



# News Release

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CONTACT:  
David Blanchette  
(217) 558-8970

*FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE*

## **Would Lincoln support today's Wisconsin state workers?**

*Presidential Library and Museum blog examines "labor" speech delivered in Wisconsin in 1859*

*SPRINGFIELD* - The Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum Blog "From out of the Top Hat" has an entry today about a speech Lincoln made in 1859 in Wisconsin on the subject of labor, and an analysis of what parallels that speech may have to today's battle between the Wisconsin Governor and organized labor. The blog is at [www.alplm.org/blog](http://www.alplm.org/blog), is updated every Monday, and additional topic suggestions are always welcome.

The text of the blog is copied below.

### **Lincoln's Homage to "Labor"**

*March 29, 2011*

*By Richard Wightman Fox*

Wisconsin Governor Scott Walker's battle to get the better of his state's unionized public employees reminds us that a century and a half ago, on September 30, 1859, Abraham Lincoln appeared at the Wisconsin state fair in Milwaukee to deliver a well-wrought speech on the subject of "labor."

He collected \$100 for a witty and sparkling meditation on the joys of all disciplined work. Quipping that farmers should beware of politicians singling them out for praise –since

farmers “are neither better nor worse than other people,” only “more numerous”— he gave them the higher compliment of taking their work seriously.

As a young man, Lincoln had preferred books to his father’s farm implements. But as a 50-year-old politician he spoke appreciatively, even wistfully, of a rural landscape where the mechanical arts progressed amidst natural rhythms. He sounded like a Walt Whitman evoking a world of daily wonders.

“Every blade of grass is a study,” he mused, “and to produce two, where there was but one, is both a profit and a pleasure. And not grass alone; but soils, seeds, and seasons — hedges, ditches, and fences, draining, droughts, and irrigation — plowing, hoeing, and harrowing — reaping, mowing, and threshing — saving crops, pests of crops, diseases of crops, and what will prevent or cure them — implements, utensils, and machines, their relative merits, and how to improve them — hogs, horses, and cattle — sheep, goats, and poultry — trees, shrubs, fruits, and flowers — the thousand things of which these are specimens — each a world of study within itself.”

The Milwaukee speech isn’t well known today. But part of what Lincoln said in 1859 at the Wisconsin state fair — and repeated nearly word for word in his better-known Annual Message to Congress on December 3, 1861 — turned up recently on Democratic and progressive websites during Governor Walker’s showdown with his state’s public workers and Democratic legislators.

The Sheboygan County Democratic Party website quoted Lincoln as saying, “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.”

Those are indeed Lincoln’s words, but they didn’t mean to him what they suggest to us. We imagine he’s siding with working people in their perennial campaign to wrest higher wages or greater job control from their employers. We think he’s giving his support (“higher consideration”) to “labor” in its negotiations or stand-offs with “capital.”

But Lincoln meant something different. When he spoke of labor and capital he was rejecting the idea that in America any essential conflict existed between them. Labor got “higher consideration” from him because labor took logical and historical precedence. It was the replenishing source of economic value. It lay at the root of all capital.

In America, Lincoln thought, people willing to work hard could expect eventually to convert their labor into some small pool of capital. He was sure no permanent wage-earning class existed in the U.S. Labor kept renewing its vitality as individuals kept clearing land or inventing new machines — like the hoped-for “steam plow” that Lincoln examined at length in his Wisconsin speech.

In a speech in New Haven, Connecticut, in March 1860, he did publicly endorse the right of working people to strike (referring to a shoe strike in Lynn, Mass.). But to him that just meant

that free laborers were not slaves. Free workers could “strike” — stop toiling — whenever they wished. If their employer didn’t respond adequately to their grievances, they could seek opportunity elsewhere. Dissatisfied workers needed only the right to quit, something slaves would never get.

As David Donald points out in his biography *Lincoln*, the rail-splitter somehow managed to miss “the growing disparity of wealth between the poor and the rich,” and “gave scant attention to the growing number of factory workers who had little prospect of upward social mobility.”

Had Lincoln lived into the late nineteenth century, would his views have evolved? We’ll never know. What we do know is that he always felt special affection for those who started on a low rung of the economic ladder and strove to climb higher. If he’d ever come to sense that American laborers’ upward path was blocked by new industrial conditions, he might well have given “higher consideration” to what we now call “pro-labor” views.

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