

Responses to Markham's "The Man with the Hoe"

The American poet Edwin Markham sparked a national debate with his poem "The Man with the Hoe." Inspired by the French artist Jean-Francois Millet's painting of a farmer resting on his hoe, exhausted from working in the fields, Markham wrote a poem commenting on the working conditions of agricultural laborers.

After its first publication in the *San Francisco Examiner* in 1899, the poem was reprinted in thousands of newspapers and magazines across the country. As a result of the poem, conversations about labor rights emerged in social circles and classrooms, and the symbol of the man with a hoe appeared in speeches by union leaders and the clergy. The president of the relatively new American Federation of Labor (AFL), Samuel Gompers, referred to the image of the man with a hoe in a national AFL convention:

Due to the bona fide labor movement of the world, we are living in the time when there is disappearing, and soon will be eliminated, the last vestige of that type "the man with the hoe" and taking his place is the intelligent worker, standing erect, looking his fellow man in the face, demanding for himself, and according to all, the full rights of disenthralled manhood.

The AFL, founded in 1886, was formed to advocate for increased wages, a shorter work week, and improvements to the working conditions of its members. Although Markham's language was not a rallying cry for all Americans, especially those against social reform, the image of a man "dead to rapture and despair" was a useful symbol for a movement fighting to elevate the laborer's status.