
Our First Great Need: A Letter from Woodstock Jail, Jan. 16, 1895 by Eugene V. Debs

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Labor has fallen on troublous times. All the forces of society and all the powers of government are arrayed against workingmen. The mills of oppression are steadily grinding and the lot of the average workingman is scarcely one remove above slavery. What shall be done to check this vicious, demoralizing tendency of the times? I answer, let us get together and pull together for the good of all. There is no other hope for salvation. As long as workingmen vote the same ticket their masters vote they must expect to be doomed to slavery. When will workingmen have the good sense to follow the example of capitalists and vote together, and vote *their interests*?

At present the grand army of labor is divided and torn into factions and fractions, whose high purpose, it seems to be, is to destroy one another. Let us break up our hostile camps, eschew all *-isms*, banish dissension, and shoulder to shoulder march to the polls and take possession of the government in all its departments. Let us do this first and do our quarreling, if we must quarrel, afterward. Until we do this capitalism will rule with iron hand and the courts and armies will enforce its decrees. The lot of the toiler will become worse and worse until the very dead line of degradation will be reached and the starry banner of the republic, whatever we may say about its waving "over the land of the free and the home of the brave," will simply symbolize the triumphant reign of the money power and the enslavement of the common people.

It would help us little to improve (if such a thing were possible) the present competitive wage system. It is essentially a system of spoliation. There is not a redeeming feature to it. Every thoughtful man

knows it is maintained by the overmastering greed of the ruling rich. Nothing less than the complete overthrow of the grinding, degrading, pauperizing conspiracy against wage-workers will answer the demand. Why should one man work like a galley slave to keep another in luxurious idleness? Every man is entitled to all he produces with his brain and hands. The night of wage competition is dark, but the dawn of cooperation is near at hand. Let us get close enough together to hear each other's heart throbs. Let us unite in harmonious cooperation and the day of deliverance is near at hand.

Eugene V. Debs.

McHenry County Jail,
Woodstock, Ill.,
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Edited by Tim Davenport

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