

## **“Equity in Labor”**

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**September 3, 2017**

Most people I’ve known want to be able to enjoy our jobs as much as the brick-layer in our reading this morning. I wish I could talk to him, ask him what about his job made him enjoy it so much in a time when, in 2013, seventy-percent of people responded to a Gallup Poll saying they hate their jobs. Everyone should be able to at least tolerate their job, and I can’t help but wonder if a lot of that hate has to do with working for jobs that don’t appreciate their workers’ labor, or don’t compensate them nearly enough.

When we look back at the history of work in America, quite often, hating our jobs has been the least of our worries.

Do you know the story of our opening hymn this morning? I used the title printed in our hymnal in the order of service, but it’s most commonly known by the title, “Bread and Roses.” I joked with Sandra that I think it’s part of every folk musician gaining their cred that they have to cover it at some point. The words are a reference to a speech by American feminist, socialist, and union organizer Rose Schneiderman which later inspired a poem which drew attention to the phrase. Schneiderman famously declared:

What the woman who labors wants is the right to live, not simply exist — the right to life as the rich woman has the right to life, and the sun and music and art. You have nothing that the humblest worker has not a right to have also. The worker must have bread, but she must have roses, too. Help, you women of privilege, give her the ballot to fight with.

The idea is that while, yes, people need bread, or food, to survive, that’s not all that’s needed to be a flourishing human being. We need to be able to enjoy ourselves as well, and that’s

where the roses come in. Roses have often been used in the past as a symbol of enjoying life, as in the oft-repeated reminder to make sure to leave enough time to stop and smell the roses. We need things in our lives that make our lives worth living, beyond the bare necessities of survival and towards a richer actualization of life.

The phrase is also commonly associated with the 1912 textile strike in Lawrence, Massachusetts, which is commonly called the “Bread and Roses” strike. See, the work week had recently been cut from fifty-six hours a week to fifty-four for women and children, which may sound like a minor victory for labor and movement towards a more reasonable and just set of working standards, but the mill owners in Lawrence soon found a way to compensate: by slashing the pay of their workers.

Now workers in Lawrence were already impoverished. Many were immigrants, and they were forced to live in apartments with multiple families, often surviving off of beans, molasses, and bread. One worker would later testify before Congress, “When we eat meat it seems like a holiday, especially for the children.” The child mortality rate was a appalling fifty percent by age six. Thirty-six out of every hundred people who worked in the mills died before the age of twenty-five; the average life-expectancy for a Lawrence mill worker was only thirty-nine.

Conditions in Lawrence were inhumane, and that seems to be an understatement. Not only did they not have the roses they needed to flourish, they didn’t even have the bare necessities of survival. The only consideration the mill owners were giving was to their bottom line, making conditions ripe for revolution.

The laborers went on strike when it became clear the mill owners were going to institute a pay cut, and the city government quickly overreacted, sending in the militia to patrol the streets and attempt to harass the workers. In one case, a member of the local school board even tried to

frame the strikers by planting dynamite throughout the city. At least three strikers died in the strike and its aftermath.

The parallels between that strike and modern actions can't be ignored, such as media and political hyper-focus on any actions of violence and destruction in an attempt to show the strikers were mere violent thugs.

Industrial Workers of the World, or IWW, leaders Bill Haywood and Elizabeth Gurley Flynn were responsible for orchestrating the signature move of the strike: sending the hungry children of strikers to sympathetic families in New York, New Jersey, and Vermont, where they garnered widespread sympathy. After a clash with police at the Lawrence train station to prevent additional children from leaving, Congressional inquiries revealed the depth of suffering in Lawrence, and the mill owners soon settled the strike by giving the organizers a twenty percent increase in their wages to avoid further embarrassment.

I've chosen to focus on the Bread and Roses strike this morning because it's such a clear example of the need for both bread and roses in one's life. Even the workers who did have enough to eat were not enjoying life. As much death as circled Lawrence, it must have been near impossible to truly flourish. Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs famously asserts that, when one is focused on basic needs of survival, one cannot possibly expect to fulfill higher level needs leading up to self-actualization.

As you can probably tell, I'm very sympathetic to the labor movement. During the industrial revolution, as more and more people depended on industry for their livelihoods, unscrupulous bosses would frequently take advantage of workers, as the textile mills did in Lawrence, creating unsafe working conditions which did not give a damn whether their employees found a greater fulfillment or not.

Labor rose as a reaction to this, seeing it as necessary to organize for the rights of workers. They realized that bosses were not going to grant the workers their rights without a fight, and labor sought to do just this, eventually leading to a stark improvement in working conditions and safety, a standard work week and minimum wage, required overtime, and the banning of child labor among their many accomplishments. You can thank the labor movement and unions for the fact that working-class people can lead long, fulfilling lives today. Things might not be perfect, but they're a lot better than they were before. And I'm aware of how relevant this history is to the Copper Country as well. Unions were very much a force for humanitarian and political change during the mining boom.

