

The Foundation of The Labor Movement

By WENDELL PHILLIPS



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Introduction.

Wendell Phillips, the great champion of the anti-slavery cause in America, was born in Boston, November 29th, 1811. He graduated from Harvard College in 1833 and was admitted to the Suffolk bar in 1834.

The times in which Wendell Phillips stepped upon the arena were already big with the struggle between the forces of slavery and anti-slavery. Phillips, a young man, strong of body and of mind, and having strong moral convictions, could not stand outside that conflict. An incident of the struggle which he witnessed when not yet twenty-five drew him as a magnet to the anti-slavery cause. The incident which had such a marked effect upon the young man was the disruption of a meeting of the Women's Anti-Slavery Society by the "Broadcloth Mob"—a mob set on foot and led by men of wealth and position. William Lloyd Garrison who was at the meeting was seized by the mob, tied with rope and ignominiously dragged through the streets of Boston. The authorities refused to interfere with the mob and ended by placing Garrison in jail as a disturber of the peace!—quite modern. Wendell Phillips was greatly moved at the sight of the inheritors of 200 years of Boston wealth and culture who were for that very reason so sunk in brutishness and ignorance that they could make no better fight against the moral conviction of the anti-slavery forces than to combat their arguments with brick-bats and ropes.

Phillips came forth as an orator in 1837 at a Boston protest meeting held to protest against the murder of Elijah P. Lovejoy, the editor of an anti-slavery newspaper at Alton, Ill., who had been killed by a mob while defending his printing press and office from its fury. The Alton outrage was the result of the Boston mob. The "Broadcloth Mob" had sown the seeds of open violence over the whole North, and back to Boston came the cry of the murdered Lovejoy. Wendell Phillips heard that cry. He attended the meeting of protest. Attorney-General Austin, a crafty politician, was the chairman. Under his management a cowardly conservatism had nearly come to passing a few perfunctory resolutions when Phillips took the floor, and in a manly, logical and yet fiery speech captured the meeting from those whose action would have meant the breathing of the breath of life into the slayers of Lovejoy.

Phillips had set his hand to the plow. He never looked back. He gave up his commission as a lawyer, saying he could no longer hold himself to obey a Constitution which protected the holder of slaves in those rights which he had not

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only determined never to recognize, but to destroy. In taking this step he cast aside social position, and ambitious prospects, for Phillips was “well connected” and had a fortune assured. He had the personal advantages of oratory, solid learning and accomplishment which by serving the world in the way it wanted would have brought to his feet all the prizes that man could covet. But the Spirit of the Age let him gaze on that, and then upon the other prospect—with all its grimness. Phillips chose, and chose well, the greater part. True all his material needs were secured from peril, but his old-time friends passed him with averted gaze, doors were shut in his face, and the many open cuts could not fail to have been felt. The great compensation was the intimate companionship of the men and women with whom he considered it a high privilege to be permitted to live and share their work. He gave up all other things and devoted himself solely to the anti-slavery cause. Powerful in logic, keen in wit and perfect in his command of language he became the orator of the movement—one of the greatest, if not the greatest orator that America has produced. His style was not that of the popular conception of an orator, for he was grave, dignified in manner, and it was the weight of his matter and the manliness of his appearance that carried all before him. He had no pathos, nor ever tried to move that way—logic was his forte. Anecdote and illustrations from history and biography he used, not to entertain, but to clinch a point. He responded to every call without pay, in fact often paying his own traveling expenses which of course he could afford.

