



Jim Hightower Speech

Carolyn Mugar: Jim Hightower, as almost everybody here needs no introduction, but as Secretary of Agriculture in Texas, he was a great friend to family farmers. There's no one here that goes back that far that doesn't know what he has done for family farmers. So, please Jim, come forward.

Jim Hightower: Thank you, thank you so much. Well, I'm grateful to get to bring up the rear here on the speechaphone. I imagine all of you all are ready to bring up your rears after a full day of this. So I will be mercifully brief here. First of all, I just want to thank Farm Aid and especially Carolyn Mugar. What a terrific she's been doing over the years. (Applause) Oscar Wilde said, "Be yourself. Everyone else is already taken." You don't get more yourself than Carolyn Mugar. Well, any hoot, I come to you not merely from Austin, Texas, but from South Austin. We have a little different attitude over there on the South side. We're sort of irreverent. Our unofficial slogan, "We're all here because we're not all there." I think we're all here gathered in Raleigh because we're not quite there as a movement. We are a good rebellion, and that's an important start, but now we got to be taking that next step to become a movement about power. That's what a movement really is about. How you build power and then how you exert that power. We've got a great chance to make that happen. A couple of words I heard recurring throughout today:

Number one was Together. Coming together. Forward Together as the Moral Monday slogan has it. Well, food does that, because food is community. It literally brings us to the same table together as consumers, as just about everything, really. But once at that table, we've got to decide where we're going next. But where we've gotten started today that I'm impressed with is showing the unity of farmers with labor. Of labor with environmentalists. Environmentalists with poor folks and poor people with students and right on down the line. As Jesse Jackson put it, "We might not all of come over on the same boat, but we are in the same boat now." That's a powerful political reality, when you think about it. It gives us a great opportunity to do something big, I think. Some people say, "Well, Hightower, you can't get at all of these different, diverse groups of people together. Kind of like trying to herd cats to get that bunch together." Well anybody who says you can't herd cats, never tried a can opener. (Laughter). They will come, won't they?

And our can opener is that set of values that our country is founded on. Economic fairness, social justice, equal opportunity for all people. That's what we stand for as a country, as a budding movement as

well. As Reverend Barber put it, “We are in a moral crisis.” Well, a moral crisis requires a moral response. That’s not just issues. We are pretty good at talking issues on our side. We dump our whole load to anybody who would dare sit still for a few seconds. But it is not about issues. It is about those values really. Our friend Van Jones once pointed out to a group of progressives said, “Our problem is we’re too much caught up in talking points and in facts and in figures”. He pointed out that Martin Luther King, Jr. at the Washington Memorial did not say, “I have a position plan.” He said, “I have a dream.” And that’s our job. It is to paint that dream, and then people have their ears open and their heads open and are willing to hear what we want to talk about in terms of the issues. So we start not with the issues but with the values themselves. Then, that makes our issues carry some weight along with it.

Reverend Barber also talked about the courage of hope, and that’s true. It takes a lot of hope to be able to have any kind of a movement at all. But you know the opposite of courage is not cowardness, it’s conformity. Just going with the flow. Even a dead fish can go with the flow, you know. So we’ve got to go against the flow, swim against that current and build on this start that you’ve got going here today. I think of Farm Aid or whatever it’s going to be called down the road in terms of a budding movement that we’ve got going here. In terms of a little hardware store near my home in South Austin, it is called Harold’s Hardware. It’s not one of these big box things, it’s not quite as big as this room right here. But it’s a great place. You can go to Harold’s, and you can buy two nails there. You don’t have to buy the whole carton, you know. They’ll work with you. Well, what are you trying to do? I want to build a table like this. Well, just pencil it out, they say, and see what you need. They’ll loan you a tool. You can take the tool home and bring it back. The slogan at Harold’s Hardware is, “Together, we can do it yourself”. (Audience laughing) And that is our slogan because we can’t do it ourselves but we can together. We can do just about anything. We can build a movement. By the way, we’ve done this before. This is not the first attempt to build a movement including the farm movement.

The old time Populist Movement in the 1870’s and 80’s and 90’s was not a racist movement. It was first an economic movement and a cultural movement and then it became a political movement down the road. And that led, ultimately, to the New Deal. Everything that the New Deal enacted was adopted by the people’s platform in 1892, the People’s Party Platform in 1892, came from ordinary dirt farmers teaming up with factory workers, by the way, with African-Americans and whites working together. You don’t hear that, but that’s the true history of that. Larry Goodwin used to be a professor over here at Duke, wrote the great book on populism, “The Democratic Promise, the Populist Moment in American History” tells that story. Now, yes, racists came along later, but they were not a part of the populist movement, the populist movement was not preaching racism. It was preaching that together, we can do it yourself. That was their message. And they created what they called a cooperative commonwealth. It was all about co-

ops coming together for the production inputs that you needed including capital and then the marketing co-ops that allowed them to go directly to market, go beyond the railroads, go around the railroads and then also then ultimately, a cooperative of politics that brought people together in a big deal. Well, what they started ended up in the New Deal, but we just got to persevere. That came years later after the populist movement itself had already petered out.

So, Willie puts it well. He points out that the early bird might get the worm, but it is the second mouse that gets the cheese. You might want to pencil that out for some of the slower ones here today. (Laughing) So, I'm excited to be part of this as well. Excited by what has begun here. I go along with Shirley Sherrod who says, I think we are going to need a little bit down the road, not next month, next year probably, but pretty soon, another congress coming together of ordinary people. The people's congress really. I don't think it's just about food, and not just about farmers, but it's about the people. I'm particularly proud that we've got the Postal Workers Union here, for example. Why would they be here? Well, because they believe in a movement. They know it can't just be a postal worker's movement, it can't just be a labor movement, it's got to be a people's movement so they're beginning to reach out. As Richard pointed out a while ago, they are, well can you imagine a zip code that does not have a postal worker in it? No. They're everywhere. They literally deliver the mail by a mule to the bottom of the Grand Canyon to a tribe of Native Americans who live down there. They're organized. They're everywhere. They are a great asset for us, and we have to look for that. Who are our new allies that we can pull into this? We need the fast food workers involved here as well by the way. And, you know, a big thing has happened, and that is, the fast food workers, the least educated of low wage workers have now linked up with adjunct college professors who are the highest educated. They have PhD's, yet they're living in poverty. They're paid poverty wage. Half of the college courses in America are now taught by adjunct professors, not tenured professors. Natural allies for us. Very different peoples coming together and making that whole that is going to make a difference.

Well, I'll leave you with this thought. When I first moved down to Austin, Texas there was a moving company there that had an advertising slogan that I liked so I stole it for political purposes. It was just a little old moving company, you know, two big guys with a truck. I think they were called Skeeter and Boger, you know, something like that. Anyway, they had this ad. It was actually in the yellow pages and said, "If we can get it loose, we can move it." That is what I think you've done here this afternoon. You've gotten it loose, now let's move it. Thank you very much. Thanks for what you are doing. (Long applause).