1939

Labor Day Speech in Butte, Montana

Mike Mansfield 1903-2001
It is a pleasure to be back in Butte once again and to see so many of my old friends. The fame of our city is worldwide and the friendliness of its people proverbial. As a group you have the unique gift of making people feel immediately at home. When I first came to Butte in 1922, I rustled a job as a mucker at the old Colorado mine on East Park Street. The wage then was $4.75 a day, and — after five years in the service, I thought I was on the road to riches, but one shift in a stope on the 2800 level washed away literally any illusions I may have had and brought me back to reality.

Nevertheless, my ten years in Butte as a mucker, miner, and sampler were ten years well spent and despite the heat, the copper water, and the copper dust, Butte still holds the number one place in my heart. It was in the mines that I received my real practical education, and it was from the miners that I derived my philosophy of life — to do unto others as you would have done unto you. That's the decent thing to do, and that's the spirit of democracy.

Butte harbors the richest hill on earth but not the richest people. Most of us have had to struggle continuously to make both ends meet, and in the struggle many have paid the supreme sacrifice long before their time. Life to us has meant a period of brief successes and reverses with the reverses becoming more and more prevalent during the past few years. Nevertheless you haven't whined or begged, but, like true Americans, you have made the best of every situation as you found it.

In order to protect yourselves and to safeguard your interests you have organized into unions so that you could achieve together what you could not achieve singly. This was imperative and necessary then, and it is still today. Organization has not been an easy matter, but it is a significant one. Organized labor, as a vital force, is a matter of recent growth, and, as we all know, was practically unknown one hundred years ago. The organization of labor in America had its seeds in the struggle of the workers in European countries for representation in their governments so that better working conditions could be achieved.

On the continent one hundred years ago, democracy was practically non-existent. But, with the rise of great industries, due to the Industrial Revolution, and the increase in wealth because of the introduction of the machines, we see an effort being made by these newly rich to become more active in governmental affairs. They had to contend with the nobility — the so-called landed aristocracy — and to break the power of that particular group they began to pay some attention to the workingman. They did not care about the worker as an individual but only wanted to use him to satisfy their own ambitious ends. They wasted no tears on the fact that he was living in crowded, unsanitary, and squalid quarters; that he was the victim of occupational hazards and industrial diseases; and that he and his entire family were all working at miserable wages to eke out a bare existence. No, they
wanted to use the worker to make themselves more powerful, and their efforts were successful. However, in order to get into power themselves, some political concessions had to be made to the worker and, once given some initiative, the laborer began to desire more. It was a difficult proposition but by gradually organizing themselves and by judicious use of their power, the workers finally made the grade, got their labor groups recognized, and proceeded to demand and secure necessary reforms.

The point which I am trying to emphasize is this: the really worthwhile and democratic reforms inaugurated were the direct result or organized labor's participation in governmental affairs.

The significance of what has just been said lies in the fact that American labor is, in a sense, the inheritor of many of the European ideas. Furthermore, the same results, though differing somewhat in final form, were achieved, and popular government advanced because of these activities. Labor always has been, still is, and will continue to be the good right arm of democracy.

I mentioned the introduction of the machine which in the beginning was a blessing but which in time turned out to be a monster. None of us is against the machine as such but many of us are fearful of it because of technological unemployment - unemployment caused by the introduction of new labor saving devices.

For awhile new industries came into being because of the machine and consequently the slack in employment could be taken up, but in the end the machines came too fast and new industries came too slow. The result is that we are going to have a tremendously larger group of unemployed. These people must be taken care of and will be taken care of regardless of what some of our cold-blooded business analysts, industrial barons, and the like, think. If big business is so anxious to use more and more machines and less and less men, then it must be prepared to pay its share to support the unemployed.

It is ironical that we should have in this country 12,000,000 unemployed. America has the natural resources and the men and women necessary to produce everything essential for the subsistence and comfort of our entire population. Yet there are millions in the depths of poverty and people are starving. Right here in Butte your papers a short while ago carried the story of just such a case. If our system allowed production for use instead of only for profit and if wealth and income were not so concentrated as to destroy the purchasing power of millions, we could do away with the ghastly insecurity of our people.
It has been estimated that
1% of the people own 59% of the wealth in the U.S.
18% " " 90% " " " " " "
37% " " " only 10% " " " " "
75% " " " practically nothing.

