

WHAT SO ★ PROUDLY ★ WE HAIL

The American Soul in Story, Speech, and Song

Labor Speaks

UNKNOWN WORKER

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This poem of unknown origin (c. 1909) was used by the Industrial Workers of the World (also known as the Wobblies) to encourage laborers to join the cause and “ask for [their] due.”

The poet, speaking for all workers (“I am Labor”), asserts sole responsibility for the creation of all material progress in America. How do you respond to these claims? To what extent are they justifiable? What about the role of inventors, architects, and investors? What is Labor’s “due”?

I built your ships and your railroads,
And worked in your factories and mines;
I built the good roads that you ride on,
And crushed your ripe grapes into wine.

I built the fine house that you live in,
And gathered the grain for your bread;
I worked late at nights on your garments,
And printed the fine books that you read.

I linked two great oceans together,
And spanned your rivers with steel,
I built your towering skyscrapers,
And also your automobile.

Wherever there is progress you will find me,
For the world without me could not live,
And yet you seek to destroy me
With the meager pittance you give.

I am master of field and of factories,
I am mighty and you are but few,
So, no longer will I bow into submission,
I am Labor and I ask for my due.