The accomplishments of labor weren't often taught when I was in school. I hope that's changed today because we need to remember them now more than ever.

That's the original purpose of Labor Day: not to be just another three-day weekend or to mark the end of summer, but to celebrate the accomplishments of the Labor movement. Unfortunately, over time, the labor movement has weakened, and a proliferation of jobs, mostly in the service industry, have appeared for low skilled workers which perpetuate their poverty and don't allow for even a basic level of sustenance. What we need today is a new, strengthened labor movement that not only reaches out to traditional union occupations, but also includes these working poor.

I support the labor movement because I know first-hand how difficult it can be to get by as a worker in America. My parents were both working-class, often subsisting on substandard incomes in professions where unions were prohibited. As a divorced woman working a minimum wage job in the late '80s, my mother was often faced with the prospect of getting by \$134 a week before taxes at a time when she was not receiving near-enough support from my father.

Have you ever tried to raise a preteen on such paltry wages? If you have, you know it's practically impossible. I know my mother skipped meals to make it happen.

There were times we had neither bread nor roses, and this is exactly the situation for so many of the working poor in America today who are being discouraged or forbidden from organizing in unions, which would give workers the ability to bargain for their livelihoods.

Consider these statistics collected by my colleague Aaron McEmrys:

- One out of every five workers who actively support a union are fired during an organizing campaign.
- 92% of employers force employees to attend mandatory anti-union meetings, while it is illegal for pro-union workers to respond.
- Over 50% of all employers threaten to close the plant if the union wins, although less than 1% actually do close after election day.
- And to add insult to injury, 34% of employers refuse to negotiate a contract with workers even AFTER the workers have formed a union through the National Labor Relations Board! This is exactly the same tactic tyrants around the world use when elections don't go their way – they just ignore the results.

Luckily my mother got a raise and eventually another job, which didn't help massively, but did keep us out of abject poverty. Not everyone is so lucky, and a minimum wage full-time worker today can expect \$290 before taxes, not a lot. And this assumes the person is lucky enough to find a full-time job; many subsist on part-time work or tip work where the minimum wage is even less.

Make no mistake: we're in this situation because politicians and the owning class have gradually pushed back the accomplishments of labor organizers, as they did in Lawrence almost immediately following the Bread and Roses Strike.

Our second principle calls on us to engage in the struggle against economic inequality, which the labor movement so valiantly fought against by demanding that people be treated in a decent manner that allots them their share of bread and roses. This struggle continues today because a person cannot be reasonably expected to get by on \$290 or less in most parts of the United States today.

That's why Unitarian Universalists have such a long history of supporting union causes. As far back as William Ellery Channing and Theodore Parker, two of the founders of Unitarianism in America, there have been people in our faith struggling to achieve rights for workers. Unitarian minister John Haynes Holmes, writing in 1912, put it best. He summarized many of the injustices laborers at his time face, but it might be best summarized by saying:

Poverty, in this age as in every age, in our country as in every country, is primarily due to the fact of social injustice...that natural resources, which are the basis of all wealth, are in the hands of a few instead of under the control of society at large, and are thus exploited for the benefit of the few and not for the sake of the common welfare; that the distribution of wealth is grossly unfair and disproportionate – in the final analysis, that society is organized upon a basis of injustice and not of justice, and is permeated by the spirit of selfishness and not of love.

Today, our principles call Unitarian Universalists to engage in the struggle for laborers, especially in this day and age when even middle-class people are finding it harder and harder to make ends make. If we say that all people have inherent worth and dignity, then they cannot fully realize what this principle says unless they have both bread and roses—the necessities of survival and the ability to live self-actualized lives.

At the June General Assembly in New Orleans, delegates adopted a Statement of Conscience which reaffirms many of these points and call on Unitarian Universalists everywhere to work towards alleviating economic inequality. Our board is currently considering ways we can engage our congregation with this Statement of Conscience, including the possibility of making it a congregational justice issue. I encourage each of us to think of ways we might engage with this statement, both individually and as a congregation.

One way we can do this is by supporting labor organizing, locally, regionally, and nationally. This system, which places the majority of economic resources in the hands of a small number of people to the point others are barely able to survive, is unjust and, dare I say, evil. Supporting labor organizing is the first step towards telling our elected officials that it is wrong to ignore the basic needs of all people in our system.

It could be discouraging that, over a century after the Bread and Roses strike, many of the advances of the labor movement seem to be in danger of being rolled back, largely because of political expediency and public detachment. Unitarian Universalism offers a base for providing a place of religious resistance to economic injustice if we but allow ourselves to be such. May we ever be a religion that struggles that all people may have their fair share of bread and roses.