
Labor Strikes and Their Lessons

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by Eugene V. Debs

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The times in which we live demand plain, straightforward, heroic talk; subterfuge is cowardice. There should be no evasions, no concealments, no masks, no idol worship, no spectacular parade of effete theories of government, no advocacy of Russian tactics in dealing with serfs, and no Sultanic or Satanic practices in determining the rights of the workingmen.

Fortunately, or otherwise, as men view the subject, we live at a time when the "labor problem" is before the country for debate and solution. Those who enter the argumentative arena must come equipped with arguments based upon cause, with logic keen as a Damascus blade and as penetrating and as quieting as a Federal bullet or bayonet.

The labor problem is the problem of problems now before the country. In another publication I took occasion to say that "the labor problem involves the consideration of a number of problems, but they all go to make up the one problem as certainly as that air is composed of oxygen, nitrogen, and carbon. Suppose the subject for discussion be taxation? All taxes are paid by labor. Suppose it be revenue? All revenues are derived from labor. Suppose it be wealth? All wealth is the creation of labor. Is the question building cities? Only labor makes them possible. Is it clearing away the wilderness? They would remain as God planted them but for labor. Is it a question of food? Famine would be universal only for labor. But for labor no keel

would cleave the waves nor locomotives speed along their iron tracks. The warehouses would stand empty, factories would be silent, ships and docks would rot, cities would tumble down, and universal ruin would prevail. These are economic truths, like the azoic rocks upon which the world is built; they are the verities upon which civilization, progress, and the hopes of the world are based.

In this connection I quote the language of Hon. Stephen B. Elkins, late Secretary of War,¹ who, referring to labor agitation at the time, said :

“I am, with others, to some extent, an employer of labor. I take a deep interest in the labor question. To my mind it rises in importance above all others. * * * The question presented by the present labor agitation is both industrial and social, and concerns not the capitalist nor the wage-receiver exclusively, nor the one more than the other, but the whole body of society and the State itself. It involves a great principle, in the presence of which individual interests become insignificant. No question more serious or of graver importance ever came before the American people, and upon its right settlement may not only depend the future of society, but ultimately the fate of the great republic.”

I reproduce the language of Mr. Elkins to demonstrate the invulnerability of the proposition that the labor problem, in its present importance and far-reaching influences, towers above all other problems; that in its settlement, if justice hold sway, the “gates of hell” will not prevail against the “great republic,” but if, in the solution of the labor problem, justice is bribed or bludgeoned into silence by the weapons of rapacity, and spoliation forever wielded for the discomfiture of labor, ultimate consequences will not be contemplated with composure.

The lessons taught by strikes are to be studied with reference to causes as well as effect, if the purpose in view is to find remedies for the ceaseless unrest in the ranks of labor, culminating all too often, perhaps, in strikes.

Every strike of workingmen of which the public has taken cognizance has had its origin in wrongs and rank injustice; but, if we are to believe the common press-reports, strikes result from pernicious influences exerted by “labor agitators,” “walking delegates,” men of

¹ **Stephen B. Elkins** (1841-1911) was Secretary of War from 1891 to 1893, during the administration of Republican Benjamin Harrison.

small capacities devoted to making mischief, and that but for them labor would be contented and prosperous. Manifestly, such assumptions are false, manufactured for base purposes, and are therefore unworthy of more consideration than attaches to puerile mendacity; and yet it will not be gainsaid that such utterances, designed to obscure the truth, have been potential in poisoning the public mind and in bringing about conditions which have indefinitely increased the burdens and ills which have afflicted labor to an extent that in many instances defies exaggeration.

