

William Cullen Bryant

William Cullen Bryant (1794–1878) was born in Massachusetts, and early in his life was considered a child prodigy as well as a fine poet. A poem criticizing Thomas Jefferson was published when he was 13. His most famous poem, “Thanatopsis,” meditates on nature and death and anticipates the transcendental ideas of Ralph Waldo Emerson. Bryant became a journalist and the editor of the *New York Evening Post* in 1829 until his death. He backed populist causes including the Free Soil movement and was an avid supporter of Abraham Lincoln. His editorials were influential in shaping public opinion.

On the Right to Strike

Sentence was passed on Saturday on the twenty “men who had determined not to work.” The punishment selected on due consideration by the judge was that officers appointed for the purpose should immediately demand from each of the delinquents a sum of money which was named in the sentence of the court. The amount demanded would not have fallen short of the savings of many years. Either the offenders had not parted with these savings, or their brother workmen raised the ransom money for them on the spot. The fine was paid over as required.

All is now well; justice has been satisfied. But if the expenses of their families had anticipated the law and left nothing in their hands, or if friends had not been ready to buy the freedom of their comrades, they would have been sent to prison, and there they would have stayed until their wives and children, besides earning their own bread, had saved enough to redeem the captives from their cells.

Such has been their punishment. What was their offense? They had committed the crime of unanimously declining to go to work at the wages offered to them by their masters. They had said to one another, “Let us come out from the meanness and misery of our caste. Let us begin to do what every order more privileged

we were true brothers to each other, and would resolve not to sell the only thing which is our own, the cunning^o of our hands, for less than it is worth.” What other things they may have done is nothing to the purpose; it was for this they were condemned; it is for this they are to endure the penalty of the law.

We call upon a candid^o and generous community to mark that the punishment inflicted upon these twenty “men who had determined not to work” is not directed against the offense of conspiring to prevent others by force from working at low wages, but expressly against the offense of settling by preconcert^o the compensation which they thought they were entitled to obtain. It is certainly superfluous to repeat that this journal would be the very last to oppose a law leveled at any attempt to molest the laborer who chooses to work for less than the prices settled by the union.

We have said, and to cut off cavil^o we say it now again, that a conspiracy to deter, by threats of violence, a fellow workman from arranging his own terms with his employers is a conspiracy to commit a felony: a conspiracy which, being a crime against liberty, we should be the first to condemn; a conspiracy which no strike should, for its own sake, countenance for a moment; a conspiracy already punishable by the statute, and far easier to reach than the one of which “the twenty” stood accused; but a conspiracy, we must add, that has not a single feature in common with the base and barbarous prohibition under which the offenders were indicted and condemned.

They were condemned because they had determined not to work for the wages that were offered them! Can anything be imagined more abhorrent to every sentiment of generosity or justice than the law which arms the rich with the legal right to fix, by assize^o, the wages of the poor? If this is not SLAVERY, we have forgotten its definition. Strike the right of associating for the sale of labor from the privileges of a freeman and you may as well at once bind him to a master or ascribe^o him to the soil. If it be not in the color of his skin and in the poor franchise^o of naming his own terms in a contract for his work, what advantage has the laborer of the North over the bondman of the South?

cunning: skill, craft

candid: honest, unbiased

preconcert: prior agreement

cavil: trivial objection

assize: judicial action, legal verdict

ascribe: assign

franchise: officially granted right or privilege