

The Barons at the White House (October 4, 1902)

Marion, Ky., October 4, 1902.

I have just finished reading the statements of President Baer¹ and other official representatives of the railway magnates and coal barons at the White House conference held at the request and under the direction of President Roosevelt.²

Notwithstanding the President had expressly stipulated that he wished no discussion of the questions of right or wrong involved in the dispute — preferring to have the case considered upon the higher ground of “patriotism,” whatever that may mean to a profit-pulling and labor-looting corporation — the coal and railway officials took advantage of the occasion, when they had an audience of 80 million eager listeners, to brand the great army of miners, whose labor pays their princely salaries and builds their marble palaces, as thugs, thieves, cutthroats, and assassins.

My blood leaped and boiled when I read this lying, vicious, brutal indictment penned by the bloated beneficiaries of the countless crimes that have crimsoned the green hills of Pennsylvania with blood drained from the veins of the coal diggers by the bullets and bludgeons of the mercenary hirelings in the service of the robber barons to keep their exploited slaves in subjection.

What stupendous gall! And what a deaf, dumb, and blind faith in the stupidity, cowardice, and everlasting servility of the working class!

Ah, gentlemen, you are woefully ignorant of the teachings of history. Little do you realize in your mad pursuit of profit that you are preparing the people to finally put you where you properly belong. You are sowing the wind and will reap the whirlwind, and when the hour finally strikes it will fall like a knell upon your startled ears and you may beg in vain for the arbitration you now scorn. And when your craven lips quiver with your last plea for mercy and it is denied you, remember that you granted none, and that inexorable justice demands that you shall atone to the last drop of blood and the last vain sigh for all the consequences of your atrocious acts.

And President Roosevelt, to whom the hired men of the barons read the riot act for daring to have them contaminated by meeting John Mitchell and the representatives of labor, what will he do now?

We have heard much about Roosevelt's wonderful nerve and indomitable will — his courage to act in the interest of the people in an emergency, even in the absence of law or precedent.

John Mitchell agreed to submit the whole case to the arbitration of a commission appointed by the President, the next thing to a flat surrender.

The corporation officials spurned Mitchell's proposition, defied the President, and commanded him to order out the federal troops to shoot the miners, crush their union, and starve their families as Cleveland had done in the railroad strike of 1894.

Here is your supreme opportunity, Mr. President! It is up to you and you must act now in self defense, unless you are willing to back down and surrender ignominiously to a handful of purse-proud, sodden plutocrats.

Are you an Andrew Jackson or a Grover Cleveland?

Eighty percent of the American people are with the struggling, starving coal miners of Pennsylvania. Their wish and their will ought to be law, even though the ruling class has not written it in the statute books of the country.

Granting that there is no law to empower the President to act in this extremity — neither is there any law to prevent him from acting.

Grover Cleveland acted in defiance of law to crush labor in the interest of capitalist tyranny and exploitation.

Theodore Roosevelt can, if he will, open the anthracite coal mines and avert the horrors of a coal famine. He has the power, and the people will stand by him.

It may also be urged that the President being now a union man and having pledged his support to union principles at the Chattanooga convention of the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen,³ is in duty bound to stand by the miners' union in its struggle, which has been endorsed by the brotherhood to which the President belongs; and failing in this, according to the ethics, rules, and principles to which he subscribed, the insufferable stigma of "scabbing" may blight his record as a union labor man.

I have no wish to hold any public office and yet I confess that just at this juncture in the coal strike I'd like to be President for just a week.

But the real good will come in the accessions to the socialist movement. The class war is revealed to the dullest and blindest of men.

To the ballot box, you working slaves, with the class-conscious ballots of socialism in your hands and the determination to be free men in your hearts.

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Since the above was written, the report has come of the collapse of the conference. The operators swept the field, among the fallen and seriously wounded being the strenuous President of the United States.

Gods, what a spectacle! The coal Baerons and Bullions denouncing the miners' union for organizing a labor monopoly "in restraint of trade," in violation of law! This literally beats hell — these coal czars, these red-handed, flint-hearted arch-anarchists with their steel and steal-clad monopoly that belches defiance, via the White House, of the government and the people, vomits its contempt upon the working class, and rides roughshod over all law, human and divine — these are fine specimens to moralize about monopoly and conspiracy and law and order.

Oh, yes, the half-starved miners, and their half-naked wives and children, who have been robbed of all save the animal power required to dig coal and propagate their species, they are the lawbreakers and criminals, and ought to be shot dead in their tracks like wild beasts.

The picture is worthy of an old master and would make a masterpiece for the lurid gallery of Inferno, where devils might contemplate it for incitement to diabolical deeds.

If ever the barricades are thrown up in the streets of New York and Pennsylvania by an insurgent mob and that bunch of coal barons find themselves tied back to back in the death cart on their way to the guillotine, they may seek comfort in the reflection that they are reaping the harvest sown by their own bloody hands.

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¹ George F. Baer (1842-1914) was President of the Philadelphia and Reading Railroad and spokesman for the owners in the great coal strike of 1902.

² The ill-fated Presidential conference intended to negotiate an end to the ongoing coal strike was held in Washington, DC on Oct. 3, 1902. The gathering broke up abruptly with

the representatives of the mine operators and railroads stating that they “decline to treat with President Mitchell.”

³ The 21st convention of the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen opened in Chattanooga on Sept. 8, 1902, with President Theodore Roosevelt addressing the gathering on its opening day. Roosevelt declared to the convention “I believe emphatically in organized labor. I believe in the organization of wage workers.” (See: “The Eight Biennial Convention,” *Locomotive Firemen's Magazine* [Peoria, IL], vol. 33, no. 4 [Oct. 1902], pg. 554.)