Sane men, seeking for the truth, whether identified with labor organizations or standing aloof from them — men interested in the public welfare — men whose incomes are not dependent upon the spoliation of wage-earners, will hesitate long before accepting as conclusive the *ex parte* arraignment of labor agitators as the cause of strikes. They will reason that the wide-spread unrest everywhere prevailing in the ranks of labor must, of necessity, have a more logical cause; that agitation is but an expression of grievances which, having been borne to the limit of endurance, are forced at last upon public attention, the *dernier ressort*² often being the strike, and when it comes it has its lessons, which communities, States, and nations are required to study. To dismiss them with a sneer as the mere effervescence of agitators, the froth of fanatics, the vagaries of cranks no longer answers the demand. The lessons which strikes force upon public attention are of such a serious character that at last the government of the United States has determined to delve for causes, to find the poisoned fountains from which labor grievances flow, at least in one instance, in which the strike has stirred the nation to profounder depths than has hitherto been credited to any labor upheaval.

Taking into consideration my environments, reticence with regard to the great strike of the American Railway Union — sometimes spoken of as the “Pullman strike” — might in some quarters be deemed a virtue, but as it has taught the nation a mighty lesson I know of no reason why I may not be heard upon the subject.

I do not use these pages for self-defense. I neither seek nor crave notoriety. I am neither passive nor defiant. With convictions intact and manhood unabashed, I view the past of my life with composure and await developments unmoved.

² *Last resort*. This is a rare instance of the son of French immigrants Debs dropping a French phrase into his writings.

I write of the lessons of the strike, their immediate influence, with such reflections relating to the future as, reasoning from cause to effect, may suggest. If we as a nation are to have an era of justice to labor, in which the alarm-bells of strikes are to be heard no more, no one will hail the advent of peace and goodwill with more enthusiasm than myself. But I do not believe, nor do I think it can be shown, that strikes have been an unmixed evil to labor, to society, or to the state.

The tongue of history does not proclaim that strikes have been uniformly or mainly abortive. On the contrary, history teaches that much, great, and permanent good has resulted from strikes. The time is largely within the memory of men now living when employers exacted 12, 14, and, in some instances, 16 hours as a day's work. Men demanded a reduction of hours of toil, but the demand was conceded only after years of struggle, accompanied with strikes and attended with many sacrifices incident to resistance, such as idleness and want. But the men were heroic, patient, and persistent, and though they suffered in contending for a principle embodying right and justice, they bequeathed to American workingmen a 10-hour day — indeed, a 9-hour day — rescuing from the grasp of employers at least five hours a day for rest, for recuperation, for home, for mental and physical improvement, and society is all the better for the victory won by the time-strikes of workingmen. The inordinate greed, the mercenary instinct of human nature were overcome by strikes oft-repeated, and, though sometimes lost, were ultimately successful. Nor has the demand for a still less number of hours for a day's work ceased.

There are in the field a host of labor agitators who are demanding that eight hours shall constitute a day's work. The federal government, in response to agitation, has yielded to the demand. States have passed 8-hour laws with *provisos* which practically nullify contemplated benefits, but the work of agitation and education proceeds. There have been eight-hour strikes attended with sacrifices and inconveniences, idleness, and the ills which idleness entails, but the work goes bravely on and victory is in sight.

In this contention for a reduction of hours it is admitted that society is largely the beneficiary, because every movement which emancipates men from mental and physical exhaustion inures to the welfare of the homes of workingmen, and therefore to the well-being of the state.

As a general proposition, I think the statement will not be seriously questioned that a large majority of the strikes have had their

origin in disagreements relating to wages, nor do I hesitate to affirm that the general policy of employers has been to secure the largest possible number of hours for a day's work at the least possible rate of wages. I refer to the rule — that there are notable exceptions goes without the saying, and these exceptions students of labor questions grasp with eagerness and give them the widest possible publicity, because they serve as an exemplification of what may be accomplished when men who employ labor and capital are animated by a desire to deal justly and not avail themselves of conditions to make themselves rapidly rich by methods which bear a striking resemblance to piracy.

