

---

# Equality of Conditions

by Eugene V. Debs

Published in *Locomotive Firemen's Magazine*, vol. 12, no. 9 (Sept. 1888), pp. 653-654.

The American idea is that all men are born equal, and are endowed by the Creator with certain unalienable rights. Grand old St. Peter ascertained, very much against his inclination, that God is no respecter of persons. Hence the propriety of the caption of this article, "Equality of Conditions." Equality before the law is often a topic in the discussion of which the genius of American institution is extolled. So far as the state is concerned there is an equality of rights, privileges and opportunities. We have no titled nobility, no recognized aristocracy; class and caste are unknown. Class legislation is unconstitutional. One American citizen has just as much sovereignty as another. The sovereignty is lodged in the ballot.

In writing of the equality of conditions we have one purpose in view, and that is, if possible to exalt the declaration that "an honest man is the noblest work of God."<sup>1</sup> An honest man may be poor, but that does not diminish his nobility, and a dishonest man, though rich as a Gould, a Vanderbilt, or a Rothschild, is his inferior.

In writing of the equality of conditions, we mean natural conditions, and conditions recognized by the laws of the land, in so far as they pertain to the rights and privileges of the people. We do not overlook the fact that there are artificial conditions, adventitious conditions, none of which, nor all of which combined, could affect the proposition that all the people in the United States, excepting criminals, insane persons, and idiots, in so far as laws are concerned, occupy absolutely the same level, the same plane.

Now, it is true that while the people of the United States recognize the fundamental facts which we have stated, as constitution and statutes bear ample testimony, there are a great many people who from the first, and the number, we regret to think, is increasing, who now believe that mere adventitious in equalities should be regarded as

---

<sup>1</sup> Line from "The Cotter's Saturday Night" (1785), by **Robert Burns** (1759-1796).

primal, fundamental, and should exert a more potent influence in affairs generally.

The man who happens to be rich looks with proud disdain upon the man who is poor. The man who is educated regards the unlearned man with aversion. The major general revolts at associating with the man who carries the knapsack and the gun. The skipper who commands a steamship, an ocean greyhound, has a contempt for the captain of the little craft. The architect who plans the palace or the monument groups all who work by his plans and rear the edifice very much after the style that Pharaoh contemplated the slaves who built the pyramids and hewed out the sphinx.

We could multiply illustrations indefinitely. But we have said enough to enable the reader to "catch on," if he desires. Still, it may be added that this tendency of thought and action has not escaped working men and organizations of wage earners. This may seem strange, but it is not more strange than true, and the facts crop out now and then in a way that cannot fail to excite comment, if not derision.

To such of the great fraternity of workmen who assume superiority over the more humble toilers the idea does not seem to occur that they, too, wear the badge of labor, that they live by work, and that when they curl their lips or elevate their noses in the presence of their less fortunate comrades, they demonstrate a desire for an alliance with those who treat all laboring men with supercilious disdain. They are at heart autocrats and aristocrats, and on all occasions, when opportunity offers, do not hesitate to air their arrogance and authority.

From individuals this peculiar weakness not infrequently passes to labor organizations, and that, too, chiefly, because one class of workers receives more pay than another class of workers. And here, again, the bed rock of the ostracism is money, not brains, not character, not probity, not fidelity to obligation, but money, as if money were the test of nobility. If that were the touchstone, who could vie with a Vanderbilt or a Gould, a Huntington or a Sage? If that be the test, then the CB&Q corporation could justify its arrogance when it treated engineers, firemen and switchmen, as of no more account than so many mules.

There is just now talk of federation; the federation of engineers, firemen, switchmen, and brakemen. The CB&Q strike has taught working men on the rail a lesson, never to be forgotten; it is the

equality of conditions when a strike is on hand and must be lost or won. A strike levels down and levels up, and if there is to be a federation of the orders we have named, the equality of conditions must be recognized. The man who throws the switch, the man who handles the scoop, the man who holds the throttle, and the man who handles the brake, must stand absolutely equal without regard to wages. In the grand federation of states which makes our ocean-girt republic, little Rhode Island stands equal to Texas, out of which a hundred Rhode Islands could be carved.

If there are those who indulge the vagary that anything less than a recognition of equality can, or will be tolerated, they should dismiss it. The interdependence of the Orders must be recognized, and this done, the work of federation will go forward, and will accomplish its beneficent mission.

*Edited with a footnote by Tim Davenport*

1000 Flowers Publishing, Corvallis, OR · April 2017 · Non-commercial reproduction permitted.  
First Edition.