
The Aristocracy of Labor

by Eugene V. Debs

Published in *Locomotive Firemen's Magazine*, vol. 12, no. 11 (Nov. 1888), pp. 804-806.

The term aristocracy signifies a condition of things totally anti-American in government — and therefore in government affairs is unknown in this country. We have no titles of nobility — and officials are simply the *servants* of the people, the people make them and unmake them at will. Notwithstanding this, it so happens with a large number of officials that the moment they are inaugurated,

They play such fantastic tricks

as to make not only angels, but all sensible people weep.¹ Nevertheless it is true, that any one, at all observant, cannot fail to note on all sides a tendency to exclusiveness which is the bane of our social structure — and an essential ingredient of aristocracy.

We have in this country a variety of aristocracies each one of which, when subjected to analysis, is fruitful of derision and contempt.

In the North we used to have what was known as the “codfish” aristocracy — an exclusiveness based upon the catch of cod and mackerel, crabs and clams. True, there was in all New England an aristocracy or aristocracies which, while owing their dignity to cod and clams were confronted with instances of exclusiveness, based upon a superior religion which whipped Quakers, banished Baptists and hung witches; but as cod and clams were abundant the codfish aristocracy gradually gained an ascendancy and maintained it. Some laid the foundation of their superiority in bartering rum and trinkets for

¹ From *The Merchant of Venice* (1604), Act 2, Scene 2, by **William Shakespeare** (1564-1616). The original lines are: “...but man, proud man, / Drest in a little brief authority, / Most ignorant of what he's most assured, / His glassy essence, like an angry ape, / Plays such fantastic tricks before high heaven / As make the angels weep; who, with our spleens, / Would all themselves laugh mortal.”

African savages, while others boasted of blue blood, but to a greater or less extent, the smell of cod permeated the entire mass.

More recently the brood of American aristocracies has multiplied. Beginning with “striking ile,” we now count our aristocracies by the score in banks and bucket shops, land and cattle, trusts and monopolies, until every town, village and station, as well as the large centers of population have their aristocrats and exclusiveness, plumed and diamond, the aristocrat swaggers and struts on all the highways. Every village aspires to have its Gould, its Vanderbilt, or Astor, its aristocratic pimple — and in all communities are found a degenerate gang, who have no higher ambition than to play the role of parasite, and now, heaven save the mark, we have what may be called an “aristocracy of labor” — an aristocracy in which one department of labor looks with proud disdain upon another department of labor— and if the, subject of *federation* is mooted, then the aristocratic idea flames out like a blast of a volcano. Our attention has been called to a communication in the *Engineers Journal* for October [1888], signed F.D. Toms, in which he says:

That the engineers and firemen should always act as one man, and if a satisfactory constitution can be adopted, should hereafter be known as one order, all who have the welfare of both organizations at heart, will agree.

So far, no proposition has been made to make the two brotherhoods, engineers and firemen, one brotherhood. It is not proposed to fuse, blend, amalgamate, the brotherhoods but to form an alliance, which in time of trouble will result in concert of action. But Mr. Toms proceeds as follows:

But are we willing to place our skilled labor on a level with the unskilled labor of switchmen and brakemen?

In this interrogatory we have the outcroppings of what may be styled the aristocracy of labor. It is the idea of exclusiveness. It is an idea of caste in embryo. In the various departments of labor no one underrates skill. The skilled laborer always receives higher wages than the unskilled laborer, but the unskilled laborer is “a man for a’ that.”² He may live in a humble home, “wear hodden gray and a’ that,” but

² From “A Man’s a Man” (1795), by **Robert Burns** (1759-1796).

he may be as intelligent as the skilled laborer, as well read, have as high ambitions, and be as good a citizen. More, he is an absolute necessity to the skilled laborer, indeed, it is not difficult to prove that the skilled laborer is positively dependent upon the unskilled laborer. We ask with commendable emphasis, what would become of the master bricklayer, the skilled mechanic, were it not for the humble, unskilled hod-carrier?