Omitting many causes of strikes, which will readily occur to the minds of those at all familiar with labor troubles, I repeat that the bedrock cause of the strikes which have from time to time aroused public attention has been wages; and if there are those who deny the affirmation, they will find it difficult to supply proof to maintain their position, and therefore the lessons taught by strikes are eminently and preeminently of an economic character. They relate to the well-being of a vast number of men, currently estimated at 17 million. If they are underpaid, if they are the victims of injustice, if of the wealth they create they do not receive such a share as enables them to live above the level of squalor and remote from the boundary lines of degradation, in consequence of which they strike for better conditions, public opinion should be concentrated more upon the causes and less upon the effects of the strike, because upon the removal of the cause rests the only hope for peace, and such would be the case if public opinion were not largely manufactured by agencies which wealth, and not weal, creates and controls.

In the United States there are reasons for maintaining that the wage-question has more significance and importance than in any other country, growing out of the fact that the wage-earners of the United States are bona fide citizens, clothed with all the prerogatives of citizenship. They constitute a part, and a very large and important part, of "we, the people." They are not opposed to the government, to its laws, nor to its flag. They are not anarchists, and though badgered and buffeted as members of the great army of labor, they are, nevertheless, by constitution and statute, sovereign citizens, and when they strike it is that their food, clothing, and shelter may be such as become American citizens; and this lesson is always taught when they strike for rights, the denial of which deprives them of liberty, of the

means of pursuing happiness, and of life itself; since when wages will not sustain life mendicancy and vagabondism, even worse than death, ensue. The idea is fully expressed in the following lines by an unknown author:

Know, autocrats, aristocrats!
All men with sounding titles!
Whose hands have wrung with demon's grasp
The pauper's shrunken vitals —
 Man has awakened in his might,
 He knows the wrong, he knows the right!
 We say it! We the people!

There was a time when Ignorance
Fell with a leaden weight
Upon "the mass" — ye call'd it thus —
The mass felt then but hate!
 But now we wake to know our might.
 We know the wrong, we know the right!
 We say it! We the people!

Learn ye! who hold by parchment bonds,
The earth's uncultur'd acres:
Men have another claim to these,
Their claim is like their Maker's!
 Yes! we've awaken'd to our might —
 We know the wrong! We know the right!
 We say it! We the people!

God gave the earth to all men! *not*,
To those with heavy purses,
Who to the brow-sweat curse, would add,
Their tenant-wringing curses!
 He gave us, too! the fearful might
 Of those who, wrong'd, have learn'd their right!
 We say it! We the people!

God did not say that some should starve
While others cloy with pleasures;
He did not constitute a class,
The keepers of his treasures!
 It has seem'd thus before, but light
 Has shown the burden'd what is right!
 We say it! We the people!

He never said that any man
Was born to rule another.
But told us that we each should treat
Our fellow as our brother.
And now, awakening in our might,
We mean to have it so — 'tis right!
We say it I We the people! ³

There are a number of lessons taught by the strike which the obstinacy of the Pullman Palace Car Company forced upon its employees and upon the country. To grasp them in their entirety is not an easy task; to catalog and classify them in a way to enable the general reader to realize to the fullest extent the wrong and injustice they teach, demands a process of analytic and synthetic discussion for which I shall not ask space.

On the one hand, a great corporation, rich to plethora, rioting in luxuries, plutocratic, proud, and powerful, and yet mean and mercenary to an extent that compels hyperbole to sit dumb in the presence of piracies decked out in the robes of paternalism and philanthropy — a corporation adept in chicane and duplicity reduced to a science — in possession of land, habitations, water, light and fuel, mills and machinery, thus controlling the lives and liberties of at least 25,000 human beings, men, women, and children, becomes an object-lesson which the nation is now required to study.

On the other hand is seen an object-lesson of a different type. It is not a picture of houses and lands, lawns and landscape, “sacred grass,” violets and rose-trees, sparkling fountains and singing birds, and an atmosphere burdened with the aroma of flowers, but of human beings living amidst such surroundings and toiling for a pittance doled out to them by their employers — as a Heber⁴ might say: “Where every prospect pleases,” and only man is wretched, where sunken eyes and hollow cheeks speak of poniard-pointed hunger-pangs, where childhood has lost its joyousness and motherhood its hopes, and where strong men bow like reeds before tempests which drive them to despair.

