

America is not broke

Michael Moore

Michael Moore is an Academy-Award winning filmmaker and best-selling author. He gave this speech on 5 March 2011, at a massive protest gathering in Madison, Wisconsin, days before the State Senate pushed through a measure that severely curtails collective bargaining rights for public sector workers.

Contrary to what those in power would like you to believe so that you'll give up your pension, cut your wages, and settle for the life your great-grandparents had, America is not broke. Not by a long shot. The country is awash in wealth and cash. It's just that it's not in your hands. It has been transferred, in the greatest heist in history, from the workers and consumers to the banks and the portfolios of the uber-rich.

Today just 400 Americans have the same wealth as *half* of all Americans combined.

Let me say that again. 400 obscenely rich people, most of whom benefited in some way from the multi-trillion dollar taxpayer 'bailout' of 2008, now have as much loot, stock and property as the assets of 155 million Americans *combined*. If you can't bring yourself to call that a financial *coup d'état*, then you are simply not being honest about what you know in your heart to be true.

And I can see why. For us to admit that we have let a small group of men abscond with and hoard the bulk of the wealth that runs our economy, would mean that we'd have to accept the humiliating acknowledgment that we have indeed surrendered our precious Democracy to the moneyed élite. Wall Street, the banks and the Fortune 500 now run this Republic – and, until this past month, the rest of us have felt completely helpless, unable to find a way to do anything about it.

I have nothing more than a high school degree. But back when I was in school, every student had to take one semester of economics in order to graduate. And here's what I learned: money doesn't grow on trees. It grows when we make things. It grows when we have good jobs with good

wages that we use to buy the things we need and thus create more jobs. It grows when we provide an outstanding educational system that then grows a new generation of inventors, entrepreneurs, artists, scientists and thinkers who come up with the next great idea for the planet. And that new idea creates new jobs and that creates revenue for the state. But if those who have the most money don't pay their fair share of taxes, the state can't function. The schools can't produce the best and the brightest who will go on to create those jobs. If the wealthy get to keep most of their money, we have seen what they will do with it: recklessly gamble it on crazy Wall Street schemes and crash our economy. The crash they created cost us millions of jobs. That, too, caused a reduction in tax revenue. Everyone ended up suffering because of what the rich did.

The nation is not broke, my friends. Wisconsin is not broke. Saying that the country is broke is repeating a Big Lie. It's one of the three biggest lies of the decade: 1) America is broke, 2) Iraq has WMD, and 3) The Packers can't win the Super Bowl without Brett Favre.

The truth is, there's lots of money to go around. LOTS. It's just that those in charge have diverted that wealth into a deep well that sits on their well-guarded estates. They know they have committed crimes to make this happen and they know that someday you may want to see some of that money that used to be yours. So they have bought and paid for hundreds of politicians across the country to do their bidding for them. But just in case that doesn't work, they've got their gated communities, and the luxury jet is always fully fuelled, the engines running, waiting for that day they hope never comes. To help prevent that day when the people demand their country back, the wealthy have done two very smart things:

1. They control the message. By owning most of the media they have expertly convinced many Americans of few means to buy their version of the American Dream and to vote for their politicians. Their version of the Dream says that you, too, might be rich some day – this is America, where anything can happen if you just apply yourself! They have conveniently provided you with believable examples to show you how a poor boy can become a rich man, how the child of a single mother in Hawaii can become president, how a guy with a high school education can become a successful filmmaker. They will play these stories for you over and over again all day long so that the last thing you will want to do is upset the apple cart – because you – yes, you, too! – might be rich/president/an Oscar-winner some day! The message is clear: keep you head down, your nose to the grindstone, don't rock the boat and be sure to vote for the party that protects the rich man that you might be some day.

