

Freedom
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A HISTORY of US

Jacob Coxey's Speech:

Written to be Delivered in Washington, D.C. on May 1, 1894

The Constitution of the United States guarantees to all citizens the right to peaceably assemble and petition for redress of grievances, and furthermore declares that the right of free speech shall not be abridged.

We stand here to-day to test these guaranties of our Constitution. We choose this place of assemblage because it is the property of the people, and if it be true that the right of the people to peacefully assemble upon their own premises and utter their petitions has been abridged by the passage of laws in direct violation of the Constitution, we are here to draw the eyes of the entire nation to this shameful fact. Here rather than at any other spot upon the continent it is fitting that we should come to mourn over our dead liberties and by our protest arouse the imperiled nation to such action as shall rescue the Constitution and resurrect our liberties.

Upon these steps where we stand has been spread a carpet for the royal feet of a foreign princess, the cost of whose lavish entertainment was taken from the public Treasury without the consent or the approval of the people. Up these steps the lobbyists of trusts and corporations have passed unchallenged on their way to committee rooms, access to which we, the representatives of the toiling wealth-producers, have been denied. We stand here to-day in behalf of millions of toilers whose petitions have been buried in committee rooms, whose prayers have been unresponded to, and whose opportunities for honest, remunerative, productive labor have been taken from them by unjust legislation, which protects idlers, speculators, and gamblers: we come to remind the Congress here assembled of the declaration of a United States Senator, "that for a quarter of a century the rich have been growing richer, the poor poorer, and that by the close of the present century the middle class will have disappeared as the struggle for existence becomes fierce and relentless."

We stand here to remind Congress of its promise of returning prosperity should the Sherman act be repealed. We stand here to declare by our march of over 400 miles through difficulties and distress, a march unstained by even the slightest act which would bring the blush of shame to any, that we are law-abiding citizens, and as men our actions speak louder than words. We are here to petition for legislation which will furnish employment for every man able and willing to work; for legislation which will bring universal prosperity and emancipate our beloved country from financial bondage to the descendants of King George. We have come to the only source which is competent to aid the people in their day of dire distress. We are here to tell our Representatives, who hold their seats by grace of our ballots, that the struggle for existence has become too fierce and relentless. We come and throw up our defenseless hands, and say, help, or we and our loved ones must perish. We are engaged in a bitter and cruel war with the enemies of all mankind—a war with hunger, wretchedness, and despair, and we ask Congress to heed our petitions and issue for the nation's good a sufficient volume of the same kind of money which carried the country through one awful war and saved the life of the nation.

In the name of justice, through whose impartial administration only the present civilization can be maintained and perpetuated, by the powers of the Constitution of our country upon which the liberties of the people must depend, and in the name of the commonweal of Christ, whose representatives we are, we enter a most solemn and earnest protest against this unnecessary and cruel usurpation and tyranny, and this enforced subjugation of the rights and privileges of American citizenship. We have assembled here in violation of no just laws to enjoy the privileges of every American citizen. We are now under the shadow of the Capitol of this great nation, and in the presence of our national legislators are refused that dearly bought privilege, and by force of arbitrary power prevented from carrying out the desire of our hearts which is plainly granted under the great magna-charta of our national liberties.

We have come here through toil and weary marches, through storms and tempests, over mountains, and amid the trials of poverty and distress, to lay our grievances at the doors of our National Legislature and ask them in the name of Him whose banners we bear, in the name of Him who plead for the poor and the oppressed, that they should heed the voice of despair and distress that is now coming up from every section of our country, that they should consider the conditions of the starving unemployed of our land, and enact such laws as will give them employment, bring happier conditions to the people, and the smile of contentment to our citizens.

Coming as we do with peace and good will to men, we shall submit to these laws, unjust as they are, and obey this mandate of authority of might which overrides and outrages the law of right. In doing so, we appeal to every peace-loving citizen, every liberty-loving man or woman, every one in whose breast the fires of patriotism and love of country have not died out, to assist us in our efforts toward better laws and general benefits.

J. S. COXEY
Commander of the Commonweal of Christ