Remember these figures; mull them over in your mind; digest them; and come to your own conclusions.

Just as organized workers have secured reforms during the last one hundred years, so, I believe, that a more solidified and earnest endeavor on the part of labor today can secure some lessening of the terrible inequalities which these figures show. No one should starve in this land of plenty. It is up to our legislators to enact the necessary measures for a more equitable distribution of our wealth. Don't forget that we live in a democracy and don't forget that we are our brother's keeper. The dole is not the answer. We need shorter hours, better wages, more education for the young to keep them from entering industry too soon, pensions for elderly people so that they will not have to work until they drop, and a long range program of public works and improvements.

Labor and democracy are synonymous. Organized labor has been the driving force behind almost every worthwhile advance in this country of ours. As a teacher I can say truthfully that nobody can claim a greater degree of credit for establishing our present public school system than can labor. Labor was also the driving force behind the woman suffrage movement, and it was also responsible for the 17th amendment to the Constitution which gave the people the right to vote for their senators and took away the privilege of appointing them from the state legislatures.

Labor has accomplished all this and much more and that is why I repeat that labor and democracy are synonymous. Democracy means the rule of the people, not the rule of a single individual or a relative few. Of course democracy is not perfect; but contrast this country of ours with other countries in the world today, and you will agree, I am sure, that despite our present difficulties we are infinitely better off than are the totalitarian states.

Nothing is perfect, nothing ever will be perfect; but as long as man lives he will continue to strive for perfection. It is the goal toward which all our energies are directed and through a process of education and cooperation we will keep working toward that end.

In this fight for perfection we have used the mechanism of organizing labor for the purpose of accomplishing the greatest good for the greatest number. We are going to succeed in our efforts but only through evolutionary methods and not through revolutionary ones. We must examine our own house - the house of labor - and keep it, as far as possible, in good working order.

How does that house look today? If we look closely we will find four groups living in it, all of varying degrees of importance. There is the craftsman in the A.F.L., the industrial worker in the C.I.O., the
company unionist, and the unorganized. In other words we find groups thinking in different thought channels and, in many instances, working at cross purposes.

What is the reason for this divergence? In days of old despotic kings used the principle of "divide and rule" to maintain themselves in power and to keep their privileges and prerogatives. This method was successful for a time but, like all dishonest things, it could not last. Why? Because the people - the masses - gradually awoke to the significance of the situation through the teachings of the philosophers and with this education and understanding the policy dwindled and finally died. Today our industrial kings are pursuing the very same policy of "divide and rule", and to date they have been fairly successful. We see two great unions, the A.F.L. and the C.I.O. comprising some 8,000,000 members, fighting each other in many sections of our country. What has been the result? Organized labor is being torn asunder and, in some sections, is losing many of the rights achieved in fifty or more years of effort. I am not an alarmist but I would like to call to your attention the elections of last November in Oregon wherein the voters of that state approved a law muzzling labor, and in Washington and California where similar attempts were made though not successfully.

The significance of this lies in our geographical proximity to the Pacific Coast states mentioned. What has been tried there may be attempted here. We must be on our guard to repel efforts of that kind, and the best way to assure success is to achieve unity in the labor movement. Every possible means must be used to reunite labor. Talk alone will not do it, but talk and action will. It is up to us, the rank and file of organized labor, to see that this is done and to work for the greatest good for the greatest number.

Let's take another look at the house of labor and see if we've overlooked anything. We find that there is another group to be considered in the labor movement, and that is the farmer. He is a worker just as much as we are, and he is seeking the very same ends also; namely, a decent livelihood and a fair amount of security. We find that he also has organized and for the same purposes. Why isn't he in with us? Because the policy of "divide and rule" is applied here also.

Many farmers are not opposed to organized labor for we find some of them organizing themselves on union lines. Let's try to understand the farmer and his problems and get him to understand ours. It's not an impossible task but it will be a slow one. Education and cooperation are necessary for a better understanding of each other.