After the 25 years’ crusade and slavery was abolished many of the abolitionists found their occupation gone, but not so Wendell Phillips. He “soiled” his great name by striking hands with the Labor movement of his day, and once more he sacrificed friends—friends more near and dear than before—his friends of the Abolition Movement! In 1870 he was the Labor-Reform candidate for governor and received 20,000 votes. At the Labor-Reform convention of the next year he presided and presented the platform, the first plank of which reads: “We affirm, as a fundamental principle, that labor, the creator of wealth, is entitled to all it creates.” He advocated the adoption of the platform in a remarkable speech in which he said: “I regard the movement with which this convention is connected as the grandest and most comprehensive movement of the age, and I choose my epithets deliberately; for I can hardly name the idea in which humanity is interested, which I do not consider locked up in the success of this movement of the people to take possession of their own.” Continuing, he said: “In the interests of peace, I welcome this movement—the

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peaceable marshalling of all voters toward remodelling the industrial and political civilization of the day. I have not a word to utter—far be it from me—against the grandest declaration of popular indignation which Paris wrote on the pages of history in fire and blood. I honor Paris as the vanguard of the Internationals of the world. When kings wake at night, startled and aghast, they do not dream of Germany and its array of forces. Aristocracy wakes up aghast at the memory of France; and, when I want to find the vanguard of the people, I look to the uneasy dreams of an aristocracy, and find what they dread most. And to-day the conspiracy of emperors is to put down—what? Not the Czar, not the Emperor William, not the armies of United Germany. But, when the emperors come together in the center of Europe, what plot do they lay? To annihilate the Internationals, and France is the soul of the Internationals. I, for one, honor Paris; but in the name of Heaven, and with the ballot in our right hands, we shall not need to write our record in fire and blood; we write it in the orderly majorities at the ballot-box.”

In 1871 Wendell Phillips delivered another memorable speech. That speech is quoted in full in this pamphlet.

JOHN HOSSACK.

THE FOUNDATION OF THE LABOR MOVEMENT.

By WENDELL PHILLIPS

[Delivered in Music Hall, Boston, October 31, 1871]

LADIES AND GENTLEMEN: We are sometimes so near an object that we cannot see it. I could place you so near the City Hall to-night that you would not know whether you were looking at a ton of granite or a wall of a large building. So it is with a fact. The men who stand the nearest to it are often the last to recognize either its breadth or its meaning. Perhaps the last men to appreciate a fact are the men nearest to whose eyes it passes; and it is just so in government. We are hardly aware of the changes that are taking place about us; our children will understand them distinctly.

There is a large class among our German fellow-citizens who advocate the abolition of the Presidency. The thoughtful in that class perceive, what the ordinary passer-by does not recognize, that we are daily abolishing the Presidency, and the movement of the country for fifty years has been toward the abolition of the Presidency. You see this tendency in a variety of circumstances. When we were first a nation, the greatest men among us were chosen President, and named for President; but now we don't think of putting up a first-rate man.

There is another feature we don't see,—that the government is fast being monopolized by the House of Representatives. If we go on as we have done for half a century, there will be no government in this country except the House. Whatever defies the power of the great House will go down. Whether harmonious and beneficent results will follow our adoption of the system, depends upon whether the great mass of men and women, with universal suffrage as their sheet-anchor, can work them out through these results one single tool like the House.

I have only gone into this statement to approach a second point; and that is, we stand on the moment when the people actually put their hands forth for power. We stand at an epoch when the nature of the government is undergoing a fundamental change. I have been speaking of machines,—whether we should operate through a Senate and President, or solely through a House. I have been speaking of the

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spindles and wheels. Below that lies the water-power. The water-power of Great Britain has been the wealth of thirty thousand land-holders,—thirty thousand land-holding families, perhaps seven hundred thousand or a million voters. With us, the water-power is to be the ballots of ten millions of adult men and women, scattered through all classes,—rich and poor, educated and ignorant, prompt and conservative, radical and timid, all modes and kinds and qualities of mind. Well, that brings me to the form which this great advance of the people takes. It is the working masses that are really about to put their hands to the work of governing.

It is no accident, no caprice of an individual, no mere shout of the political arena, that heralds to-day the great Labor movement of the United States.

But in the mean time, over the horizon, looming at first and now almost touching its meridian, comes up another power,—I mean the power of wealth, the inordinate power of capital. Our fathers, when they prevented entail, when they provided for the distribution of estates, thought they had erected a bulwark against the money power that had killed Great Britain. They forgot that money could combine; that a moneyed corporation was like the papacy,—a succession of persons with a unity of purpose; that it never died; that it never by natural proclivity became imbecile. The grandson of a king is necessarily one-third an idiot; but the third generation of a money corporation is wiser for the experience of predecessors, and preserve the same unity of purpose.