But without further divergence from the text, what would become of the skilled engineer but for the switchman and brakeman? No train would run, and the engineer's occupation, like that of Othello, would be gone. When, we ask Mr. F.D. Toms, was it conceded that locomotive firemen were skilled laborers? When did the fact find lodgment in the mind of Mr. Toms? The idea of federation is not based upon skill or wages, or the superiority of one department of labor in comparison with another. The proposition of federation of railway employees is based upon the irrevocable necessity of one department to another in case a wrong exists which demands redress. It matters not how exclusive, how boastful, how aristocratic one department may be when its members are off of duty, the moment one takes his place on the rail all must be at their posts of duty. If the train can't move without an engineer, no more can it move without a fireman, a switchman, a brakeman, and a conductor. Here we have, federation or no federation, cooperation, interdependence— a necessity of one to the other, absolute and irrevocable — and any proposition looking to federation which does not include all, or at least four of the departments named, is futile and preposterous.

We have no comments to make upon Mr. Toms' estimate of the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers, commendations in that direction are worthily bestowed, but says Mr. Toms:

If we place ourselves in the power of other orders so they can call upon us to strike whenever they see fit, we will at once lose all the advantages we have gained by twenty years of conservative action.

Federation does not contemplate strikes. On the contrary, federation proposes the avoidance of strikes. There is no purpose to fort go arbitration and concession. Corporations will be invited to adjust grievances as before; expedients to secure justice will be exhausted, as

with the CB&Q,³ but when all fail and a strike is ordered, all train men will go together. It then that men, skilled or unskilled laborers exert their power, and the fact that they would act as a unit, it is believed would prevent a strike and secure justice by the exhibition of federated force.

Mr. Toms, in speaking of the “Q” strike expresses the opinion that the engineers and firemen could not have been “more successful had every brakeman and switchman on the road gone out with us,” and immediately calls in question the declaration that “the conductors are the ones who have beaten us,” and adds, “they would beat the engineers and firemen out of their jobs at any opportunity, but not many conductors would ht anxious to take the positions vacated by the switchmcn and brakemen.” We italicise for the purpose of emphasizing Mr. Toms’ inconsistency. The conductors would play engineers and firemen, but not switchmen and brakemen. Necessarily, therefore, if the switchmen and brakemen had “gone out” with the engineers and firemen they would have helped to gain the victory over the “Q.”

As for the conductors, it is even now believed that a majority of the members of the ORC are in active sympathy with other railroad employees who propose federation for protection and who, though not skilled workmen, are able, according to Mr. Toms, to defeat the engineers and firemen.

Mr. Toms further says:

The switchmen have struck because a railroad company employed non-union men. Would we endorse any such actions? That would be contrary to all our principles. We never have, and I hope we never will so far forget our principles of American freedom, as to dictate to anyone who they may or may not employ.

This is simply chaff. It gives away everything. The strike on the “Q” is continued because the “Q” employs scabs, and refuses to reinstate the old employees. If it be an American principle that any one may employ whom they please, no one should kick if they employ Chinamen. And if it be an American principle that any one can employ whom they please it is certainly an American principle that they may pay them, if rot such prices as they please, at least, such prices as

³ The Chicago, Burlington & Quincy Railroad, known colloquially as “the Burlington” and “the Q.”

the parties may agree upon, and this being true, the question of wages is thrown out of court, remanded to the limbo of things obsolete.

Not so. The American idea is justice, the enthronement of the right, and that, too, by federation — “one in many” — not to defend the wrong, but to extirpate it and establish the right. Federation does not mean war, but more properly resistance of wrongs and injustice. In the American colonial federation, and in forming the union, little Rhode Island was crowned with all the dignity that attached to New York, Pennsylvania, and Virginia. There was no aristocracy of colonies, no feeling of exclusiveness when Rhode Island and Delaware entered the council chamber, and Mr. F.D. Toms can well afford to regard the importance of switchmen and brakemen when discussing the federation of railroad employees for mutual protection when they have wrongs to redress. Let us be done with every thing that smacks of aristocracy in labor. The man who quarries the marble is a necessity to the artist, whose skilled hand and eye produce a statue, and the man who throws a switch, sets a brake, or shovels the coal, is as important to running a train as the engineer — and in discussing federation, where necessity forces cooperation and interdependence, exclusiveness regardless of real or supposed superiority, is not to be tolerated.

Edited by Tim Davenport

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First Edition.