2. They have created a poison pill that they know you will never want to take. It is their version of mutually assured destruction. And when they threatened to release this weapon of mass economic annihilation in September of 2008, we blinked. As the economy and the stock market went into a tailspin, and the banks were caught conducting a worldwide Ponzi scheme, Wall Street issued this threat: either hand over trillions of dollars from the American taxpayers or we will crash this economy straight into the ground. Fork it over or it's goodbye savings accounts. Goodbye pensions. Goodbye United States Treasury. Goodbye jobs and homes and future. It was friggin' awesome and it scared the shit out of everyone. 'Here! Take our money! We don't care. We'll even print more for you! Just take it! But, please, leave our lives alone, PLEASE!'

The executives in the board rooms and hedge funds could not contain their laughter, their glee, and within three months they were writing each other huge bonus checks and marvelling at how perfectly they had played a nation full of suckers. Millions lost their jobs anyway, and millions lost their homes. But there was no revolt.

Until now. On Wisconsin! Never has a Michigander been more happy to share a big, great lake with you! You have aroused the sleeping giant known as the working people of the United States of America. Right now the earth is shaking and the ground is shifting under the feet of those who are in charge. Your message has inspired people in all 50 states and that message is: WE HAVE HAD IT! We reject anyone who tells us America is broke and broken. It's just the opposite! We are rich with talent and ideas and hard work and, yes, love. Love and compassion toward those who have, through no fault of their own, ended up as the least among us. But they still crave what we all crave: our country back! Our democracy back! Our good name back! The United States of America. NOT the Corporate States of America. *The United States of America!*

So how do we make this happen? Well, we do it with a little bit of Egypt here, a little bit of Madison there. And let us pause for a moment and remember that it was a poor man with a fruit stand in Tunisia who gave his life so that the world might focus its attention on how a government run by billionaires for billionaires is an affront to freedom and morality and humanity.

Thank you, Wisconsin. You have made people realize this was our last best chance to grab the final thread of what was left of who we are as Americans. For three weeks you have stood in the cold, slept on the floor, skipped out of town to Illinois – whatever it took, you have done it, and one thing is for certain: Madison is only the beginning. The smug rich have

overplayed their hand. They couldn't have just been content with the money they raided from the treasury. They couldn't be satiated by simply removing millions of jobs and shipping them overseas to exploit the poor elsewhere. No, they had to have more – something more than all the riches in the world. They had to have our soul. They had to strip us of our dignity. They had to shut us up and shut us down so that we could not even sit at a table with them and bargain about simple things like classroom size or bullet-proof vests for everyone on the police force or letting a pilot just get a few extra hours sleep so he or she can do their job – their \$19,000 a year job. That's how much some rookie pilots on commuter airlines make, maybe even the rookie pilot who flew me here to Madison today. He told me he's stopped hoping for a pay increase. All he's asking for now is enough down time so that he doesn't have to sleep in his car between shifts at O'Hare airport. That's how despicably low we have sunk! The wealthy couldn't be content with just paying this man \$19,000 a year. They had to take away his sleep. They had to demean him and dehumanize him and rub his face in it. After all, he's just another slob, isn't he?

And that, my friends, is Corporate America's fatal mistake. But trying to destroy us they have given birth to a movement – a movement that is becoming a massive, non-violent revolt across the country. We all knew there had to be a breaking point some day, and that point is upon us. Many people in the media don't understand this. They say they were caught off guard about Egypt, never saw it coming. Now they act surprised and flummoxed about why so many hundreds of thousands have come to Madison over the last three weeks during brutal winter weather. 'Why are they all standing out there in the cold?' I mean, there was that election in November and that was supposed to be that!

'There's something happening here, and you don't know what it is, do you ...?'

America ain't broke! The only thing that's broke is the moral compass of the rulers. And we aim to fix that compass and steer the ship ourselves from now on. Never forget, as long as that Constitution of ours still stands, it's one person, one vote, and it's the thing the rich hate most about America – because even though they seem to hold all the money and all the cards, they begrudgingly know this one unshakeable basic fact: there are more of us than there are of them!

Madison, do not retreat. We are with you. We will win together.

*This blog has been slightly edited for clarity since being posted.
A video of the speech is available online (michaelmoore.com).*