Organized labor in western Montana is embarking on a policy in this respect which we hope will be of tremendous benefit to the people of this state. Too often do we find the worker and the farmer pitted against one another and too often has this antagonism been created and maintained by a lack of understanding. In an effort to overcome this situation the Missoula County Trades and Labor Assembly and the Ravalli County Farm Union Council have reached the state where they
are exchanging fraternal delegates with each other. On this basis a
start has been made toward bringing about a degree of cooperation
between the organized farmer and the organized laborer which we hope,
and sincerely believe, will redound to the benefit of both. We do not,
of course, expect that our differences will be ironed out immediately
but we do expect much to be done in the way of a better understanding
as time goes on.

We members of organized labor must realize the difficulties under
which the farmer labors. We must recognize that with the farmer we
can accomplish a great deal, and we must understand that his problems
are as vital to him as ours are to us. A lack of cooperation means
insecurity for both sides; complete, or almost complete, cooperation
means a better livelihood, a brighter future, and a keener understanding
of our fellow men.

That's the picture of labor today, and while it is bright in some
respects, it is gloomy in others. Let us take cognizance of the con-
dition of our house, eliminate the duplex features, and erect a
structure which will be solid and enduring and able to withstand the
opposition of those who would dynamite us.

Earlier, I mentioned the relationship between labor and democracy.
Let no one fool you into the belief that too much freedom for labor
presages ill for our country. On the contrary, the opposite is true.
Only as long as we have democracy will labor advance, and only so
long as organized labor is a vital, driving force will democracy remain.
List the European countries today and note the subservient condition
of labor in all of them. Contrast that with our democracy and thank
God for our fortunate position. We can sit down at a table and discuss
our problems in a friendly way; we have a National Labor Relations
Act which is fair to both employer and employee, and allows, at long
last, the right — and not the privilege — of collective bargaining.
In spite of the difficulties confronting us today in American we are
still a fortunate people. How different this is from the situation
in so many of our neighboring countries. We are not regimented and
told what to do and what not to do. The law we live under is not the
law of a dictator, but the law of the people. There is no prohibition
of massed gatherings, such as this Labor Day demonstration, because
we are and will continue to be a free people.
My fellow-Americans:

We meet today to celebrate the Armistice ending the World War twenty-one years ago. We fought in that struggle not for glory or gain but to make the world safe for Democracy. Many of our comrades made the supreme sacrifice in order that we might live to enjoy the privileges and prerogatives which are ours; many are still paying the penalties imposed in hospitals, asylums, and shortened lives. These people are our fathers, brothers, and friends and to them we owe a debt we can never repay. Their fight for Democracy in this country was not in vain and we honor them gladly for that which they did so willingly.

But democracy - as we know it, love it, and understand it - is today facing a challenge as to its very existence. This challenge must be met, met by all who believe in its fundamental processes and who love the liberties and responsibilities of a democracy. It is dangerous in this world of today to take democracy for granted. It is up to us, all of us, to take cognizance of the dangers affecting our system and to clarify our thinking as to our responsibilities. Only as long as we have democracy in our daily lives will we continue to have democracy in our government.

At the present time the world is engaged in another war and the people of all countries are apprehensive. Even we, in America, are affected by this struggle despite the fact that we are not active participants. We veterans, we Americans, stand for peace because we know full well what the horrors of war really are. Those of us who participated in the last struggle realize that we are citizens in the only real democracy left in the world. Ours is the last outpost of representative government.
We are sincerely anxious for peace, all of us, whether or not we be veterans, and our only desire is to promote the best interests of our country. Across the ocean decisions of life and death are being made by small groups of men but here we have a real free forum – the only one in existence – representing the people. May God grant to our Congress and to our President the privilege of guiding our nation safely through any storms which may be encountered in our national life.

War is hell because it tears down so much that we have fought to achieve over a period of centuries. Standards of morality are lowered and religion is relegated to a position of secondary and in some instances, no importance. All this, and much more, can be traced to the ravages of war and that is why we, the people of America, stand for peace. We are proud of the record of our country in this respect because we have been, still are, and will continue to be, consistent in our efforts for peace. These dangerous days demand cooperation among all of us and our energies will be used, without stint, to keeping this country out of war. We can achieve our aim because we are one people, with one mind, and guided by one purpose – the welfare of our nation. Let us remember the words of President Roosevelt that this is not our war and not of our making and face the truth that America can in no way be benefited by entering the present struggle.

