
Strike

by Eugene V. Debs

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The word “strike” is the sign of an idea which most men dislike to contemplate — and none more, we opine, than those whose purpose it is to strike.

A great many people assume that those who strike do so without counting the cost; without recognizing the fact that they will be called upon to make many and grievous sacrifices; that a strike means idleness; the expenditure of money saved, and after all, involving uncertainties relating to the final outcome.

We do not doubt that there have been unnecessary strikes, just as there have been unnecessary wars; we do not doubt that strikes have sometimes resulted from the leadership of men totally disqualified to give advice in such matters, and that the penalties for such mistakes have been severe.

After making such admissions, the fact stands out in haggard prominence that some times a strike is demanded regardless of costs and of sacrifices — demanded by every consideration of right and justice, and under such circumstances not to strike is to tamely submit to outrages and accept degradation; to surrender liberty, independence, self-respect — to permit the wrong to triumph without protest or struggle, and tamely become a slave.

It was said by Admiral Porter, and the declaration will bear repeating, that “a pin is worth fighting for if it involves a principle.”¹

The announcement of the American Admiral is eminently American, and will do for all nations and tribes of men. It is as applicable to individuals as to nations — to workingmen as to princes — to labor organizations as to States, but a miserable, subsidized, monopolistic press, and a miserable gang of politicians, who fawn about the rich

¹ A slight misquotation of Admiral **David Dixon Porter** (1813-1891), who said in a March 1889 newspaper interview: “A pin is worth fighting for, if principle is involved.”

men and lick the boots of millionaires, never discuss the principle which occasions strikes, but are eternally denouncing strikes and upholding those whose tyrannies are productive of strikes, and of such publications *Frank Leslie's Weekly* is a notable example.

Some months since, this paper, discussing "the cost of strikes," said:

The prime lesson for all workingmen to learn is that the only true path to freedom lies through an increasing command by each individual of the capital essential to his own employment. He who does not attain this must always find himself compelled to submit to the direction of others is all the little methods of his labor, and dependent on the will of others for the opportunity to work at all.

That is to say, that it is money that secures "freedom," and without this money "workingmen" will find themselves "compelled to submit to the direction of others," depending "on the will of others for the opportunity to work at all."

Such is the logic of the organ of moneybags. It places the workingman without money just where the negro was before Sumpter's guns were fired — absolutely "dependent on the will of others," to accept such terms and treatment as "others" might dictate.

It would be impossible to consign American workingmen to a lower level of degradation. It places them at the bottom. It makes them the "mudsills" of the social, political and business fabric. It is *caste* pure and simple — aristocracy and autocracy combined. Rights, privileges, prerogatives, liberty, independence fall prostrate in the presence of "Capital."

Take a body of workingmen, employed by a capitalist. Their wages compel them to wear rags, to inhabit hovels and to subsist upon insufficient, and often offensive food. They know they are systematically robbed; they know, and the world knows, that their impoverished condition is the result of the piratical greed of their employers. The outraged men demand an increase of pay, simply to better their condition; the demand relates to the mitigation of human sufferings. The men would have better clothes, food, and shelter. They would get out of the mud. They appeal to their employer for a fraction more of the wealth they create, which he is appropriating. The demand is denied. The employer's ears are deaf to all appeals. His heart is adamant. He robs and increases his wealth. The picture is not

overdrawn — not over-colored. The world knows it is truthful. Under such conditions the alternatives are submit or strike, and under such circumstances the press, the pulpit, the rostrum, Congress, and the legislature, the public meeting, all, all, should thunder approval of a strike. But, says the monopolistic, subsidized press, of which *Frank Leslie's Weekly* is of the meanest:

Visionaries will always be rising up and earning a cheap notoriety as friends of wage-workers, by promising them some shorter road than this to individual freedom. These visionaries, however, will generally be found to be merely using their cunning advice to others as a means to make themselves capitalists, even though the nostrum by whose sale they become capitalists in their own right be a recommendation to others to become capitalists by associated hocus pocus.

The “visionaries” are the men who, receiving 75 cents or \$1 a day (often less than the amount named), demand more pay. The *practical* men are, in every instance, according to the monopolistic press, the men who refuse to be just, who refuse the workingman fair wages, who denounce labor organizations as “associated hocus pocus.”

It does not matter. There is now a labor press. There are labor agitators, as there were in 1770 and 1776 revolutionary agitators, as there were abolition agitators at a later date. They were called “visionaries,” but they were, nevertheless, clear-sighted, and saw coming events. The labor agitators of the present would prevent strikes, just as American patriots before the American revolution would have prevented war. They asked for justice; it was denied — then came the strike of '76. There was misery, sacrifices, death, but out of it all came liberty and independence.

Let it not be forgotten that there is something far more deplorable than strikes. It is a condition when men, subjugated and degraded, accept chains without protest. It does not matter how starry may be your flag, it does not matter how glorious may be your traditions, how boundless your country — indeed, the more highly wrought the eulogies of such things, the weaker becomes hyperbole in seeking to depict the condition of degraded men in the midst of such surroundings — men who are too degraded to strike.

Edited with a footnote by Tim Davenport

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