

The Farmers' Declaration of Independence, 1873

When in the course of human events, it becomes necessary for a class of people, suffering from long-continued systems of oppression and abuse, to rouse themselves from an apathetic indifference to their own interests, which has become habitual; to assume among their fellow citizens that equal station and demand from the government they support those equal rights to which the laws of nature and of nature's God entitles them; a decent respect for the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes that impel them to a course so necessary to their own protection.

We hold these truths to be self-evident: That all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain rights; that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. That to secure these rights governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed; that whenever the powers of a government become destructive of these, either through the injustice or inefficiency of its laws or through the corruption of its administrators, it is the right of the people to abolish such laws and institute such reforms as to them shall seem most likely to effect their safety and happiness.

Prudence indeed will dictate that laws long established shall not be changed for light and trifling causes, and, accordingly, all experience hath shown that mankind are more disposed to suffer while evils are sufferable than to right themselves by abolishing the laws to which they are accustomed. But when a long train of abuses and usurpations, pursuing invariably the same object, evinces a desire to reduce a people under the absolute despotism of combinations that, under the fostering care of government and with wealth wrung from the people, have grown to such gigantic proportions as to overshadow all the land and wield an almost irresistible influence for their own selfish purposes in all its halls of legislation, it is their right -- it is their duty -- to throw off such tyranny and provide new guards for their future security.

Such has been the patient sufferance of the producing classes of these states, and such is now the necessity which compels them to declare that they will use every means save a resort to arms to overthrow this despotism of monopoly, and to reduce all men claiming the protection of American laws to an equality before those laws, making the owner of a railroad as amenable thereto as the "veriest beggar that walks the streets, the sun and air his sole inheritance."

The history of the present railway monopoly is a history of repeated injuries and oppressions, all having in direct object the establishment of an absolute tyranny over the people of these states unequalled in any monarchy of the Old World, and having its only parallel in the history of the medieval ages, when the strong hand was the only law and the highways of commerce were taxed by the feudal barons, who, from their strongholds, surrounded by their armies of vassals, could levy such tribute upon the traveller as their

own will alone should dictate. To prove this, let facts be submitted to a candid world:

They have influenced our executive officers to refuse their assent to laws the most wholesome and necessary for the public good; and when such laws have been passed, they have utterly refused to obey them.

They have procured the passage of other laws for their own benefit alone, by which they have put untold millions into their own coffers, to the injury of the entire commercial and industrial interests of the country.

They have influenced legislation to suit themselves by bribing venal legislators betray the true interests of their constituents, while others have been kept quiet by the compliment of free passes.

They have repeatedly prevented the re-election of representatives for opposing with manly firmness their invasion of the people's rights.

They have by false representations and subterfuge induced the people to subscribe funds to build roads, whose rates, when built, are so exorbitant that in many instances transportation by private conveyance is less burdensome.

They have procured charters by which they condemn and appropriate our lands without adequate compensation therefor and arrogantly claim that by virtue of these charters they are absolutely above the control of legal enactments.

They have procured a law of Congress by which they have dispossessed hundreds of farmers of the homes that by years of toil they have built up; have induced others to mortgage their farms for roads never intended to be built, and, after squandering the money thus obtained, have left their victims to the mercy of courts over which they have held absolute sway.

They have obstructed the administration of justice by injunctions procured from venal judges by legal quibbles and appeals from court to court, with intent to wear out or ruin the prosecutor, openly avowing their determination to make it so terrible for the public to prosecute them that they will not dare undertake it.

They have virtually made judges dependent on their will alone and have procured their appointment for the express purpose of reversing a decision of the highest court of the nation by which millions were gained to them, to the injury of the holders of the bonds and the breaking down of this last safeguard of American freemen.

They have affected to render themselves independent of and superior to the civil power by ordering large bodies of hirelings to enforce their unlawful exactions and have protected them from punishment for an injury they might inflict upon peaceful citizens, while ejecting them from their conveyances for refusing to pay more than the rate of fare

prescribed by laws.

They have arrested and summoned from their homes for trial, at distant points, other citizens for the same offense of refusing to pay more than the legal fare, putting them to as great inconvenience and expense as possible, and still further evincing their determination to make it too terrible for the people to dare engage in any legal conflict with them.

They have combined together to destroy competition and to practise an unjust discrimination, contrary to the expressed provisions of our Constitution and the spirit of our law.

They have virtually cut off our trade with distant parts of the world by their unjust discriminations and by their exorbitant rates of freights, forcing upon us the alternative of accumulating upon our hands a worthless surplus, or of giving three-fourths of the price our customers pay for their products for their transportation.

Under the false and specious pretense of developing the country, they have obtained enormous grants of public lands from Congress and now retard rather than develop its settlement by the high prices charged for such land.

They have converted the bonds fraudulently obtained from the government into a great corruption fund, with which they are enabled to bribe and control legislatures and subvert every branch of government to their own base and sordid purpose.

In every stage of these oppressions we have petitioned our legislatures for redress in the most humble terms. Our repeated petitions have been answered only by silence or by attempts to frame laws that shall seem to meet our wants, but that are, in fact, only a legal snare for courts to disagree upon and for corporations to disobey.

Nor have we been wanting in attempts to obtain redress through Congress. We have warned them from time to time of these various and repeated encroachments upon our rights; we have reminded them of the circumstances of our emigration and settlement here; we have appealed to them as the administrators of a free and impartial government to protect us from these encroachments, which, if continued, would inevitably end in the utter destruction of those liberties for which our fathers gave their lives, and the reinstatement of privileged classes and an aristocracy of wealth, worse than that from which the War of the Revolution freed us. They too have been deaf to the voice of justice and of duty. We must therefore acquiesce in the necessity which compels us to denounce their criminal indifference to our wrongs and hold them as we hold our legislators -- enemies to the producer -- to the monopolists, friends.

We, therefore, the producers of this state in our several counties assembled, on this the anniversary of that day that gave birth to a nation of freemen and to a government of which, despite the corruption of its officers, we are still so justly proud, appealing to the

Supreme Judge of the world for the rectitude of our intentions, do solemnly declare that we will use all lawful and peaceable means to free ourselves from the tyranny of monopoly, and that we will never cease our efforts for reform until every department of our government gives token that the reign of licentious extravagance is over and something of the purity, honesty, and frugality with which our fathers inaugurated it has taken its place.

That to this end we hereby declare ourselves absolutely free and independent of all past political connections, and that we will give our suffrage only to such men for office, from the lowest officer in the state to the President of the United States, as we have good reason to believe will use their best endeavors to the promotion of these ends; and for the support of this declaration, with a firm reliance on Divine Providence, we mutually pledge to each other our lives, our fortunes, and our sacred honor.