The present war is not a war to preserve democracy or to preserve liberty. It is a war to preserve the balance of power in Europe. Under the present circumstances and regardless of our sympathies for the belligerents, truth impels us to state that
the victory of one or the other will no more solve Europe's problems today than it did in 1918. Let the Europeans settle their own problems and let us settle those (and they are many) which confront us in our own land.

We are primarily interested in the preservation of a democratic form of government in the United States. If we join in another world war, it might be difficult to maintain such a government in this country. We would be bound to go far toward totalitarianism because modern war is the enemy of democracy. Our best service to the cause of democracy is to keep it alive in the United States and provide a standard to which the world may in time return.

Other countries wage war; we must wage peace. If we want to keep out of war we must keep clear of the roads that lead to war. These paths lead to the pursuit of a dangerous temporary prosperity out of the profits of war trade. We should follow paths of prosperity which are based on production for peace and not for war. We can wage peace best if we build up a resistance to foreign propaganda and to our own emotionalism. We can wage peace by insisting upon the control of our own destiny: namely the right to say whether or not we wish to enter a war.

Older people declare wars; younger people fight them. Why not reverse the process to the extent of making those who seem so anxious for war and who have the power because of their official positions to bring about a declaration of war - why not make it mandatory that they be the first to go? It is almost a truism in this country of ours that we would never go to war if those in responsible official positions had to do the fighting themselves instead of sitting in comfortable offices, uttering platitudes, and cheering the population on.
War has no place in our present system in America. We all desire, under the supervision of our own democratic government, to go on living like normal Americans in past generations have done: to work, to marry, and to raise our children in comfort and peace. We want to find an answer for our present unemployment problem. We want an ultimate prosperity and security. This is our modest and earnest appeal and our government must not fail us.

In these days of difficulty we must think of our duty to ourselves and to the memory of those who have died for their country. We must stop this talk that we will be drawn into a European war, that we cannot avoid it, that our participation is inevitable. If we say it often enough - if this fatalistic talk goes on - we will become involved. The position of a nation is largely what that nation thinks its position is.

Instead of talking as though things were beyond our control, we should stress the fact that we can stay out, that we should stay out, that we must stay out, and begin at once the devising of constructive measures to keep us out.

We desire nothing that is selfish or cowardly. We are willing to risk our all in a real cause but let it be an American cause. This is no time for any kind of action except united action. America must stand as a unit if American ideals are to be preserved. The freedom that we in this country enjoy is the result of the labors of many patriots in the past. The American nation is the triumph of the men and women who fought for the principles upon which it is founded. The
America of the future will similarly bear the marks of the political and economic workmanship of the present generation. Let us hope that those who follow us can look back upon our actions with pride and continue the enjoyment of the democratic practices which are ours today.

How different these principles of democracy which characterizes us are from the principles of hatred and distrust so prevalent throughout the world today. When I think of our Constitution and our Bill of Rights I thank God that He has seen fit to establish a country such as ours.

In other countries are people who live, yes, but under what circumstances. They are regimented and told what to do and what not to do. Freedom, equality, and justice are meaningless words to them. They aren't smiling, or friendly but rather they are grim and fearful because they know not what the morrow has in store for them. The law under which they live in the law of the dictator not the law of the people. Free gatherings are practically unknown and massed assemblages - unless on order - are prohibited. Contrast that with this and you will realize - as I know you have - that there can be no compromise between the two. We are indeed fortunate to live under a flag and in a country such as ours where we can practice what we preach; where we can disagree but still remain friends; where there are no concentration camps, where no one is liquidated, where we have complete religious tolerance; and where we can live and enjoy life knowing full well that tomorrow the sun will shine and that all is well with America.

America the country, Americanism the ideal, and American the people represents an actuality worth living for, worth fighting for, and if need be, worth dying for.
The really fine thing about us is that we're just American. There are no distinctions among us because we practice equality as we preach it. There is no lack of harmony because we believe in cooperation. This is necessary if any country is to survive and grow. It was harmony, cooperation, and teamwork which brought into being this great nation. America will always be the symbol of the united efforts put forth by the different peoples who combined to bring it into being.

Out of this assimilation of peoples from various countries of the world evolved Democracy as we have it today. Our comrades of the world war gave their lives to preserve this Democracy. Let us honor them today and in their memory keep alive the fires of freedom, justice and equality, and let us, as real Americans, dedicate ourselves to peace in 1939.