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517. *SPEECH AT LABOURERS' MEETING, AHMEDABAD*

October 31, 1936

In 1918 some workers had become indifferent and had also weakened. To carry on a strike for twenty-one days—remaining peaceful, not even throwing a little stone at anyone—is a hard test for anyone. You passed through the test lasting 21 days. Then you weakened somewhat. Do you know what I had to do then and what the results were? For 21 days you carried the banner on which were written the words “Unbreakable Vow”. Every day I asked you to remember God and do everything with Him as your witness; otherwise the time would have come for a person like me to die. As on the banner, so in the heart, “Unbreakable Vow” was written. You had all lost heart but you played your part well. Anyone who wishes to keep a pledge should take it only after due deliberation and recognizing his limitations. One should know one’s own capacity and, as the saying goes, “You should stretch yourself according to the length of your bedspread.” Do I need to explain this to labourers? For you always huddle up when you go to sleep. Everyone should have a seven-foot long bed; the labourer’s may well be made of coir strings and the rich man’s have silk webbing. The rich may have a painted cot and yours may be [made of] babul wood, but everyone needs to stretch himself full length while sleeping. I can see that this is not the case today. Where is the room in your house for such a bed? Some of you may have it, but the majority do not. And, moreover, even if there is room for one such bed, the houses are not big enough to hold beds for your mother, wife, children, sister, and so on. You live in hovels. You have always to live huddled up as one does when shivering with cold. You have not room enough even to stretch your legs. At present this is the case everywhere. Here too we are able to huddle up. We do not have the strength to soar high into the skies. Means have been invented for killing thousands of people with an explosion from the sky, but I do not want such power. We should not even wish for it. Even if it were possible to acquire the strength to destroy everything by a whiff, I would refuse such strength. But we should have the strength to keep a pledge, if we have taken one. It is enough

if we secure this strength. We are all children of the earth and it is only if we keep our vows that we can live on this earth preserving our self-respect. You had for twenty years that capacity to keep your vow. If tomorrow you lose this capacity which is your capital, you shall have lost your twenty years' earnings. It would be an asset if you could keep it unto death; otherwise all your achievements will come to nothing. Today there are multi-millionaires who become insolvent and take poison to end their lives. Isn't that so? A vow is worth more than a hundred millions. Its value can never be measured. You treasured that capital for twenty years. With the interest on it, it must have now doubled or trebled itself. We, however, cannot live on interest. We should be satisfied with what we have. It is enough that our principle remains intact. However, when this capital is lost you will become bankrupt.¹

The question facing you seems to be this: Whether you have grown in strength or the mill-owners. If the mill-owners close the doors against arbitration, you may have to resort to a strike. They may want to try your strength. Now I should like to suggest to the mill-owners that if you grow in strength, they have nothing to be afraid of. If they grow in strength you have everything to be afraid of.

But let us see what differentiates us from the mill-owners. Their strength lies in their wealth. Ours in our capacity to work. Whereas they have the strength of money we have the strength of labour. They depend upon their money, we upon our labour. If labour did not co-operate with capital, not a single mill could function. If you and I do not work in their mills, your brothers will go and work there. They will be able to procure workers with the help of money, threats, coercion or force. But the co-operation of labour will have to be secured. Otherwise their mills will come to a standstill. It is labour that holds the key. The labour union may not have it but you, the labourers do have it.

Although there may be crores of you, what could you do if you had no capital? What could you achieve if you had crores of rupees but not the talent to use them? You will also need people to manage these mills. I should not be able to run the industry even if someone gave me a crore of rupees. I would know how to use the sum for Harijan work or for pro-

¹ The paragraph that follows is from Mahadev Desai's "Weekly Letter" in *Harijan*.

ducing khadi. But I cannot run a model mill. It may well happen that a mill-owner might hand over a mill to me if I pleaded with him to do so. But even if someone did it I would not have the capacity to run it. I wish you to acquire this capacity some day. But in twenty years you have not acquired it, and in another twenty you may not be able to do so. It may well happen that one labourer may learn the trick and make the others his slaves. But the working class as a whole does not have this ability today. If you believe that you have now developed this capacity, you will no longer require a leader. I do not think you have it. And the day you do so, there will cease to be two isms. If you have it today, you have become capitalists. Capital and labour will become one when you become aware of your own capital. I am imagining a time when we shall bring about such a situation through a vow and this would be done not by breaking the heads of capitalists. Let those who preach class war say what they will. If I appreciated what they said, I would become one of them. However, even if I came to profess class wars I would while doing so have to bring in many of my fads such as non-violence, truth and so on. To me, of course, these are invaluable principles and not fads.

Even if we fight mill-owners, we are not to bear them ill will. If we fight them, we should do so in the same way as we would fight our father, mother, wife or children. We should struggle against them in the same way and for the same reason, as lovingly and reluctantly and with as much respect and politeness as we do against our blood-relations. The lessons which you learnt twenty years ago have still to be kept in mind. Mill-owners belong to the opposite camp. But we have to consider others besides them. Those who are known to all as blacklegs are traitors. Within no time they undo the labour of years. Instead of fighting them, we should plead with them, reason with them. It may well happen that they do not listen to you. It is all right if they walk away after hearing you; it would be even better if they came over to your side, but even if they do not, we have to bear with them.

