

“Woman Wants Bread, Not the Ballot” Susan B. Anthony, 1880-1890

My purpose tonight is to demonstrate the great historical fact that disfranchisement is not only political degradation, but also moral, social, educational and industrial degradation; and that it does not matter whether the disfranchised class live under a monarchical or a republican form of government, or whether it be white working men of England, negroes on our southern plantations, serfs of Russia, Chinamen on our Pacific coast, or native born, tax-paying women of this republic. Wherever, on the face of the globe or on the page of history, you show me a disfranchised class, I will show you a degraded class of labor. Disfranchisement means inability to make, shape or control one's own circumstances. The disfranchised must always do the work, accept the wages, occupy the position the enfranchised assign to them. The disfranchised are in the position of the pauper. You remember the old adage, “Beggars must not be choosers;” they must take what they can get or nothing! That is exactly the position of women in the world of work today; they cannot choose. If they could, do you for a moment believe they would take the subordinate places and the inferior pay? Nor is it a “new thing under the sun” for the disfranchised, the inferior classes weighed down with wrongs, to declare they “do not want to vote.” The rank and file are not philosophers, they are not educated to think for themselves, but simply to accept, unquestioned, whatever comes.

Years ago in England when the workingmen, starving in the mines and factories, gathered in mobs and took bread wherever they could get it, their friends tried to educate them into a knowledge of the causes of their poverty and degradation. At one of these “monster bread meeting,” held in Manchester, John Bright said to them, “Workingmen, what you need to bring to you cheap bread and plenty of it, is the franchise;” but those ignorant men shouted back to Mr. Bright, precisely as the women of America do to us today, “It is not the vote we want, it is bread;” and they broke up the meeting, refusing to allow him, their best friend, to explain to them the powers of the franchise. The condition of those workingmen was very little above that of slavery, Some of you may remember when George Thompson came over to this country and rebuked us for our crime and our curse of slavery, how the slaveholders and their abettors shouted back to Mr. Thompson, “Look at home, look into your mines and your factories, you have slavery in England.”

You recollect a book published at that time entitled, “The Glory and Shame of England.” Her glory was the emancipation of slaves in the British West Indies and her shame the degraded and outraged condition of those very miners and factory men. In their desperation, they organized trades unions, went on strike, fought terrible battles, often destroying property and sometimes even killing their employers. Those who have read Charles Reade's novel, “Put Yourself in his Place,” have not forgotten the terrible scenes depicted. While those starving men sometimes bettered their condition financially, they never made a ripple on the surface of political thought. No member ever championed their cause on the floor of Parliament. If spoken of at all, it was as our politicians used to speak of the negroes before the war, or as they speak of the Chinese today — as nuisances that ought to be suppressed.

But at length, through the persistent demands of a little handful of reformers, there was introduced into the British Parliament the “household suffrage” bill of 1867. John Stuart Mill not only championed that bill as it was presented, but moved an amendment to strike out the word “man” and substitute therefor

the word “person,” so that the bill should read, “every person who shall pay a seven-pound rental per annum shall be entitled to the franchise.” You will see that Mr. Mill’s motive was to extend the suffrage to women as well as men. But when the vote was taken, only seventy-four, out of the nearly seven hundreds members of the British Parliament, voted in its favor.

During the discussion of the original bill, the opposition was championed by Robert Lowe, who presented all the stock objections to the extension of the franchise to “those ignorant, degraded workingmen,” as he called them, that ever were presented in this country against giving the ballot to the negroes, and that are today being urged against the enfranchisement of women. Is it not a little remarkable that no matter who the class may be that it is proposed to enfranchise, the objections are always the same? “The ballot in the hands of this new class will make their condition worse than before, and the introduction of this new class into the political arena will degrade politics to a lower level.” But notwithstanding Mr. Lowe’s persistent opposition, the bill became a law; and before the session closed, that same individual moved that Parliament, having enfranchised these men, should now make an appropriation for the establishment and support of schools for the education of them and their sons. Now, mark you his reason why! “Unless they are educated,” said he, “they will be the means of overturning the throne of England.” So long as these poor men in the mines and factories had not the right to vote, the power to make and unmake the laws and law-makers, to help or hurt the government, no measure ever had been proposed for their benefit although they were ground under the heel of the capitalist to a condition of abject slavery. But the moment this power is placed in their hands, before they have used it even once, this bitterest enemy to their possessing it is the first man to spring to his feet and make this motion for the most beneficent measure possible in their behalf —public schools for the education of themselves and their children.

