
Protection

by Eugene V. Debs

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It is a mistake of no little importance to suppose that the students of phenomena confine their observations to strange and unusual appearances in the heavens, the earth, or the waters under the firmament. There is a world of mind in which those who are at all attentive may discover many things well calculated to arouse reflections of intense seriousness. It goes for nothing to say that the great majority are unobservant — heedless of passing events. There are those who never heed the signs of the times, and who, if their attention could be arrested, would simply stare at them with scarcely more apprehension of their significance than so many sheep. They marry, and are given in marriage; they eat, drink, and sleep. The skies may be red, or dark and lowering, it is all the same to them. Such people do not keep up with the procession. They are always too late for the train. We can afford to dismiss them. As forces and factors, they are as copper coins among doubloons. If rich, they are like misers, who clutch and count their gold and hide it away; if poor, they accept conditions without protest, and like asses, bear their burdens uncomplainingly.

But there are others who are wide awake and on the alert. They read, they think, they watch. They clamber to the highlands of vision and survey with eagle eyes the surroundings. They detect phenomena whenever and wherever they appear. They see the shadows of coming events. They are the *avant couriers* of all explorers — the pathfinders in every wilderness. They are the Johns¹ crying, “make straight paths”² for men who have discovered at last that “God is no respecter

¹ Reference to **John the Baptist**, a proselytizing Jewish religious leader of whom Jesus of Nazareth is believed to have been a follower.

² Adapted from *Hebrews*, chapter 12, verse 13: “And make straight paths for your feet, lest that which is lame be turned out of the way; but let it rather be healed.”

of persons,”³ and who have concluded to live and be clad and fed and sheltered by Divine right, without asking permission of mortals.

Here in the United States of America the uprising is phenomenal. It is a phenomenon that creates continental amazement. A writer in a magazine calls it “The Labor Crisis.” He says, “The point to be determined is, whether capital or labor shall, in future, determine the terms upon which the invested resources of the nation are to be employed.”⁴ Not exactly. The point is, shall the men who perform the labor and create all the capital, share in it to the extent of living like men or of living like beasts? The point is imbedded in the question, Can workingmen *protect* their inalienable rights of life, liberty, and happiness? If so, how? The answers are easy. First, by organization. The extent of organization is phenomenal. It extends to every trade. It is steadily going forward. It alarms those who deem it for their interests to degrade workingmen — to so impoverish American laborers that they shall be content to work for such wages as satisfy Italians, Poles, Hungarians, and others who, at home, have shared their huts and dens with domestic animals and vermin — who never drew a freeman’s breath nor uttered a sentiment in accord with American citizenship. We accept the announcement that a “labor crisis” is at hand. Workingmen are preparing for its coming. Every sign betokens its coming.

Those who are observant, will notice that workingmen are not only organizing, but are reading. They take the papers, and at last labor has a press. If, therefore, those who oppose the emancipation of labor from debasing enthrallments, predicate success upon the ignorance of workingmen, they are doomed to disappointment. The propositions up for debate in the councils of workingmen are few and simple, but fundamental. They are not to any great extent discussing Bellamyism. They are not trying to determine what will be the condition of workingmen AD 2000. They are not switched off to find out whether a worker in Europe receives more or less than a worker in America. The supreme purpose is to obtain such pay for their work as will support themselves and their families decently, and this, as cer-

³ From *Acts*, chapter 10, verses 34-35: “Then Peter opened his mouth, and said, Of a truth I perceive that God is no respecter of persons: But in every nation he that feareth him, and worketh righteousness, is accepted with him.”

⁴ Henry Clews, “The Labor Crisis,” *North American Review*, vol. 142, whole no. 355 (June 1886), pg. 598.

tainly as rivers How- to the sea, they are going to have, crisis or no crisis. It is a righteous demand, and will undergo no abatement.

As matters now stand, workingmen are the victims of oppression. They are overworked and underpaid, or, if in any case, justice is done them, it is the result of compact organization. That is what affords them such protection as they have. The fact is recognized and acknowledged. But it has been found that organization is but the initial step in securing protection, hence the shibboleth of workingmen today is *federation* — an alliance of all organizations — and that once perfected, labor's millennium dawns.

We must not be misunderstood. We do not mean that carpenters and brick masons are to federate with men engaged in the train service of railroads. Fortunately, these are setting a noble example of federation, and are securing protection. So it may be with men identified with the building trades, and thus, wherever there is an identity of interests, such alliances secure the right and protect the right, and when an organization of workingmen is formed, and its chief officers fight protection and hobnob with those who oppress labor, such an organization is certain to disappear. It cannot stand. It is a treasonable organization, and ought to die. All the scabs that ever existed are not equal to the malign influence exerted by a workingman's organization in alliance with the Corbins of the period.

The era of victory is dawning. The days of doubt and despondency are passing away. The spirit of protection is abroad. Its animating, vitalizing power is felt by the hosts of labor everywhere, and they are moving forward to certain triumph.

Edited with footnotes by Tim Davenport

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