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# Strikes

by Eugene V. Debs

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The world has always had a non-combatant element, those who deplored war under all circumstances, and they are still doing business at the old stand. Notwithstanding this, there are wars and rumors of wars on all of the continents and many of the islands, nor is it expected that any change will immediately occur.

It is conceded that labor strikes are declarations of war, not sanguinary, but war nevertheless, war which entails sacrifices and many woes upon those who strike — the rank and file of the armies of labor. To show how the strike wars went forward in the state of New York last year, or, 1890, the following summary from the report of Mr. Peck, Labor Commissioner of that state, is interesting.<sup>1</sup> He states that there were, during the year, 6,258 in 170 trades. Of these, 5,566 were successful, 169 were compromised, 565 were unsuccessful, and 58 are pending. Number of persons engaged in strikes: 93,984. Number refused work after strike: 5,048. Amount lost in wages: \$1,889,164.32. Amount expended for relief of strikers: \$131,518.75. Estimated gain in wages for one year: \$4,122,883.10. Loss to employers from all causes: \$481,524.43.

In the foregoing it is shown that after deducting for loss of wages \$1,889,164.32, and \$131,518.75 — a total of \$2,020,683.07 — labor gained by the wars \$2,102,200.03. It is furthermore shown that employers lost, in one way and another, \$481,524.43. It is not to be presumed that the losses by employers in any wise detracted from the sum total of their “creature” enjoyments; they could draw on their “surplus” and proceed as usual, but in the cases where the employees did not win a victory the situation was far different.

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<sup>1</sup> **Charles Fletcher Peck** (1845-1912) was the first Commissioner of the Bureau of Labor Statistics of New York, appointed by Democratic Governor Grover Cleveland in 1883.

By reference to Mr. Peck's figures it is seen that 5,048 workers, after peace had been declared were refused work, turned adrift to face any fate that the world might have in store for them.

The question arises, why were 5,048 men refused work? Mr. Peck does not state the reason and we are, therefore, left to conjecture.

It is probable that these 5,048 men were active in bringing about the strikes, that they saw the wrongs practiced and demanded justice, and were therefore "spotted" and made to realize that men who have the courage of convictions are the ones who are marked for penalties, and as they fall thick, merciless, and crushing, those who inflict them tauntingly exclaim, "That is what you get by striking," and a heartless world chimes in, saying, "Good enough for them, the next time they will know better than to strike." And the effect, in numerous instances, is that of intimidation upon the workingmen, who accept degradation, wrong, and injustice rather than try the strike remedy. What these wrongs are, what is the character of the injustice and degradation it is not required that we should attempt to recite. They are often such that could they be shown, as Anthony exhibited the stab holes in Caesar's mantle, would move paving stones to mutiny. There is slow death by hunger, exposure, foul air, and tasks such as only galley slaves are required to endure.

We are not an advocate of strikes, except as a last resort, and that last resort comes when employers refuse to accord a full measure of justice to employees.

We do not forget the trials which men endure when the fortunes of war go against them, when they are compelled to see scabs take their places, as in the case of the Northwestern Railroad, when 400 switchmen were made to "bite the dust," and a great brotherhood of railroad employees flung out the banner, black with treason to organized labor, which advocates protection.

When pirates sail the seas they have numerous flags, indicating nationality and that they are pursuing a legitimate trade, but when their victim has "hove to," the black flag is unfurled and the captured ship's crew have to "walk the plank," but if anything more cruel, less than death, was ever visited upon innocent men, than the grand officers of the B of RT<sup>2</sup> visited upon 400 switchmen, the account has

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<sup>2</sup> The Brotherhood of Railroad Trainmen, an organization previously known as the Brotherhood of Railroad Brakemen, which colluded with the Northwestern Railroad as part of a jurisdictional dispute with the Switchmen's Mutual Aid Association in May 1891.

escaped our notice. That was a strike on the part of the Northwestern and the B of RT conspirators, and unfortunately the fallen switchmen could not strike back.

It was a case that should have aroused the indignation of every railroad employee on the continent. It was an instance of such unpardonable perfidy as should have aroused the strike spirit everywhere, but it did not and 400 innocent men were made the victims of idleness. Is that the whole story? Oh, no. On the contrary, the conspirators were hailed with exclamations of “well done, good and faithful servants,” and were encouraged to go forward and “get even” regardless of methods or consequences.

It is a case that Mr. Peck could take up and analyze, showing how many parts of virtue and how many of villainy there were in its composition.

Strikes will continue to occur while injustice prevails, but since organized treason has become a feature of protection, it will be well for honest men to be on the lookout for conspirators.

*Edited with footnotes by Tim Davenport*

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