From that day to this, there never has been a session of the British Parliament that has not been had before it some measure for the benefit of the working classes. Parliament has enacted laws compelling employers to cut down the number of hours for a day’s work, to pay better wages, to build decent houses for their employees, and has prohibited the employment of very young children in the mines and factories. The history of those olden times records that not infrequently children were born in the mines and passed their lives there, scarcely seeing the sunlight from the day of their birth to the day of their death.

Sad as is the condition of the workingmen of England today, it is infinitely better than it was twenty years ago. At first the votes of the workingmen were given to the Liberal party, because it was the leaders of that party who secured their enfranchisement; but soon the leaders of the Conservative party, seeing the power the workingmen had, began to vie with the Liberals by going into their meetings and pledging that if they would vote Tory ticket and bring that party into control, it would give them more and better laws even than the Liberals. In 1874 enough workingmen did go over to bring that party in front, with Disraeli at its head, where it stood till 1880 when the rank and file of the workingmen of England, dissatisfied with Disraeli’s policy, both domestic and foreign, turned and again voted the Liberal ticket, putting that party in power with Gladstone as its leader. This is the way in which the ballot in the hands of the masses of wage-earners, even under a monarchical form of government, makes of them a

tremendous balance of power whose wants and wishes the instinct of self-interest compels the political leaders to study and obey.

The great distinctive advantage possessed by the workingmen of this republic is that the son of the humblest citizen, black or white, has equal chances with the son of the richest in the land if he take advantage of the public schools, the colleges and the many opportunities freely offered. It is this equality of rights, which makes our nation a home for the oppressed of all the monarchies of the old world.

And yet, notwithstanding the declaration of our Revolutionary fathers, "all men created equal," "governments derive their just powers from the consent of the governed," "taxation and representation inseparable"—notwithstanding all these grand enunciations, our government was founded upon the blood and bones of half a million beings, bought and sold as chattels in the market. Nearly all the original thirteen States had property qualifications, which disfranchised poor white men as well as women and negroes. Thomas Jefferson, at the head of the old Democratic party, took the lead in advocating the removal of all property qualifications, as so many violations of the fundamental principle of our government — "the right of consent." In New York the qualification was \$250. Martin Van Buren, the chief of the Democracy, was a member of the Constitutional Convention held in Buffalo in 1821, which wiped out that qualification so far as white men were concerned. He declared, "The poor man has as good a right to a voice in the government as the rich man, and a vastly greater need to possess it as a means of protection to himself and his family." It was because the Democrats enfranchised poor white men, both native and foreign, that strong old party held absolute sway in this country for almost forty years, with only now and then a one-term Whig administration.

In those olden days Horace Greeley, at the head of the Whig party and his glorious New York Tribune, used to write long editorials showing the workingmen that they had a mistaken idea about the Democratic party; that it was not so much the friend of the poor man as was the Whig and if they would but vote the Whig ticket and put that party in power, they would find that it would give them better laws than the Democrats had done. At length, after many, many years of such education and persuasion, the workingmen's vote, native and foreign, was divided, and in 1860 there came to the front a new party which, though not called Whig, was largely made up of the old Whig elements. In its turn this new party enfranchised another degraded class of labor. Because the Republicans gave the ballot to negroes, they have been allied to that party and have held it solid in power from the rectification of the Fifteenth Amendment, in 1870, to the present day. Until the Democrats are doing, there will be no appreciable division of the negro vote.

The vast numbers of wage-earning men coming from Europe to this country, where manhood suffrage prevails with no limitations, find themselves invested at once with immense political power. They organize their trades unions, but not being able to use the franchise intelligently, they continue to strike and to fight their battles with the capitalists just as they did in the old countries. Neither press nor politicians dare to condemn these strikes or to demand their suppression because the workingmen hold the balance of power and use it for the success or defeat of either party.

It is said women do not need the ballot for their protection because they are supported by men. Statistics show that there are 3,000,000 women in this nation supporting themselves. In the crowded cities of the East they are compelled to work in shops, stores and factories for the merest pittance. In New York alone, there are over 50,000 of these women receiving less than fifty cents a day. Women wage-earners in different occupations have organized themselves into trades unions, from time to time, and made their strikes to get justice at the hands of their employers just as men have done, but I have yet to learn of a successful strike of any body of women. The best organized one I ever knew was that of the collar laundry women of the city of Troy, N.Y., the great emporium for the manufacture of shirts collars and cuffs. They formed a trades union of several hundred members and demanded an increase of wages. It was refused. So one May morning in 1867, each woman threw down her scissors and her needle, her starch-pan and flat-iron, and for three long months not one returned to the factories. At the end of that time they were literally starved out and the majority of them were compelled to go back, but not at their old wages, for their employers cut them down to even a lower figure.

