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ADDRESS OF

HONORABLE ROBERT F. KENNEDY  
BEFORE

UNITED HATTERS AND MILLINERY WORKERS INTERNATIONAL UNION

STATLER HOTEL, NEW YORK, NEW YORK

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You may have heard that we on the New Frontier are fond of quoting scholars and artists. I'd like to take as my text today some words from one who may not be a scholar and who some may find lacking in art, but whose experience no one can question.

Sophie Tucker once said:

"From birth to eighteen, a girl needs good parents.  
From eighteen to thirty-five, she needs good looks.  
From thirty-five to fifty-five, a good personality.  
And after that she needs good cash."

Needs do change over the years, and I would like to talk with you tonight about what your country needs from the labor movement. This need has changed and a change is taking place now.

In the early days of unions, the fight was simple enough. When asked what the labor movement wanted, Samuel Gompers summed it up succinctly. He said, "more"

Unions were then preoccupied with the struggle for more money, and better working conditions. This was needed not only for the workers but for the good of the country, and the labor movement fulfilled a great need by bettering the lot of many Americans.

Much has been won in this fight. Workers here enjoy the highest standard of living anywhere. And they should continue to enjoy increased benefits as they share in the gains in productivity which the economy makes.

After its early struggles, labor expanded its interest and became active in the broad front of social legislation. The child labor laws, minimum wage and hour laws, and industrial safety laws are but a few examples of the work of labor in the legislative halls.

Again, these measures have benefits, the entire nation—not only labor. The union movement was fulfilling a need for progressive influence in this country.

The labor movement has served its country well in the front ranks of the evolution, which has adopted traditional American principles to a changing, complex society.

In more recent times, the labor unions have filled another need. They have given to this country a new type of leader--a selfless, dedicated person fighting for the interests of his constituents but dedicated also to the general public interest. With their responsibilities to their members in a trust relationship and their responsibilities to the public, labor leaders are a new breed--a sort of quasi-public official.

It is true that a very few have betrayed their trust but the overwhelming majority serve their members and the public well.

Good union leaders make excellent public leaders in the legislative and executive branches. Your president, Alec Rose, is the kind of leader here in New York who brings credit to all in political life.

The labor movement must continue to perform these traditional functions. It must keep the attributes of its youth and cannot shed them as Sophie Tucker's girl must. But in its maturity, there is a new, additional duty which the labor movement must carry--and this may be its most important function of all.

The labor movement in this country must play an increasing part in making America understood among the nations of the world. This is a time when two-thirds of the three billion people of the world are choosing the path their nation will follow--democracy or totalitarianism.

The decisions they make in this decade will determine the face of the world for a long time and our future is closely tied to what they do. If the presently uncommitted nations decide to bow to totalitarian government, we are in trouble. There is an ever-present danger that they will do so.

On my recent trip abroad, the most disconcerting thing I discovered was the ignorance of the United States among many of the people who will make the decisions, and as the philosopher Goethe said, "There is nothing more terrifying than ignorance in action."

The developing nations, if they are uninformed, can be easily led to totalitarianism by the beguiling promises, the misleading claims for efficiency and the feigned concern for the individual of the Communists.

We must inform these people of the way America works so that they will be able to make responsible decisions.

We do not want to impose our way of government on every nation in the world, but the people of every nation must have a chance to see the advantages of democracy in action and be able to choose that which is good for them.

American labor unions are a vital factor in this task of making America understood across the world for two reasons.

First, there is no better example of American democracy in effective action than the labor union. Unions, by and large, are democratic organizations with freely chosen leaders and policies determined by the membership.

They concern themselves with individual dignity not only in their aims but in their method. We have no better example of what is worthy of emulation abroad than the workings of a good union.

Secondly, labor unions in other countries are one of the crucial forms in which America's story must be heard. In the developing nations, unions are just coming of age. In some cases, they have just been allowed full freedom; in others they are still struggling for that freedom.

But in almost every country they will have a large part to play in the path their country follows. Even where only lip service is paid to representative government, the convictions of labor unions must be considered.

Yet, unhappily, labor leaders in other nations know little of this country.

On my trip abroad, I talked to many labor leaders as well as rank and file members. Over and over again I was dismayed by the misconceptions about America they harbored. In many cases these misconceptions were obviously carefully planted.

In Japan, I had a long conversation with Akira Iwai, a leader of the largest labor organization in the country. He has an open and alert mind; in fact, he was one of the brightest and most intelligent personalities I met on my entire trip.

Yet, he had some almost frightening misconceptions about the United States. In serious discussion, he contended that our country was run by the Morgans and the Rockefellers and that we were capitalist imperialists.

I assured him that this country was not being run by the Rockefellers or the Morgans. I did agree that we were capitalists, but pointed out that we were not imperialists by any means.

When I suggested that the actions of the Communists in Hungary and Tibet were imperialistic, he would not agree in those terms.

Here was a well-informed leader of a nation with an advanced labor movement grossly misled about what is going on in the United States. The situation in less developed countries is worse.

This is the new need the labor movement in this country must meet. Workers and union leaders in other countries must know more about you and your role in American life and your achievements over the past years.

Unions in the developing nations will be following in your footsteps. They will be winning benefits for their members, influencing legislation and providing leaders for their nation. The way in which they seek their gains, the kind of laws they will and the kind of leaders they will provide are being determined now.

The Communists are seeking to sway these decisions to their ends. We must see that our side of the story is told.

I can think of no one better equipped to challenge the Communists than you in the labor movement. You perhaps better than any other segment of national life, have met the Communist challenge and defeated it.

The lessons that Jim Carey and Walter Reuther and many others learned in fighting the Communists can be put to good use now. Unions in other countries are facing the same enemies and the same tactics you defeated.

As we are sharing our technical knowledge to advance industry, our military knowledge to bolster defense, we must share our knowledge of union democracy.

I know that much is being done already. American unions, through the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions, have brought help and hope to 60 million workers in over a hundred nations.

Through the ICFTU and the cooperating trade secretariats, labor organization has been improved in many countries. Better labor organizations mean a better chance for democracy.

The new American Institute for Free Labor Development will do a great deal to help our friends in Latin America. This program, will teach union leaders from Latin American countries not only organizing and leadership techniques, but also assist them in such social progress as low-cost housing, credit unions, and adult and vocational education.

This is the kind of action we need. It is an example of private citizens supplementing, expanding and diversifying the efforts of government. It is also an excellent example of American labor and industry working together.

You in the Hatters Unions, I know, have worked through the International Garment Workers Union and have contributed both money and talent to your fellow workers overseas.

Other individual unions have helped those in like trades overseas. The new program of the United Auto Workers is an outstanding example.

The unions of this country have done as much, if not more, than any other sector of our society in overseas aid. Yet, because of the urgent and vital nature of the problem, your country is now asking of you what Samuel Gompers used to ask of the country, "more".

Your present programs of aid through the ICFTU and direct contacts should be continued and expanded.

Direct contributions to unions overseas must be continued and expanded.

New ideas such as the Institute for Free Labor Development must be encouraged and made a reality.

The labor movement with its close relationships overseas is particularly well qualified to determine how the American story can be told most effectively and how our friends abroad can be helped. We, in government, will welcome your suggestions.

I realize that these may appear to be burdensome demands upon your treasury and your time. But today there is no greater service that any group of our society can perform.

Unions have served this country well throughout their history. I am sure they will meet this new need in the same measure they have fulfilled the others.

I hope that if I go abroad again, I will find labor leaders and union leaders well informed of the role of unions in America. If they are, they will be well impressed. And they will be eager to contribute to their nations, the achievements you have given to America.