

**Unionism is the Flower of the Past Century:
A Labor Day Message¹
[excerpt]
(September 3, 1910)**

The wage earners of the world today are poor as a rule and ignorant as a class, but they constitute the overwhelming majority. In other words, they have the power but are not conscious of it. The supreme demand of the day is to make them conscious of the power they possess by reason of their vast numbers.

Labor Day celebrations in the United States are advancing numerically, but in the enlightenment of the wage earner, in the awakening of him to the realization of his power, they are accomplishing nothing. Labor Day will see vast assemblages of men in parade. With banners and floats, uniforms and bands, they will march through the city, listen to some suave speaker, enjoy the fellowship of their kind, point out the great showing they make in their numbers, and the next day they will be back in the factories and the mills, toiling and sweating and not one particle better off for their celebration.

The working class alone does the world's work, creates its capital, digs its wealth from out of the ground, builds its factories, its mills, its railroads, conquers the rivers and the mountains, manufactures the things that support the people, feeds and clothes the multitude, and rears the majestic palaces that shelter the parasites.

The working class alone increases the knowledge and adds to the wealth of society. It is the only class that is essential to society and, therefore, the only class that can survive in the worldwide struggle for freedom.

A century ago the trade union movement started to develop into the tremendous power it is in the land today. Unionism, as applied to labor in the modern sense, is the fruit and flower of the last century. It has come to us for the impetus of our day in pursuit of its worldwide mission of emancipation. It is the manifestation of the desire and the need of the great majority that constitutes the working class to unite in order that they may rule as the sovereigns they are told they are but are not.

Wendell Phillips, in 1872, said: "I hail the labor movement for the reason that it is my only hope for democracy."² Unless there is power in your movement, industrially and politically, the last knell of democratic liberty in this Union is struck.

In the wage-earning army of this country lies the power to rule righteously and honestly. The immense numbers of laborers is the manifestation of that power. All that is needed is the awakening. That the laboring man does not realize his right and his power to rule is not all his fault. Deprived of education by the necessity of earning bread, spending his waking hours in endless toil, returning to his modest home at night with his energies spent in laboring for another's profit, he has little time to study, to learn, to think of the power he should exercise, and always there are those who would confuse him, minions hired to boss him, shrewd lieutenants of the rich paid to lead him astray, to falsely inform him, to prevent him from realizing his strength and so hold him in bondage.

But there is ground upon which to be optimistic. There is reason to rejoice at the growth of trade unionism. Wage-earners are awakening to the fact that the important thing to impress upon the mind of the trade unionist is that it is his duty to cultivate the habit of doing his own thinking.

The moment he realizes this he is beyond the power of the scheming politician, the emissary of the exploiter, in or out of the labor movement. And you may quote me as saying that the laboring men of Terre Haute are today in the grasp of men who would and do exploit them for their own gains. "No politics in the union" is the cry of these men. By it they hope to keep the wage-earner from exercising that right of franchise by which the laboring class, the great majority, could rule for itself. By dividing the votes between the two great political parties they hope to maintain for the men who boss them the power to rule the multitude.

To them this Labor Day demonstration is a credit. They are exhibiting their stock. They are showing the big bosses the vast army they lead. They are impressing their followers with their strength while all the time they are carefully guiding that strength to suit their own purposes by keeping the union out of politics.

In Terre Haute's Labor Day celebration one man I know has awakened and will take part. He is one of the great army that toils in a mill. He has not had the advantages of a good education. But in his modest little home there are all the standard works on economics and in his idle moments you will find him studying them. Place this man before a workingman's

audience and he would route Senator Beveridge with his oratory. He has learned the lesson of doing his own thinking. He knows why the wage-earner should rule and he knows the wage-earner does not rule.

It is in men like him that the future of this country rests. His kind will set this overwhelming majority of toiling workmen to thinking for themselves, acting for themselves, voting for themselves, and then Labor Day, with all its pomp and parade and music, will have a new significance. Then, and not until then, will labor exercise its power and right to rule the world.

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¹ Excerpt of a 90 minute interview granted to the *Terre Haute Tribune*, held at Debs's home in that city.

² Wendell Phillips, "Address to the Knights of St. Crispin," April 1872.