In the winter following I met the president of this union, a bright young Irish girl, and asked her, "Do you not think if you had been 500 carpenters or 500 masons, you would have succeeded?" "Certainly," she said, and then she told me of 200 bricklayers who had the year before been on strike and gained every point with their employers. "What could have made the difference? Their 200 were but a fraction of that trade, while your 500 absolutely controlled yours." Finally she said, "It was because the editors ridiculed and denounced us." "Did they ridicule and denounce the bricklayers?" "No." "What did they say about you?" "Why, that our wages were good enough now, better than those of any other workingwomen except teachers; and if we weren't satisfied, we had better go and get married." "What the do you think made this difference?" After studying over the question awhile she concluded, "It must have been because our employers bribed the editors." "Couldn't the employers of the bricklayers have bribed the editors?" She had never thought of that. Most people never do think; they see one thing totally unlike another, but the person who stops to inquire into the cause that produces the one or the other is the exception. So this young Irish girl was simply not an exception, but followed the general rule of people, whether men or women; she hadn't thought. In the case of the bricklayers, no editor, either Democrat or Republican, would have accepted the proffer of a bribe, because he would have known that if he denounced or ridiculed those men, not only they but all the trades union men of the city at the next election would vote solidly against the nominees advocated by that editor. If those collar laundry women had been voters, they would have held, in that little city of Troy, the "balance of political power" and the editor or the politician who ignored or insulted them would have turned that balance over to the opposing party.

My friends, the condition of those collar laundry women but represents the utter helplessness of disfranchisement. The question with you, as men, is not whether you want your wives and daughters to vote, nor with you, as women, whether you yourselves want to vote; but whether you will help to put this power of the ballot into the hands of the 3,000,000 wage-earning women, so that they may be able to compel politicians to legislate on their favor and employers to grant them justice.

The law of capital is to extort the greatest amount of work for the least amount of money; the rule of labor is to do the smallest amount of work for the largest amount of money. Hence there is, and in the

nature of things must continue to be, antagonism between the two classes; therefore, neither should be left wholly at the mercy of the other. It was cruel, under the old regime, to give rich men the right to rule poor men. It was wicked to allow white men absolute power over black men. It is vastly more cruel, more wicked to give to all men — rich and poor, white and black, native and foreign, educated and ignorant, virtuous of monopolies. There never was, there never can be, a monopoly so fraught with injustice, tyranny and degradation as this monopoly of sex, of all men over all women. Therefore I not only agree with Abraham Lincoln that, “No man is good enough to govern another man without her consent, and still farther, that all men combined in government are not good enough to govern all women without their consent.” There might have been some plausible excuse for the rich governing the poor, the educated governing the ignorant, the Saxon governing the African; but there can be none for making the husband the ruler of the wife, the brother of the sister, the man of the woman, his peer in birth, in education, in social position, in all that stands for the best and highest in humanity.

I believe that by nature men are no more unjust than women. It from the beginning women had maintained the right to rule not only themselves but men also, the latter today doubtless would be occupying the subordinate places with inferior pay in the world of work; women would be holding the higher positions with the big salaries; widowers would be doomed to a “life interest of one-third of the family estate;” husbands would “owe service” to their wives, so that every one of you men would be begging your good wives, “Please be so kind as to Ôgive me’ ten cents for a cigar.” The principle of self-government cannot be violated with impunity. The individual’s right to it is sacred — regardless of class, caste, race, color, sex or any other accident or incident of birth. What we ask is that you shall cease to imagine that women are outside this law, and that you shall come into the knowledge that disfranchisement means the same degradation to your daughters as to your sons.

Governments cannot afford to ignore the rights of those holding the ballot, who make and unmake every law and law-maker. It is not because the members of Congress are tyrants that women receive only half pay and are admitted only to inferior positions in the departments. It is simply in obedience to a law of political economy, which makes it impossible for a government to do as much for the disfranchised as for the enfranchised. Women are no exception to the general rule. As disfranchisement always has degraded men, socially, morally and industrially, so today it is disfranchisement that degrades women in the same spheres.