This great money power looms over the horizon at the very moment when, to every thoughtful man, the power of the masses concentrating in the House of Representatives is to become the sole omnipotence of the State. Naturally so ominous a conjuncture provokes resistance; naturally a peril so immediate prompts the wealthy class of the community to combine for defence.

The land of England has ruled it for six hundred years. The corporations of America mean to rule it in the same way, and unless some power more radical than that of ordinary politics is found, will rule it inevitably. I confess that the only fear I have in regard to republican institutions is whether, in our day, any adequate remedy will be found for this incoming flood of the power of incorporated wealth. No statesman, no public man yet, has dared to defy it. Every man that has met it has been crushed to powder; and the only hope of any effectual grapple with it is in rousing the actual masses, whose interests permanently lie in an opposite direction, to grapple with this great force; for you know very well that our great cities are the radiating points from which go forth the great journalism, the culture, the

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education, the commercial influences, that make and shape the nation. The great cities are the arsenals of great wealth, where wealth manages everything its own way.

Now, gentlemen, to me the Labor movement means just this: It is the last noble protest of the American people against the power of incorporated wealth, seeking to do over again what the Whig aristocracy of Great Britain has successfully done for two hundred years. Thirty thousand families own Great Britain to-day; and if you multiply John Bright by a hundred, and double his eloquence, it seems impossible that he should save England from a violent convulsion in the great grapple between such a power and the people who have determined to have their way.

Men blame us, the representatives of the workingmen of the nation, that we come into politics. The other day it was my good fortune to meet that distinguished Frenchman, Monsieur Coquerel; and he asked me what was the motto of the working-men of the United States. I said to him, "Short hours, better education, co-operation in the end, and in the mean time a political movement that will concentrate the thought of the country upon this thing."

Now, here I take issue with the best critic which the Labor movement has met: I refer to Rev. Samuel Johnson of Salem, one of the thinkers who has spread out before the people his objections to the Labor movement of this country. His first objection is, that we will hurry into politics. Well, now, our answer is to him, and to the score of other scholars who have been criticising us, is this: Gentlemen, we see the benefit of going into politics. If we had not rushed into politics, had not taken Massachusetts by the four corners and shaken her, you never would have written your criticisms. We rush into politics because politics is the safety-valve. We could discuss as well as you if, you would only give us bread and houses, fair pay and leisure, and opportunities to travel. We could sit and discuss the question for the next fifty years. It's a very easy thing to discuss, for a gentleman in his study, with no anxiety about to-morrow. Why, the ladies and gentlemen of the reign of Louis XV. and Louis XVI., in France, seated in gilded saloons and on Persian carpets, surrounded with luxury, with the products of India, and the curious manufactures of ingenious Lyons and Rheims, discussed the rights of man, and balanced them in dainty phrases, and expressed them in such quaint generalizations that Jefferson borrowed the Declaration of Independence from their hands. There they sat, balancing and discussing sweetly, making out new theories, and daily erecting a splendid architecture of debate, till the angry crowd broke open the doors, and

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ended the discussion in blood. They waited too long, discussed about half a century too long. You see, discussion is very good when a man has bread to eat, and his children all portioned off, and his daughters married, and his house furnished and paid for, and his will made; but discussion is very bad when—

“Ye hear the children weeping, O my brothers!
Ere the sorrow come with years;”

discussion is bad when a class bends under actual oppression. We want immediate action.

We would fain save this issue from an outbreak of actual violence. Therefore we go into politics.

