
The Labor Movement

by Eugene V. Debs

Unsigned article in *Locomotive Firemen's Magazine*,
vol. 13, no. 3 (March 1889), pp. 206-207.

There was a time, not remote, when it was held that the only weapon of the wage workers in America was the strike. But a change has come. Wage workers have advanced in intelligence. They have become readers and thinkers, and they have become close observers. They have devoted their leisure to the study of conditions, surroundings, circumstances, and have advanced to positions which enable them to arrive at just and wise conclusions. We refer to the many, not to the few. There are still those who believe that "our varied industries and heterogeneous population necessitate all phases of warfare, from the guerilla system, incident to isolation, to the arbitration of differences consequent upon the higher civilization of congregated citizenship. But the great mass of wage workers in the United States believe that the ballot is the weapon which is ultimately to secure them justice and equal privileges before the law. It is an old aphorism: "Like people, like the king," or, vice versa, and it may be said, like people like law, and certainly this may be said when the ballot is in the hands of all the people.

In the United States the wage men are in the majority; they have the ballot; majorities rule. Now, then, if lawmakers are corrupt, if laws are vicious, if injustice is practiced, if rights are cloven down, if courts are venal — who is to blame? Manifestly those in the majority, who, having the ballot, can, if they choose, remedy the evils complained of.

Does someone ask, if the wage-workers have this power why do they not use it? It is an easy matter to ask questions, but not always as easy to answer them. We shall attempt a reply. In the first place, wage men have been allied to some one of the political parties of the country, and have permitted their fealty to party to obscure the fact that legislation has been to their detriment rather than to their advantage. To use a phrase, they have "run with the machine" regardless of con-

sequences. They have been the victims of false professions, of pledges made to be broken. It has required time to educate workingmen out of the old rut and up to a higher plane of purpose. What is the spectacle now? Workingmen are federating. Nor for the purpose of “guerilla” warfare, not for the adoption of the policy of anarchists, not to revolutionize society and government by bludgeons and bombs, dynamite and kindred explosives, but by the ballot. They realize that they are American citizens, that they create the wealth of the country, that revenues are derived from their labor, that in peace they pay the taxes and in war fight the battles, and rising to the dignity of their rights under the Constitution they are saying, “We will elect just men to office. We will have just laws administered by honest men, and this we will do by the use of the all-powerful weapon — the ballot, and this they can do by the ballot, and they can achieve such victories as will astonish the world.

Does someone ask, When will these wonderful things transpire? When will this full orb'd day occupy its place in the calendar? When will this millennial era dawn? Such queries have a taint of querulousness. It is sufficient to say that the labor movement is a growth. To emancipate labor from the thralldom of injustice is not a task of a day or a year. Labor confronts an antiquity of injustice. It bends beneath wrongs which began before the pyramids were built. It has been prostrate for 40 centuries, and in all lands beneath the sun it is prostrate today, save in this God-favored land, and here, after a century of freedom wagemen have, by processes of political and judicial chicane, been kept under the ban. We say political and judicial because by law and by decisions of courts, grasping and conscienceless men have been able to so shape business affairs as to make *work* all too often the synonym for poverty and degradation. In this connection we desire to be understood as saying that a new departure has been inaugurated, that a new revolution has been begun which means the emancipation of labor from many forms of injustice and wrongs. Not by the mob, not by incendiary harangues, not by arousing and firing the passions of men, not by disturbing the peace and security of society, but by means ordained by the Constitution and in harmony with order.

What, we ask, is more fashionable than to quote wages in king-cursed European lands? As if to tell, workingmen of America, that citizenship and all of its privileges, responsibilities, and high aspirations is to be measured by wages. We have a rational conception of the power of money, but let it be understood that wagemen of Amer-

ica are not to be silenced by any per diem. The high resolve is to change unjust laws and place men in the legislative, executive, and judiciary departments who will see that just laws are righteously administered. We admit that the task is herculean, but not more formidable than to successfully redeem a continent from a wilderness and make fruitful Edens as numerous as the stars. This labor has done for America, and if wagemen are true to themselves, true to their noble heritage, the time is not distant when they will behold their banner waving in triumph where legislators deliberate and where judges proclaim the law.

Edited by Tim Davenport

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