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Conference. Order can be maintained if all of them do not crowd together and keep standing at one place but keep to their appointed spots. They ought to be taught signalling with flags and fingers to communicate with one another from a distance when they cannot make themselves heard.

[From Gujarati]

Navajivan, 15-8-1920

99. *SPEECH ON RIGHTS AND DUTIES OF LABOUR,
MADRAS*¹

August 15, 1920

MR. CHAIRMAN AND FRIENDS,

I hope that you will excuse me for not standing whilst speaking. Though my voice has become stronger than it was over a year ago, my body has not become as strong as I should like to be so as to enable me to stand up and speak. It gives me very great pleasure to renew your acquaintance a second time. I think I told you last year, when I had the privilege of addressing some of you that I considered myself a fellow-labourer with you. Perhaps you are labourers not by choice, but somewhat by compulsion. But I entertain such high regard for labour. I entertain such great respect for the dignity of labour that I have thrown in my lot with the labourers. And for many many years now, I have lived in their midst like them labouring with my hands and with my feet. I believe that it is the lot of life for every sentient being that before he or she eats, he or she must use hands and feet. In labouring therefore with your bodies you are simply following the law of your being and there is not the slightest reason for you to feel dissatisfied with your lot. On the contrary I would ask to regard yourselves as trustees for the nation for which you are labouring. A nation may do without its millionaires, without its capitalists, but a nation can never do without its labour. There is one fundamental distinction between your labour and my labour. You are labouring for someone else. In a natural state perhaps we would expect everyone to be his own master, viz, to be his own labourer. You are not your own labourer. I consider that I am labouring for myself, i.e., I am my own master. In a natural state, we should all find ourselves our own masters. But such a state of things, cannot

¹ At a meeting at Madras Beach under the auspices of the Central Labour Board, B. P. Wadia presiding

be reached in a day. It therefore becomes a very serious question for you to consider how you are to conduct yourselves as labourers serving for others. Just as there is no shame in being a labourer, so also there is no shame in labouring for others. It becomes necessary to find the true relation between master and servant. What are your duties? What are your responsibilities? And what are your rights? It is simple enough to understand that your right is to receive the hire for your labour and it is equally simple to know that your duty is to work to the best of your ability for the wages you receive. And it is my universal experience that as a rule labour discharges its obligations more effectively and more conscientiously. The masters have corresponding duties towards the labourers. It therefore becomes necessary for labour to find out how far labour can impose its will upon the masters. If we find that we are not adequately paid, or adequately housed, how are we to claim and receive enough wages and good accommodation? Who is to determine the standard of wages and the standard of comfort required by the labourers? The best way, no doubt, is that you labourers understand your own rights, understand the method of enforcing those rights and enforce them. For that you require a little previous training and education. You have been brought to a central point from various parts of the country, and find yourselves duly congregated together and it was in the stress of circumstances perhaps you did not earn enough on your fields, or in your previous occupation, that you found yourselves in the hands of a particular master. But later you find that you are not getting enough and that you are not properly housed. But you do not know how to go about your work. I therefore venture to suggest to Mr. Wadia and those who are leading you and advising you that their first business is to guide you, not by giving you a knowledge of letters, but a knowledge of human affairs and human relations. I make this suggestion respectfully and in all humility, because my survey of labour in India, in so far as I have been able to undertake it, and my long experience of conditions of labour in South Africa led me to the conclusion that in a large majority of cases, leaders consider that they have to give labour a knowledge of the three R's. That undoubtedly is a necessity of the case. But it is to be preceded by a proper knowledge of your own rights and a way of enforcing them. In conducting many a strike I have found that it is possible to give this fundamental education to the labourers within a day. That brings me to the subject of strikes.

Strikes are in the air today throughout the world. On the slightest pretext, the labourer goes in for strikes. My own experience

of the last six months is that many strikes have done harm to labour rather than good. I have studied in so far as I could the strike in Bombay, the strike at the Tata Iron Works, the strike in Gorakhpur twice, and the celebrated strike of the Railway labourers in the Punjab. In all these four strikes I was more or less in connection with the labourers and what I am about to tell is derived from the labourers themselves. There was partial failure in all these strikes. Labour was not able to make good its points to the fullest extent. What was the reason? Labour was badly led. I want you to distinguish between two classes of leaders, you have leaders derived from yourselves and they are in their turn advised and led by those who are not themselves labourers, but who are in sympathy or expected to be in sympathy with labour. You do not require me to tell you that unless there is correspondence between yourselves, your own leaders, and those who are above you, unless there is perfect correspondence between these three there is bound to be failure. Now in all these four strikes, that perfect correspondence was lacking. There is another substantial reason which I discovered. The labourers looked at pecuniary support from their unions for the maintenance. No labour can prolong a strike indefinitely so long as labour depends upon the resources of its union. No strike can absolutely succeed which cannot be indefinitely prolonged. In all the strikes that I have ever conducted, I have laid down one indispensable rule, that labourers must find their own support. Therein lies the secret of success. And therein consists your education. You should be able to perceive that if you are able to serve one master and command a particular wage your labour must be worth and must be fit to receive that wage anywhere else. Strikers therefore cannot be expected to be idlers and to succeed. Your demands must be just and there should be no pressure exerted upon those whom you call blacklegs, any force of this kind exerted against your own fellow-labourers is bound to react upon yourselves. I think your advisers will tell you that these three conditions being fulfilled no strike need ever fail. That at once demonstrates to you the necessity of thinking a hundred times, before undertaking a strike. So much for your rights and the method of enforcing it.

But as labour becomes organized, strikes must become few and far between and as your mental development progresses further you will find immediately that the principle of arbitration replaces the principle of strikes. Time has now arrived when we should reach this stage. I will not detain you on this point any further.

I would now venture to say a few words in connection with your national responsibilities. Just as you have to understand obligations amongst yourselves with reference to your own masters, so also it is necessary to understand your obligations to the nation to which you belong. Then your primary education is complete. If you sufficiently realize the dignity of labour, you will realize that you have a duty to discharge by your country. You must therefore find out the affairs of our country in the best manner you can. You must find it out without having to wade through a cartful of books, who are your governors, what are your duties in relation to them, what they can do to you and what you can do to them. I do not propose to go into the existing conditions. I have not come here to give you a long address. It is impossible for me to interest you in the intricate questions that are now agitating the country. It is enough for me to tell you that it is your bounden duty to understand your responsibilities and your duties as citizens of this great land. In my humble opinion it is not possible for you to live up to your religion fully until you undertake to understand these things. My task this evening is finished, if I have stimulated your desire after a knowledge of the affairs of your country and I hope that you will not rest content until you have found out through your advisers and leaders—the principal affairs of this country. I thank the controllers of labour here for extending this invitation to me and I thank you all for having come and given me patient hearing. I wish to give you my assurance that whenever you find that, you need any advice from me, it is yours. It therefore grieves me very much that when you invited me at one time to come to Madras, I was unable, because I was pre-occupied, to respond to your invitation to come to Madras. But you will accept my assurance that it was not due to want of will, it was due to want of ability. I wish you all the prosperity that you may deserve and I hope that you will discharge yourselves as good citizens of this country.

The Hindu, 16-8-1920; also *Speeches and Writings of Mahatma Gandhi* (3rd ed.), pp. 784-8