There is another union here. It has sent me an open letter. Its substance is that you should merge in that union. Otherwise there will be two unions. I agree that in a place like Ahmedabad there is no room for two unions. It is easy to undo the work you have been doing for twenty years; it is not so easy to carry it on. If you wish to undo it, the Sabarmati is handy. It may be that one may become a president quicker

in the new union, you may even achieve some success, but do not yield to that temptation. The protagonists of class war may claim that co-operation is harmful. For us, co-operation is the first lesson. When non-co-operation with the Government was advocated it was not implied that there could be no co-operation in future. In fact non-co-operation with the Government was launched so that co-operation could at last become possible. The day the Government becomes the servant of the people we should certainly co-operate with it. Similarly, these people—mill-owners—can become our friends, but that will be when they give up their ism.

My association with you is a lifelong one. If unfortunately you have to non-co-operate, it should only be in order to return to co-operation. If we do not co-operate, both the parties will suffer. You will be put to hardship for nothing and the mill-owners too will suffer loss. It is my desire that Ahmedabad should become a thousand times greater than it is today and the prestige this city has today should be greatly multiplied. It is a heterogeneous place. It is my function to bring about harmony among its varied elements. It is the function of us all. It is not for us to accentuate distinctions; it could be the work of class war enthusiasts. We should on our part plead with them to bear with a single union.

I am one of the arbitrators and as such I may not say anything regarding justice or injustice. After all I am an optimist. I hope you will not be obliged to resort to a strike.¹ The mill-owners have not thrown their reason into the Sabarmati that they would be prepared to fight it out. If for twenty years they regarded this course of action as harmful, would it become all right overnight? I shall strain every nerve to avert a crisis. However, what shall I do if the strain tells on the nerves? I shall then understand that God is going to give us a test. God perhaps wants to see whether or not the labourers keep their vow. Only then will it be known whether your pledge was a flute made of a carrot, which could be eaten if it did not work, or a real flute. Will a drunkard, a gambler or a dissolute character be able to keep his vow? We are after all your servants. We shall suffer for your sake. We shall receive blows along with you, if that -

¹ *The Bombay Chronicle* reports here: "He was optimistic. He believed that they would not have to go on strike. Sheth Kasturbhai Lalbhai, the President of the Mill-owners' Association, was going to see him today."

becomes necessary. However, it may happen that we shall be spared and you alone will be beaten. If you are beaten, we will nurse you. You yourselves will have to bear the final burden. We are only going to help you when you bear that burden. Whatever you do, do it intelligently and not through blind faith.

I believed that the key to swaraj lay with the labourers; but I now feel that it is not with them alone. Swaraj will not come so long as our poverty is not wiped out. The magic cure for achieving this is in Segaoon—in the villages. It is a village of six hundred people. Three out of every four persons there are Harijans. It has no railway station. I have settled there because I believe it is untouched and not for my own pleasure. The happiness of the poor, of *Davidranarayana*, is all my pleasure. They do not get even *rotlo*. And if they do, it is of poor quality, unbuttered and savoured with dirty salt. I can testify to this. We must find out how we can rid them of their misery. How can it be done while sitting here? You are in a much better position than they. There are no *chawls*¹, no schools, no hospitals like yours. Even for Mirabehn, no doctor would be available if we looked for one. On both sides there would be patients suffering from infectious diseases, and we lying between them. My faith, however, grows day after day.

The people of Segaoon hold the key to your liberation. You are well aware of your plight. Those who have this awareness are not unhappy. But one who is not conscious of his plight is truly unhappy. He is himself a slave but knows not that he is one. His predicament is such that if you put ghee on his bread, he will get stomachache. As you go farther from Segaoon, you find the villages more and more exploited. If I find the magic cure, I shall achieve everything. I am not fond of making speeches. If you depend upon me, I shall prove a false support. You will have to forget me. I am going farther and farther away, and my interest in you is drying up because you do not have that key. I shall have to go far to find that key. For me, there is no other happiness. There is only one joy for me and that is to get a glimpse of God. This will be possible when I become one with the poor. I can be one with the whole world if I can merge myself in the poor people of a poor country. This is my defence before the public. I am running away only to find the right key. I have

¹ Tenement houses

been a villager for years. I am a villager by temperament. I am therefore happy there. You cannot afford what I can. To-day I am being tested. I do not know whether or not I shall be able to live for a year in Segaoon, how then can I advise others?

I have run far away. I have now served you notice not to depend upon me. Even if I have a telegram that I am needed, I may refuse to come. Even if the mill-owners request me to come, I may say no. Anyone who comes to Segaoon will get whatever services I can give. My *sadhana* and my *samadhi* are at Segaoon. Even if the people of Segaoon throw stones at me, my place will be there. At first, they did not even let me have water, now we are on slightly better terms. But the way is not clear. I am not the person to run away from the thorny path. I shall sleep there as I would on a bed of flowers if I could get one. You have to depend upon your own strength. You shall triumph if you fight with God's strength; if you fight with mine, you will fall into the ditch. We are all servants, we serve to the best of our capacity. You should depend upon your own and God's strength.

[From Gujarati]

Harijanbandhu, 8-11-1936, and *Harijan*, 7-11-1936

518. SPEECH AT GUJARATI SAHITYA PARISHAD

AHMEDABAD,
October 31, 1936

What Bhai Munshi told you was not quite true. He told you that in 1925 I resolutely turned down the offer and refused the presidentship and further said that if such a request was repeated I would plead helplessness. So far so good. But Munshi hastened to add that on this occasion I had accepted the presidentship as resolutely as I had declined it earlier. But this is not a fact, it is far from the truth. I was then not worthy of this honour and I am much less so now. I was not at all eager to accept this honour. However, I have accepted it, but reluctantly. I came because I was faced with a dilemma. When friends from whom I expect to take work put some burden on me, I persuade myself to assume it.

After accepting it I fell ill¹. I sent word asking to be excused and suggesting that they should go ahead with this session

¹ On December 7, 1935; *vide* Vol. LXII, p. 169.