Well, then, our critic goes on to say, “What do you call yourselves Labor party for? All men labor. Rufus Choate labors. Daniel Webster labors. Why do you confine your party to the men that work?” Well, now, we confine it because thus there is no mistake. Now, suppose you should take up a book presenting the condition of the laboring classes of Great Britain. Mr. Gladstone works harder than any other man there; Lord Brougham did more work than any other man there; Lord Palmerston, up to his eightieth year, worked hard as any man there. But if you were to take up a book on the working men of Great Britain, do you think you would find the condition of Lord Brougham there? If you took up a book on the British laboring class, or how much they eat, what kind of houses they live in, etc., do you think you would find Gladstone’s income, and the number of rooms he had in his house, and how many children he had had the last fifty years? So, if an Englishman came here, and said, “I want to know something about your working-men. Please let me hear it from some of themselves. Whom shall I go to?” Would you send him to Daniel Webster or Rufus Choate? But Daniel Webster did as much work as any man of his day. Would you have him sent to Rufus Choate? But Rufus Choate was a hard-working man. John Marshall and Lemuel Shaw did as much work as any man in Massachusetts or Virginia; but if George Combe had come to this country, and said, “I want to see a specimen of the laboring class of the United States,” I doubt whether any man would have sent him to Lemuel Shaw. I ask the critics of the Labor movement, whether any man ever misunderstood this? Every man who reads of the Labor Question knows that it means the movement of the men that earn their living with their hands; that are employed, and paid in wages; are gathered under

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roofs of factories; sent out on farms; sent out on ships; gathered on the walls. In popular acceptance, the working class means the men that work with their hands, for wages, so many hours a day, employed by great capitalists; that work for everybody else.

Why do we move for this class? "Why," says Mr. Johnson, "don't you move for all working-men?" Because, while Daniel Webster gets forty thousand dollars for arguing the Mexican claims, there is no need of anybody's moving for him. While Rufus Choate gets five thousand dollars for making one argument to a jury, there is no need of moving for him, or for the men that work with their brains,—that do highly disciplined and skilled labor, invent, and write books. The reason why the Labor movement confines itself to a single class is because that class of work does not get paid, does not get protection. Mental labor is adequately paid, and more than adequately protected. It can shift its channels; it can vary according to the supply and demand. If a man fails as a minister, why, he becomes a railway-conductor. If that doesn't suit him, he turns out, and becomes the agent of an insurance office. If that doesn't suit, he goes West, and becomes governor of a Territory. And if he finds himself incapable of either of these positions, he comes home, and gets to be a city editor. He varies his occupation as he pleases, and doesn't need protection. But the great mass, chained to a trade, doomed to be ground up in the mill of supply and demand, that work so many hours a day, and must run in the great ruts of business,—they are the men whose inadequate protection, whose unfair share of the general product claims a movement in their behalf.

Well, the third charge brought by Mr. Johnson against us is, that we are cruel,—we combine; we prevent this man laboring there, and we won't let that man learn our trade; we form trades-unions. To be sure we do. We say to the Chinese, "Stay at home. Don't come here by importation; come by immigration." We say to the crowding millions who try to swamp our trade, "Stand aloof; we won't teach you." We say to the mills of Lowell, who have turned us out of doors, "We'll starve you into submission." Well, "it's a narrow contest; it's an unjust, it's a cruel, it's an avaricious method." So it is. Where did we learn it? Learned it of capital, learned it of our enemies.

I know labor is narrow; I know she is aggressive; I know she arms herself with the best weapon that a corrupt civilization furnishes,—all true. Where do we get these ideas? Borrowed them from capital, every one of them; and when you advance

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to us on the level of peace, unarmed, we'll meet you on the same. While you combine and plot and defend, so will we.

But Mr. Johnson says, "Come into the world with the white banner of peace." Ay, we will, when you disarm. How foolish it would have been for Grant to send home his Sharp's rifles to Springfield, and garner all his cannon in New York, and put all his monitors in the harbor of Norfolk, and go down to Virginia with eighty thousand unarmed men, to look her in the face! Labor comes up, and says, "They have shotted their cannon to the lips; they have rough-ground their swords as in battle; they have adopted every new method; they have invented every dangerous machine,—and it is all planted like a great park of artillery against us. They have incorporated wealth; they have hidden behind banks; they have concealed themselves in currency; they have sheltered themselves in taxation; they have passed rules to govern us,—and we will improve upon the lesson they have taught us. When they disarm, we will—not before."