Again men say it is not votes, but the law of supply and demand which regulates wages. The law of gravity is that water shall run down hill, but when men build a dam across the stream, the force of gravity is stopped and the water held back. The law of supply and demand regulates free and enfranchised labor, but disfranchisement estops its operation. What we ask is the removal of the dam, that women, like men, may reap the benefit of the law. Did the law of supply and demand regulate work and wages in the olden days of slavery? This law can no more reach the disfranchised than it did the enslaved. There is scarcely a place where a woman can earn a single dollar without a man’s consent.

There are many women equally well qualified with men for principles and superintendents of schools, and yet, while three-fourths of the teachers are women, nearly all of them are relegated to subordinate positions on half or at most two-thirds the salaries paid to men. The law of supply and demand is

ignored, and that of sex alone settles the question. If a business man should advertise for a book-keeper and ten young men, equally well qualified, should present themselves and, after looking them over, he should say, "To you who have red hair, we will pay full wages, while to you with black hair we will pay half the regular price;" that would not be a more flagrant violation of the law of supply and demand than is that now perpetrated upon women because of their sex.

And then again you say, "Capital, not the vote, regulates labor." Granted, for the sake of the argument, that capital does control the labor of women, Chinamen and slaves; but no one with eyes to see and ears to hear, will concede for a moment that capital absolutely dominates the work and wages of the free and enfranchised men of this republic. It is in order to lift the millions of our wage-earning women into a position of as much power over their own labor as men possess that they should be invested with the franchise. This ought to be done not only for the sake of justice to the women, but to the men with whom they compete; for, just so long as there is a degraded class of labor in the market, it always will be used by the capitalists to checkmate and undermine the superior classes.

Now that as a result of the agitation for equality of chances, and through the invention of machinery, there has come a great revolution in the world of economics, so that wherever a man may go to earn an honest dollar a woman may go also, there is no escape from the conclusion that she must be clothed with equal power to protect herself. That power is the ballot, the symbol of freedom and equality, without which no citizen is sure of keeping even that which he hath, much less of getting that which he hath not. Women are today the peers of men in education, in the arts and sciences, in the industries and professions, and there is no escape from conclusion that the next step must be to make them the peers of men in the government—city, State and national—to give them an equal voice in the framing, interpreting and administering of the codes and constitutions,

We recognize that the ballot is a two-edged, nay, a many-edged sword, which may be made to cut in every direction. If wily politicians and sordid capitalists may wield it for mere party and personal greed; if oppressed wage-earners may invoke it to wring justice from legislators and extort material advantages from employers; if the lowest and most degraded classes of men may use it to open wide the narrow, selfish, corrupt and corrupting men and measures rule—it is quite as true that noble-minded statesmen, philanthropists and reformers may make it the weapon with which to reverse the above order of things, as soon as they can have added to their now small numbers the immensely larger ratio of what men so love to call "the better half of the people." When women vote, they will make a new balance of power that must be weighed and measured and calculated in its effect upon every social and moral question, which goes to the arbitrament of the ballot box. Who can doubt that when the representative women of thought and culture, who are today the moral backbone of our nation, sit in counsel with the best men of the country, higher conditions will be the result?

Insurrectionary and revolutionary methods of righting wrongs, imaginary or real, are pardonable only in the enslaved and disfranchised. The moment any class of men possess the ballot, it is their weapon and their shield. Men with a vote have no valid excuse for resorting to the use of illegal means to fight their battles. When the masses of wage-earning men are educated into a knowledge of their own rights and of their duties to others, so that they are able to vote intelligently, they can carry their measures

through the ballot box and will have no need to resort to force. But so long as they remain in ignorance and are manipulated by the political bosses they will continue to vote against their own interests and turn again to violence to right their wrongs.

If men possessing the power of the ballot are driven to desperate means to gain their ends, what shall be done by disfranchised women? There are grave questions of moral, as well as of material interest in which women are most deeply concerned. Denied the ballot, the legitimate means with which to exert their influence, and as a rule, being lovers of peace, they have recourse to prayers and tears, those potent weapons of women and children, and, when they fail, must tamely submit to wrong or rise in rebellion against the powers that be. Women's crusades against saloons, brothels and gambling- dens, emptying kegs and bottles into the streets, breaking doors and windows and burning houses, all go to prove that disfranchisement, the denial of lawful means to gain desired ends, may drive even women to violations of law and order. Hence to secure both national and "domestic tranquillity," to "establish justice," to carry out the spirit of our Constitution, put into the hands of all women, as you have into those of all men, the ballot, that symbol of perfect equality, that right protective of all other rights.

http://www.pbs.org/stantonanthony/resources/index.html?body=bread_not_ballot.html