

LINCOLN LORE

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LINCOLN'S COMMENTS ON LABOR AND CAPITAL

The industrial unrest everywhere evident, makes it timely to compile some of the statements which Lincoln made with reference to the problems of labor and capital as they existed in his day. Care has been taken not to include passages which referred directly or indirectly to the status of slave labor which was then a live question. It should be remembered that Lincoln lived in a period previous to the machine age and its systems of industrialism with which we are so well acquainted.

"There is no permanent class of hired laborers among us."—1854.

"Universal idleness would speedily result in universal ruin."—1847.

"Advancement—improvement in condition—is the order of things in a society of equals."—1854.

"No good thing has been or can be enjoyed by us without having first cost labor."—1847.

"No men living are more worthy to be trusted than those who toil up from poverty."—1862.

"Labor is the great source from which nearly all, if not all, human comforts and necessities are drawn."—1859.

"Let not him who is homeless pull down the house of another, but let him labor diligently to build one for himself."

"The hired laborer of yesterday labors on his own account today and will hire the labor of others tomorrow."—1854.

"Labor is like any other commodity in the market—increase the demand for it and you increase the price of it."—1862.

"Inasmuch as most good things are produced by labor, it follows that all such things of right belong to those whose labor has produced them."—1847.

"When one starts poor, as most do in the race of life, free society is such that he knows he can better his condition, he knows there is no fixed condition of labor for his whole life."—1860.

"Property is the fruit of labor; property is desirable; is a positive good in the world. That some should be rich shows that others may become rich, and hence is just encouragement to industry and enterprise."—1864.

"The strongest bond of human sympathy, outside the family relation, should be one uniting all working people, of all nations, and tongues and kindreds. Nor should this lead to a war upon property, or the owners of property."—1864.

"What is the true condition of the laborer? I take it that it is best for all to leave each man free to acquire property as fast as he can. Some will get wealthy. I don't believe in a law to prevent a man from getting rich; it would do more harm than good."—1860.

"It has so happened, in all ages of the world, that some have labored, and others without labor enjoyed a large

proportion of the fruits. This is wrong, and should not continue. To secure to each laborer the whole product of his labor, or as nearly as possible, is a worthy object of any good government."—1847.

"Labor is prior to and independent of capital. Capital is only the fruit of labor, and could never have existed if labor had not first existed. Labor is the superior of capital, and deserves much the higher consideration. Capital has its rights, which are as worthy of protection as any other rights. Nor is it denied that there is and probably always will be a relation between labor and capital producing mutual benefits."—1861.

"The habits of our whole species fall into three great classes—useful labor, useless labor and idleness. Of these the first only is meritorious, and to it all the products of labor rightfully belong; but the two latter, while they exist, are heavy pensioners upon the first, robbing it of a large portion of its just rights. The only remedy for this is to, so far as possible, drive useless labor and idleness out of existence."—1847.

"There is no necessity for any such thing as the free hired laborer being fixed to that condition for life. Many independent men everywhere in these States a few years back in their lives were hired laborers. The prudent, penniless beginner in the world labors for wages a while, saves a surplus with which to buy tools or land for himself, then labors on his own account another while, and at length hires another new beginner to help him. This is the just and generous and prosperous system which opens the way to all, and consequent energy and progress and improvement of conditions to all."—1861.

" . . . Men who are industrious and sober and honest in the pursuit of their own interests should after a while accumulate capital, and after that should be allowed to enjoy it in peace, and also if they should choose, when they have accumulated it, to use it to save themselves from actual labor, and hire other people to labor for them, is right. In doing so, they do not wrong the man they employ, for they find men who have not their own land to work upon, or shops to work in, and who are benefitted by working for others—hired laborers, receiving their capital for it. Thus a few men that own capital hire a few others, and these establish the relation of capital and labor rightfully—a relation of which I make no complaint. . . ."—1859.

"It seems to be an opinion very generally entertained that the condition of a nation is best whenever it can buy cheapest; but this is not necessarily true, because if at the same time and by the same cause, it is compelled to sell correspondingly cheap, nothing is gained. Then it is said the best condition is when we can buy cheapest and sell dearest; but this again is not necessarily true, because with both these we might have scarcely anything to sell, or, which is the same thing, to buy with.

"These reflections show that to reason and act correctly on this subject we must look not merely to buying cheap, nor yet to buying cheap and selling dear, but also to having constant employment, so that we may have the largest possible amount of something to sell. This matter of employment can only be secured by an ample, steady, and certain market to sell the products of our labor in."—1847.