Well, then, the fourth charge is found in the *Daily Advertiser*. We had a meeting at Framingham, and passed a set of resolutions; we adopted a platform; and the next day the *Daily Advertiser* granted us the condescension of an article, criticising our action, especially mine; and they described what we had adopted. They painted its horrible tendency. They said, "If you adopt that principle, it will lead you to that (and so on to that) till the final result will be—" I held my breath. I said to myself, "What will it probably be? Perhaps the stereotyped ghost of the French Revolution; that's what's coming." "The final result will be—" Horrible! I thought probably they would paint a millionaire hanging on every lamp-post. "The final result"— Perhaps it will be Mormonism; society dissolved into its original elements. Horrible! I began to feel a faint sensation; but I concluded to read on: "The final result will be an equalization of property." Horrible, horrible! Actually, men will be almost equal! An equalization of property! Any man that does that ought to be hanged. Well, we do mean it; we do mean just that. That's the meaning of the Labor movement,—an equalization of property. The *Advertiser* has found us out, actually discovered our plot. He's let the cat out of the bag. We didn't mean to have told you, but it is so. What we need is an equalization of property,—nothing else. My ideal of a civilization is a very high one; but the approach to it is a New England town of some two thousand inhabitants, with no rich man and no poor man in it, all mingling in the same society, every child at the same school, no poorhouse, no beggar, opportunities equal, nobody too proud to stand aloof, nobody too humble

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to be shut out. That's New England as it was fifty years ago, the horrible creature that the *Daily Advertiser* fears. That's what Framingham proposes to bring about. But why isn't Framingham contented? Because the civilization that lingers beautifully on the hillsides of New England, nestles sweetly in the valleys of Vermont, the moment it approaches a crowd like Boston, or a million of men gathered in one place like New York,—rots. It cannot force the crowd; it cannot stand the great centres of modern civilization.

Our civilization cannot stand the city. One reason is, it has got some hidden disease. Another reason is, the moment it flows out into the broad, deep activity of the nineteenth century, it betrays its weakness, and copies Europe. The moment this sweet-scented, dew-smelling Vermont flows down into the slums of New York, it becomes like London. The moment the North gathers its forces, and goes down the Mississippi Valley into New Orleans, social science stands aghast. Modern civilization shrinks back at the terrible evil which she can neither fathom nor cure, just as she does in Europe.

What is our cause? It is this: there are three hundred and fifty millions of human beings in what you call Christendom, and two hundred millions of them don't get enough to eat from January to December. I won't ask for culture, for opportunities, for education, for travel, for society; but two hundred millions of men gathered under Christendom don't have enough to eat. A hundred thousand men in the city of New York live in dwellings that a rich man wouldn't let his horse stay in a day.

But that isn't anything. You should go up to beautiful Berkshire with me, into the factories there. It shall be the day after a Presidential election. I will go with you into a counting-room,—four hundred employees. The partners are sitting down, the day after a Presidential election. They take the list of workmen, and sift them out; and every man that has not voted the ticket they wanted is thrown out to starve just as if he were cattle. That's Christian civilization! that's Massachusetts! I don't like that significant fact. I leap from that town into a large mill, with five hundred employees, and say to the master, "How about the dwellings of your operatives? How many hours do they have at home?" "Well, I hope they don't have any. The best-ventilated place they are ever in is in my mill. They had better stay here sixteen hours out of the twenty-four; it keeps them out of mischief better than any other place. As long as they work they are not doing worse. I cannot attend to their houses." I say to him, "It seems to me you do the same for your ox." That's

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another significant fact of our civilization. I go to Lowell, and I say to a young girl, wandering in the streets, "How is this?" "Well, I worked here seven years, and I thought I would leave that mill, and go to another; and the corporation won't give me my ticket. I have sued them in the Supreme Court, and I cannot get it; and here I am, penniless, in Eastern Massachusetts." That's Christian civilization. I am picking up, not individual facts, but significant rules, that were made for labor.

