

ADDRESS BEFORE UTILITY WORKERS UNION, MIAMI, 1959

by

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Dear Friends,

Story of Reverend Webber

I am very grateful to Charles Webber for the invitation to speak before this group today. When I received the letter signed by Mr. Webber, the signature did not note that the signee was a minister. Nevertheless, I immediately recalled that some 13 years ago, a Reverend Charles Webber had visited my home in Norfolk, Va., since he had heard that I was interested in joining the Union movement. At that time, I had not yet begun my study for the Rabbinate, and, indeed, I had not yet decided whether my future lay in the Union Movement or in the Ministry.

It may seem to some people that this was a choice between two rather distant vocations, but to me the two were very closely allied. While most people say that the three main sources of education are the Home, the School, and the Church, I was convinced at that time that a 4th main influence upon the minds of the American people was the Union Movement.

Today's News

I prepared this talk only yesterday when the headlines of the newspapers carried the charge that a union executive had swindled the owner of a business out of a quarter of a million dollars. News of this type has managed to dwarf all other accomplishments of the Unions during the past year or so. Even a pro-Union person like myself is caught up in this well-fashioned news campaign, and I am moved to ask - HAVE THE UNIONS CHANGED? EVEN IF IT IS TRUE THAT THIS GENTLEMAN AND PERHAPS HIS PARTICULAR UNION ARE EXCEPTIONS TO THE RULE, IS IT STILL POSSIBLE THAT THE OLD UNION IDEALISM HAS BEEN LOST AND A NEW MATERIALISM SUBSTITUTED IN ITS PLACE?

When I considered devoting my life to Union Work, little more than a decade ago, I was drawn to unionism, first BY ITS CONCERN FOR THE POWERLESS AND THE UNDERPRIVILEGED, and secondly, BY ITS PHILOSOPHY OF TOGETHERNESS, its teachings that all men of all faiths, races, and nationalities must stand together. I am quite aware of the history of unionism, and I know that had it not been for unionism, the American workmen would be at the mercy of the industrialists. I know full well that unionism brought

brought a high standard of living and dignity to the American workmen. In the old days, the laborer was fighting for such basic things as bread and the right to hold his head high in self-respect. He has attained these things through his union.

However, the efforts of the unions have been so successful that today the unions and their members seem to face entirely different problems. The problem of wages seems not so acute as the problem of using the new power of the union in a democratic way. The very success of the unions has made it possible for the idealism of old to be diluted by pride and perhaps by a little selfishness. The problem of growing power is a well-known problem. It affects all groups, not only unions. It affects, for example, growing nations. Our country was born in a demonstration of unparalleled idealism, yet when we grew strong, we were not beyond the selfish exploitation of the Spanish-American War. We who had once been colonies of a sovereign power against which we had revolted, were not beyond taking colonies unto ourselves, instead of granting them their freedom. We have the same problem in the Rabbinate and in the Ministry. The Rabbi or Minister who graduates from school full of zeal is usually effective in the battle for a just and peaceful world, only so long as he is unsuccessful in becoming the leader of a rich synagogue or church. Once he becomes involved in meeting a large organizational budget, and building a bigger and more beautiful sanctuary, he soon has little time for the grand causes which first motivated him.

Good friends, I did not accept your invitation to speak in order to chastise you. I came merely to suggest that perhaps the Union Movement has come upon a time when it must ask itself some questions. Perhaps this is a moment for soul-searching and self-criticism. It may well be that this particular union and your sister unions in the AFL-CIO are all beyond reproach. In which case, please consider my remarks as the vain, oral exercise of a frustrated clergyman. At any rate, when a person suggests to me that he is beyond improvement, I recall the story of a venerated Rabbi who visited a small town in Russia before the turn of the century. The Rabbi asked that the Jewish villagers assemble in the rather plain synagogue there. When the people gathered together and sat expectantly, the Rabbi spoke. He said, "I have heard that there is in

this town a very humble man. Wherever I have traveled, and I have traveled widely, I have come upon people who were filled with pride and who were incapable of self-criticism. Yet, I have heard that in this little town, there is a man so righteous as to be completely self-effacing and humble. Tell me," said the Rabbi, "Who is that humble man?" Without hesitation, a man on the edge of the crowd volunteered, "Rabbi, I am the humble one!"

Yes, we are all so humble and righteous that we do not hesitate to compliment ourselves. The other fellow, is, of course, wrong, and we are, of course, right. But, of course, the truth lies somewhere in between. May we not honestly say that the group which seeks to be truly humble and righteous is constantly analyzing itself to make certain that its position and policies are pointed towards the attainment of the highest ideals.

Self-Criticism

Frankly, gentlemen, there have been times when I have said to myself, "Herb, you made the wrong choice. You should have become a union man. Here you are talking big, and your people sit in their pews with prayerful attitudes, yet you know that there is a long journey between prayer and action, between say-so and do-so. While on the other hand, those union men, they're out there where it counts. They're closer to pay-dirt. They aren't just refereeing. They're in there fighting the battle." Yes, I've said that to myself in moments of self-analysis, and I have risen from those moments determined to make my ministry more down to earth, more concerned with the problems of earth.

Yet, when I observe unions fighting merely for wages but not for cleaner politics; when I see unions fighting for fewer working hours but not for integration, I feel less guilty about choosing the pulpit. Mind you, the Unions might well fight for better wages and working conditions, but if that is all a Union is for, then the Unions have lost their most precious asset, and they have lost that something which most attracted many of us to the movement.

In summing up, gentlemen, let me say that I think the time has come for unions to do a little addition and subtraction. If the movement is becoming fat and impotent, it is merely following the law of deterioration which afflicts all movements as they grow in success and power, but the illness is nevertheless a weakening one. While the movement still has many enemies who are waiting to pounce upon it, it will not maintain the loyalty of its friends and adherents if it merely says, "I am the humble one. I am the faultless one."

It would seem to this friend of unionism that the movement will continue to strengthen itself only to the extent that it undergoes a new birth of freedom, a new dedication to the idealism which was its goal short years ago. Sometimes even in laboring for a cause which is good, there can be a drying up of the spirit of dedication, and the absence of this spirit can make all the difference in the world. Let me close with this illustrative story:

A by-stander was observing work on the construction of a new building. He went up to one man and asked, "What are you building here?" The man answered, "I am a carpenter. I am building a window. I am laying the frame for the window." The by-stander, unsatisfied, went to a second laborer and asked, "What are you building here?" The laborer answered, "I am a brick-layer. I am piling these bricks one on top of another. I am making a wall." Finally, the by-stander went to an unskilled laborer who was stirring cement in a large trough. "What are you building?" he asked again. The worker, who happened to be Negro, lifted his eyes skyward and answered, "I'm building a house of God."

Yes, some people work just to keep busy, and some people work just to earn wages, but some few devote their labors to a cause greater than themselves, and in doing so, glorify the most menial of tasks.

There are few movements in America more sacred than the movement which binds American workers together in common cause. Let that movement never forget what it is building, and let it never forget the plain road that it must follow.