William H. Sylvis, long the secretary of the National Molders’ Union, undertook a broader effort to organizer workers during the Civil War, despite a brief detour taking a company of volunteers to Gettysburg. His efforts to foster cooperation among local unions and to establish standards of solidarity among the unions established the foundations for the National Labor Union he headed after the war’s end. These selections from an address delivered to organized workers at Buffalo, New York in January 1864 sounded the basic themes of his message: that workers needed to organize in self-defense and assert their common interests in opposition to that of their employers.

This labor question, Mr. Chairman, is one that has troubled the minds of men for centuries past. . . . These men have, with but one or two exceptions, taken the ground and founded their arguments upon the assumed facts, that the soil is the source of all wealth. That there is an identity of interests between labor and capital, that labor and capital are copartners, that the two elements go hand-in-hand, and constitute one vast firm, who carry on and control the vast business of the world; that labor is an article of commerce, and that the price of labor is regulated by the laws of supply and demand.

Nothing, to my mind, can be more absurd than all these propositions. It may be considered presumption in so humble an individual as I to set myself up in opposition to these great authors, but, nevertheless, I claim the right to do so. . . .

Capitalists employ labor for the amount of profit realized, and workingmen labor for the amount of wages received. This is the only relation existing between them; they are two distinct elements, or rather two distinct classes, with interests as widely separated as the poles. We find capitalists ever watchful of their interests — ever ready to make everything bend to their desires. Then why should not laborers be equally watchful of their interests — equally ready to take advantage of every circumstance to secure good wages and social elevation? Were labor left free to control itself, as it should be and must be, instead of there being an identity of interests, a mutual relation between the two classes, there is an antagonism that ever did and ever will exist; a sort of an irrepressible conflict that commenced with the world, and will only end with it.

If workingmen and capitalists are equal co-partners, composing one vast firm by which the industry of the world is carried on and controlled, why do they not share equally in the profits? Why does capital take to itself the whole loaf, while labor is left to gather up the crumbs? Why does capital roll in luxury and wealth, while labor is left to eke out a miserable existence in poverty and want? Are these the evidences of an identity of interests, of mutual relations, of equal partnership? No, sir. On the contrary, they are evidences of an antagonism. This antagonism is the general origin of all “strikes.” Labor has always the same complaints to make, and capital always the same oppressive rules to make, and power to employ. Were it not for this antagonism, labor would often escape the penalty of much misery and moral degradation, and capital the disgrace and ruin consequent upon such dangerous collisions. There is not only a never-ending conflict between the two classes, but capital is, in all cases, the aggressor. Labor is always found on the defensive, because

1. Capital enjoys individual power, and in the exercise of that is given to encroach upon the rights and privileges of labor.

2. Labor is individually weak, and only becomes powerful when banded together for self-defence.

3. Capital is jealous of control, or even of remonstrance, and will often object to the interference of labor, even when such an interference would be beneficial to its own interests.

4. Capital is selfish and regardless of the fate, feelings, or condition of labor. The physical condition, intellectual development, and moral training of labor are neglected for that inordinate power which accumulated wealth supplies.
5. Capital is haughty, proud, and insolent, and spurns with contempt the remonstrances of the oppressed, the respectful entreaties of the defrauded, and the cries of the poor and abject.

6. Capital seldom forgives; it loses the finer feelings of the human heart, and knows no other commercial principle than that embodied in the famous axiom of the “Free Trade” school, which says, “buy in the cheapest market and sell in the dearest,” but which, if applied to labor means, “keep down the price of labor and starve the workingmen; so shall thy profits be many, and thy wealth increased.” It must follow, from the admission of these premises, that the interests of employer and employee are not identical. That on the one side, employers are interested, because of profit, to keep down the price of labor; while on the other side, the employees are justified, on account of self-interest, to keep up wages. Thus labor and capital are antagonistic.