity and the worth of human beings. We are trying to feel ourselves, and to have others feel that, since self-respect, independence, manhood and womanhood, should belong to free men and women living together in a social order. This advancement in the principles of democracy has not been without its serious difficulty, perplexing problems, and bitter conflicts. No growth

in the life of the individual or in the development of society has been or ever can be attained without the hard labor, the continual sacrifice and the frequent hardship of those concerned. Upon the basis of this idea, of the dignity and the worth of a human being, and the possibilities and responsibilities for these achievements in all the big values in life as a foundation, rests the whole structure of desire, and from this point of view must they be measured. Here then, as I see it, is the crux of this labor situation in the country at large, and in this city in particular. I grant you that it may not consciously, from this point of view, be so viewed by those most intimately concerned, but, in the long run, whatever may be the immediate outcome of the difficulty, the determining factor must be the extent to which contribution is made to establishing, defining and assuring those directly concerned and their fellow citizens at large, the greater security in living self-respecting lives. In other words, here is a fundamental conflict between two widely separated groups in our common life. At the present time they [are] at a deadlock. The essential issue between them is not one of wages, although that is a factor. Nor is it indeed, the technical [matter] of the recognition of the labor union, although that is a factor. But it is the right of the men who work for wages in a factory, which they do not own, to have a collective word in determining the conditions under which they shall work, as against the right of the owners of the factory, who do not use it, to dictate through their representatives the terms of employment, with no ultimate appeal. As you easily see this is no superficial disagreement. It involved the very foundations of our industrial life, and there are at stake those principles of democracy about which we seem to be so much concerned. So far as the ultimate solution of this problem is concerned, no sane man expects to see it solved here. But in my opinion, and I believe in making this statement that I express the opinion of practically that whole body of men and women who have given themselves to a disinterested study of the situation, no settlement of this acute situation can be fair or just or in the interest of the development of society that does not recognize either directly or by implication the right of the men as a whole to have provided the proper machinery for presenting their claims and grievances to the owners, or the representative managers of the owners of the factories, in which they work.

But the present situation, either from the point of view of workman or manager or owner, or from the point of view of society at large, is an intolerable one. Under the pressure of such an industrial organization as obtains today in our American life, we are developing with a rapidity that is often astounding class divisions that are, and ought to be, intolerable in a republican or democratic society. And unless steps are taken with intelligence and foresight, there are dangers ahead of us in this nation that threaten profoundly the peace and the stability of our national life. Today we hear much about patriotism, about the peril of the republic, about the dangers of complications in European countries, about hyphenated Americans. In comparison with the dangers involved there, the danger involved in this rapidly developing conflict between economic classes is by far the greater. My appeal today is not to either one side or the other in this local situation, as to what their feeling is or as to what their necessities are. I hope that the settlement of the difficulties may be immediate and satisfactory for immediate necessity. But my appeal is to both parties concerned, and to the citizens of Pittsfield as a whole, to direct their attention to that greater problem upon the proper settlement of which the future of our lives in this country depends. Our task as citizens is to live together in this land in such a way that no individual or group shall have control over the life and destiny of another, but living together we may provide ourselves with the necessities of life and to work together for its development and enrichment, and take our share in creating and establishing the most enlightened, the most just, social order that this world has ever seen. One aspect of the change of men's ideas in the world of religion has been to [de-]emphasize the glories of a heaven beyond death, and to emphasize more the necessity and the desirability of a more tolerable and a more just and a more Christ-like world here. To this task for you men and women I make my appeal from the point of view of those men and women in church and out whose lives are not divided by denominational barriers or ecclesiastical interests, to you who are interested in making your contribution to the development of a cleaner, safer world in which your children and your children's children may develop to heights of achievements toward which our faith in the principles of democracy and in the integrity of the universe compel us to look. The outcome of this possible development will be determined by your devotion in thought and action to this great test question of our times. The achievements are great. As



steps in the process of social development, both the great corporations and trade-unions, are tremendous achievements. But as finished products subject to no further modification or development, they are intolerable and impossible. But within them both lie principles which, under fair development and just direction, may lead us out of the difficulties that now seem to beset our whole national life. To this great task, then, of applying the principles of democracy to the industrial life of tomorrow, in the interest of all men without distinction of class, I make my appeal. I close by quoting a passage written about a hundred years ago by that great prophet William Ellery Channing<sup>7</sup> in an address on the subject, "Honor Due to All Men."

The sun, which is to bring on a brighter day, is rising in thick and threatening clouds. Perhaps the minds of men were never more unquiet than at the present moment. Still I do not despair. That a higher order of ideas and principles is beginning to be unfolded; that a wider philanthropy is beginning to triumph over distinctions of ranks and nations; that a new feeling of what is due to the ignorant, poor, and depraved has sprung up; that the right of every human being to such an education as shall call forth his best faculties, and train him more and more to control himself, is recognized as it never was before; and that Government is more and more regarded as intended not to elevate the few, but to guard the rights of all; that these great revolutions in principle have commenced and are spreading who can deny? and to me they are prophetic of an improved condition of human nature and human affairs—Oh, that this melioration might be accomplished without blood!<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> William Ellery Channing (1780-1842) foremost Unitarian preacher in the United States in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century.

<sup>8</sup> William Ellery Channing, "Honor Due to All Men," In *The Complete Works of William Ellery Channing*, London: Routledge, 1884, p. 82, originally published in November 1830.