
A Larger Standing Army

by Eugene V. Debs

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There is now a demand, made by certain military gentlemen who wear shoulder straps and who are fed from the public crib, for a larger standing army. It has been suggested that there should be a military post in every state, where at least a thousand soldiers should be stationed and held in readiness for serious work.

In looking over the field, men inquire: What is the necessity for a larger standing army? Are there any enemies in sight, foreign or domestic? Is there a probability of an invasion from Mexico or Canada? No replies are made to these queries, and still the demand is made for a larger standing army, more federal troops. It is understood that corporations of the Pullman and Homestead stripe, coal operators and railroad magnates and other employers of labor, favor the increase of the federal army, and it is just here that the secret leaks out. The patriot is the man who reduces wages, and the enemy to be shot down is the man who resists spoliation. The plutocrat believes in powder, ball, and bayonet. He has observed their quieting effects. Every workingman killed for clamoring for fair wages helps the piratical employer amazingly. The circumstance, while it intimidates workingmen, emboldens the pirate — assures him of security, and impresses him with confidence in the strength of the government, and the act is wildly applauded. If Europeans so much as intimate that ours is not a strong government, the President, the general in command, and the corporations point proudly to battlefields where workingmen lie stiff and cold in their bloody rags, and ask what European government can improve upon the spectacle? Europe looks, and acknowledges the *corn*,¹ and joins in with American plutocratic patriots in singing our national anthem, “The Star Spangled Banner.”

¹ “Acknowledge the corn” is a 19th Century slang expression meaning “to admit the truth.”

The President orders out the federal troops. Having been a hangman he has the required nerve to do his duty when a murderer is to be banged or a workingman shot. On such occasions he expands to the largest proportions of a tsar, sultan, or shah, and yet, there is something connected with the business which seemingly troubles his waking and sleeping hours. Possibly dead men visit him in his dreams and show him their wounds, flaunt their bloody shirts in his face, call his attention to their gloomy homes, introduce him to their starving wives and children, and bother him so much that Congress comes to his aid and passes resolutions applauding his military orders. It does not matter that the Congress which endorses the military exploits of the President is the target for the scorn and contempt, the flings and jeers of the country, imbecile and incapable to an extent that defies characterization — bribed and debauched, vulgar and venal until all the people cry out: Shame! It is the Congress fitted by nature and acquirements to vote that the military remedy for labor troubles is just the thing, and the plutocratic corporations cry the louder for a larger standing army. The enemy to be subdued is labor.

At the same time, while the demand is being made for a larger standing army, governors of states and military gentlemen of small caliber are demanding a larger "home guard," more state troops, greater military efficiency. If it is asked why this demand the reply is that labor is becoming dangerous. It will not be degraded and robbed to please the corporation, but as that is just what the military machine is for and nothing else, the corporation insists upon more state troops. If, however, the active state militia is to be increased, the recruits must come chiefly from the ranks of labor, and workingmen, in the event of becoming a part of the military machine, will be required, if ordered, to shoot down their fellow workmen. If they, however, do not want to join in that sort of work they can easily avoid it by refusing to enlist.

In this connection an incident at Pullman has special significance. It was reported by the Associated Press as follows:

The sensation of the day at Pullman was the refusal of Company M of the 1st Infantry to eat at the same table with non-union workmen. At 1:30 o'clock Lieut. Bowra marched Company M up to the big mess tent that stands on the lawn behind the Hotel Florence. There the company, was left in command of Sgt. Cook. When the company came to break ranks at the tent entrance they were indignant to see two tables within filled with non-union

employees of the Pullman company. The workmen were a part of the new force hired today. They had been smuggled in with the soldier boys on the apology that they were afraid to go home for dinner. As the practice had been tried in a smaller way last week, to the distaste of the company, the soldiers were prepared for decisive action. William Byrnes, a member of the company, stepped into the entrance and said:

“As volunteer soldiers the men of Company M are here to see that the laws of Illinois are obeyed. I am not aware that it is soldierly or that discipline compels us to do what we feel is unpatriotic and not worthy of gentlemen. My scruples demand that I shall not associate with scabs. I refuse to sit with them at the same table.”

There was an outburst of applause from Byrne's comrades, and Sgt. Cook marched the company across the street and broke ranks.

"We will not enter that tent," a dozen privates said, "till we are assured that all non-union workmen are to be kept out."

The workmen were finally marched out and the company marched in, receiving the assurance that they will hereafter have the mess tent to themselves.

The foregoing has been widely commented upon by the press, the point being made that a soldier on duty is not expected to have any views of his own; being a part of an unthinking machine he is simply to obey the orders of his superiors, shoot, stab, hew down, and trample upon those he is told are the enemies of the state, and eat his grub without having anything to say about his surroundings. The Pullman incident is, therefore, in the line of rebellion, mutiny, grave insubordination, but it sharply defines the deep seated hostility of state troops to scabs — men who are willing to accept such degrading wages as corporations choose to offer. Taking this view of the subject, the Pullman incident is a note of warning that plutocratic employers will do well to heed, since it is indicative of still graver incidents of insubordination on the part of state troops recruited from the ranks of workingmen.

Edited with a footnote by Tim Davenport

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