You say, "What does labor need in New England?" It needs justice. Mr. Stewart, in New York, has bought a whole town; and he is going to build model houses, and house there all the labor he can get to go into them. Yet the civilization which alone can look the New Testament in the face is a civilization where one man does not depend on the pity of another man's building him a model lodging-house; the civilization which alone can look the New Testament in the face is a civilization where one man could not build, and another man would not need, that sort of refuge.

No, gentlemen, what we mean is this: The labor of yesterday, your capital, is protected sacredly. Not so the labor of to-day. The labor of yesterday gets twice the protection and twice the pay that the labor of to-day gets. Capital gets twice the protection and twice the pay.

Now, we mean a radical change, and in the few minutes that are left me, I want to indicate our object.

We mean certain great radical changes. I am not quite of the opinion of Mr. Secretary Boutwell, when he said here the other night, that fifty years hence the idea that a man could own land, and leave it to his children, would be ridiculous. I have not quite come to that. But then, you know there is a reason for it; he is a radical, and I have always been a conservative. There is a curious thing underlies lands. We are not quite certain that we have got the best system. Secretary Boutwell may be right. Seventy years ago a man offered to a relative of mine all the land between Federal Street and Hawley Street, between Milk Street and Franklin, for thirty-three hundred dollars. He came to him day after day, urging him to purchase; and the answer was, "I am not rich enough to have a cow-pasture at that price, and I couldn't use it for anything else,"—that tract of land which to-day, gentlemen, as you know, would sell for three million dollars. Now, labor goes about, like Socrates, asking questions. We don't assume anything. When we were little boys, and did our sums on the slate, and the answer came out wrong, we didn't break the slate. We went to the master; and he said, "Go back; there's a mistake

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somewhere; if you examine, you will find it.” I come into a civilization in which two men out of three don’t have enough to eat. I come into New York, where it is a rich man that supplies a lodging for houseless poverty. I say to myself, “That course isn’t right; there’s a mistake somewhere.” Do unto others as you would have others do unto you. The end of things is New York. That doesn’t cohere. Where is the mistake? It’s somewhere, and the Labor movement is trying to find it out.

Again, gentlemen, we have another doubt to express. Are you quite certain that capital—the child of artificial laws, the product of society, the mere growth of social life—has a right to only an equal burden with labor, the living spring? We doubt it so much that we think we have invented a way to defeat Tom Scott, of the Pennsylvania Central. We think we have devised a little plan—Abraham Lincoln used to have a little story—by which we will save the Congress of the Nation from the moneyed corporations of the State. When we get into power, there is one thing we mean to do. If a man owns a single house, we will tax him one hundred dollars. If he owns ten houses of like value, we won’t tax him one thousand dollars, but two thousand dollars. If he owns a hundred houses, we won’t tax him ten thousand dollars, but sixty thousand dollars; and the richer a man grows, the bigger his tax, so that when he is worth forty million dollars he will not have more than twenty thousand dollars a year to live on. We’ll double and treble and quintuple and sextuple and increase tenfold the taxes, till Stewart, out of his uncounted millions, and the Pennsylvania Central, out of its measureless income, shall not have anything more than a moderate lodging and an honest table. The corporations we would have are those of associated labor and capital,—co-operation.

We’ll crumble up wealth by making it unprofitable to be rich. The poor man shall have a larger income in proportion as he is poor. The rich man shall have a lesser income in proportion as he is rich. You will say, “Is that just?” My friends, it is safe. Man is more valuable than money. You say, “Then capital will go to Europe.” Good heavens! let it go.

If other States wish to make themselves vassals to wealth, so will not we. We will save a country equal from end to end. Land, private property, all sorts of property, shall be so dearly taxed that it shall be impossible to be rich; for it is in wealth, in incorporated, combining, perpetual wealth, that the danger of labor lies.

(The End)