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## The Degradation of Mine Labor (May 5, 1897)

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Terre Haute, Ind., May 5, 1897.

In the article preceding this I said that the paramount issue with the mine owners was the disruption of the miners' union. The question of wages could, and doubtless would, have been readily settled. Indeed, it is doubtful if upon this question alone the strike had ever been declared. The only effect of the question of wages was to speedily and thoroughly organize the miners. As soon as the matter of demanding increased wages was raised, men fairly flocked into the union and it is in order to remark that if the increase had been secured, many of them would have been as prompt to flock out again.

There are workmen who never join a union unless they have a personal grievance or want their pay raised and then they rush into a union with a whoop and precipitate a strike and when the strike is over, whether it succeeds or fails, their fit of unionism is ended and they recede as unceremoniously as they appeared. Such men have no conception of union principles and are always a detriment to an organization. They are animated wholly by selfish motives. They do not join a union because they approve its principles or are in sympathy with its mission, or because of a desire to help their fellow men, but simply and solely to use it as emergency may require, to accomplish their own selfish ends. If the union happens to succeed they pocket the benefits but never attend another meeting, nor pay another cent of dues. If failure results, they are the first to pour their denunciations upon the leaders for having "sold them out" and to condemn and renounce the union for having "beat them out of their jobs."

In this, of course, they have a chorus of sympathetic "amens" from plutocrats and their hirelings and parasites, generally including the press and often the pulpit, who, while feigning to commiserate with the poor "dupes," as they are termed, for having been led astray by designing agitators, proceed to traduce the leaders and misrepresent and vilify the union

and thus the organization is made to appear as a reprehensible conspiracy and is riven asunder and the now defenseless employees settle down to their tasks, dismayed and disheartened, while the screws are applied to them more vigorously than ever, and with accelerating rapidity they begin the downward course to degradation. I have neither time nor space to elucidate the point, but this is the outline of the process whereby the once independent, self-respecting American workman has been reduced to mendicancy and servitude.

The state of Pennsylvania affords a humiliating illustration. The investigation just authorized by the state legislature has disclosed a most shocking state of affairs. Twenty years ago the coal miners of that state could make from \$4 to \$6 per day. Now at the very best they cannot average to exceed \$1 per day; in many cases they cannot make more than 50 cents, while others are only able to average 25 cents per day. What a tragic enactment on American soil, wet with the blood of the world's noblest martyrs, that liberty, equality, and justice might be the heritage of all, and this to gratify the insatiate lust for wealth and power.

Is the situation overdrawn? Do I hear it said that such talk is merely the gabble of a walking delegate, the raving of a lying agitator who is trying to stir up discontent? Listen, ye Americans, and especially ye who froth about organized labor and refuse to treat with it. Listen, I say, to what follows, for these workingmen are not organized. *Once they were*. They took the advice of some of our present day employers, including certain mine managers. They abjured organized labor and "preserved their independence" and *relied upon the honor of their employers to do them justice* and this has brought them to the 25 cents per day level, a rate of wages that an average chinaman would scorn to work for.

Here is a brief extract from the report just issued in reference to the legislative investigation:

The legislative committee that is investigating the condition of the miners of the Pittsburgh district completed its second day of personal inspection among the mines, and what the investigators witnessed would fill many large volumes. When the work was finished the members of the committee made the statement that no such suffering was ever known by them to exist before, and they are well convinced that something must be done and at once to alleviate the condition of the unfortunate thousands who are in the district.

The territory that was inspected today was in and about Banning on the P&LE Railroad,<sup>1</sup> about 40 miles above Pittsburgh.

The mines are located at Banning station and are worked by about 100 miners. One half of that number could easily do the work, for the men do not get more than two or three days a week. When they do work, the cars are so scarce that no matter how hard they try they are unable to make more than \$1 a day at the outside, and very much more frequently their pay for the day is from 25 to 50 cents. The greater part of these employees are foreigners, there being but ten American-born families in the entire number.

After leaving the settlement in and about Banning, the committee went to Jacobs Creek, about three miles below Banning, where the Darr mines of Osborne and Saeger are located. The condition of the miners here is worse, if anything, than at the mines oat Banning. The men work from three to four days a week, but the wages they receive are so small that they can scarcely manage to exist. The greater part of the miners are foreigners, with a good sprinkling of Americans and negroes.

The company owns the miserable hovels which shelter the inhabitants. One of the most wretched is a shed about 18 x 12 feet. For this hovel the company received \$4 per month and it would cost about \$25 to build it. The occupants of the house are Peter Jones, his wife and child, and eight "boarders." Where these eleven persons manage to find room enough to stretch out at night is a mystery. Inside there was a varied assortment of furniture, for the cooking, eating, and sleeping is all done in one room. "We just manage to live," said Mrs. Jones, "but if it was not for the boarders that we keep Peter could not make enough in the mines to keep us from starvation."

Here is food for a whole freight train of through and for none more than for Western miners. Mine managers can also contemplate this appalling picture at their leisure and if they are not destitute of heart and soul and conscience (and some, I know, are not) they will not only cease their antagonism to union labor but will encourage the men to organize and with words of kindness and encouragement do their best to secure and maintain harmonious relations and present a solid front against such Siberization of the Western states. But aside from all ethical consideration, such a policy of degradation as reduced the once proud state of Pennsylvania to a plague spot is ruinous and destructive. The famishing miner is followed by the bankrupt operator. Read this dispatch which I clip from this morning's paper:

PITTSBURGH, April 29th [1897]. John M. Risher, the big coal operator, has confessed judgment to his wife for the sum of \$115,376 on notes given to her at diverse times. Mr. Risher was supposed to be one of the wealthiest operators in the district. No reason for the judgment is given except the disastrous condition of the coal business.

Here we have an exhibition of the logical consequences of the intolerant, impoverishing policy of crushing labor.<sup>2</sup> This is the story briefly told: Organized capital — Organized labor — Strike — Nothing to arbitrate — Riots — Soldiers — Injunction — Labor vanquished — Reduced wages — Tramps — Bankruptcy — General demoralization and all around ruin.

But fortunately such calamities are not unmixed evils. They are not only fruitful of lessons to observant men but they are the means of shaking to their foundation and ultimately destroying old systems and decaying institutions and preparing the way for the new, and thus making possible the material progress and moral development of the world.

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<sup>1</sup> The Pittsburgh & Lake Erie Railroad, established in May 1875.

<sup>2</sup> While the economic condition of coal operators may well have been disastrous in this period, the example Debs cites here is far from prototypical. It involves financial machinations that were part of a dispute among siblings over disposition of the \$450,000 estate of coal operator John C. Risher, who died in 1889, leaving his mining operation and various real estate holdings in trust to his children. One of these children, John M. Risher, drew out more than his share from the trust fund, prompting legal action. The John M. Risher Coal Co. was liquidated in the summer of 1898, retaining a positive cash balance.