³ This radical egalitarian poem was contributed anonymously to the weekly New York political magazine *Yankee Doodle*. Its first publication in the Sept. 18, 1847 issue, vol. 2, no. 50, pg. 238. Debs silently omits the third and fourth stanzas from this article, which are reprinted here from the original.

⁴ Apparently a reference to poet **Reginald Heber** (1783-1826).

As an object-lesson, the condition of the Pullman employees before the strike is worthy of serious consideration. Unable to shelter themselves, unable to feed themselves, unable to clothe themselves, the Pullman employees were made to realize their hapless and helpless condition, where the power on the throne ordered all their ways and reduced them to a point of destitution which required them to sit upon their coffins and contemplate a lingering death by starvation. It is assumed that labor agitators brought about the Pullman strike. Is it not, on the contrary, the fact that the Pullman employees, having been despoiled to the limit of endurance, by the exercise of their volition decided to strike? And that, too, upon the hypothesis that, whatever might happen, their condition could not be made worse. This being the fact, verified by overwhelming testimony, does it not become the public, the courts, and the government, in studying the lessons of the strike, to probe for causes, and then determine if the effects were not as logical as in any case of cause and effect within the entire domain of human affairs.

The cause of the strike was brazen heartlessness, cruelties that touched the vitals of innocent toilers untainted by crime, obedient to law, seeking to maintain their families by their work, and striking only when robbed by processes as relentless as foot-padism. The cause being cruelty — a crime as infamous as ever made a human heart its hiding-place, a crime that makes its perpetrator a monster while it blasts the hopes of its victims — ought to be productive of resistance, and such resistance ought to command the approval of every honest patriotic American.

The great lesson of the Pullman strike is found in the fact that it arouses wide-spread sympathy. This fellow-feeling for the woes of others — this desire to help the unfortunate; this exhibition of a divine principle, which makes the declaration plausible that “man was made a little lower than God,” and without which man would rank lower than the devil by several degrees — should be accepted as at once the hope of civilization and the supreme glory of manhood. And yet this exhibition of sympathy aroused by the Pullman strike is harped upon by press and pulpit as the one atrocious feature of the strike. Epithets, calumny, denunciation in every form that malice or mendacity could invent have been poured forth in a vitriol tide to scathe those who advocated and practiced the Christ-like virtue of sympathy. The crime of the American Railway Union was the practical exhibition of sympathy for the Pullman employes. Humanity and

Christianity, undebauched and unperverted, are forever pleading for sympathy for the poor and the oppressed. In all the tomes of civilized literature those who search for expressions and periods indicative of man's primal innocence, of hope for his deliverance from base desires, his emancipation from vice, inherited or acquired, of faith in an eternity of happiness, find them embodied in emanations flowing from sympathetic souls that have been loyal to God, to Truth, and to Justice; true to convictions, true to duty, however fierce the ordeal their fidelity may have required them to endure.

In studying this lesson of the Pullman strike, men, sturdy men, who know the right and dare maintain the right, have had occasion to note to what an extent the love of "filthy lucre" has debauched the press of the country — not all of it — no, for in all of the cities of our boasted civilization, our marts of money and trade, there have been publications that could be neither intimidated nor debauched. Invective, scurrility, and maledictions have done their utmost, and yet those courageous advocates of the right ceaselessly thunder into the public ear the dangers of despotism, warnings which will be remembered and treasured all the more certainly if the passing cyclone of passion shall have obliterated for a time the landmarks of liberty, and by arbitrary methods shall have secured that dangerous peace which comes to nations in the red track of bullets and bayonets, or is found behind the iron doors and bars of bastilles.

The strikes, while they have taught the country that sympathy remains in the breasts of thousands, have impressed upon all the fact that others prefer to nurse selfishness as cold as ice, and hate as hot as old Nebuchadnezzar's fiery furnace and as relentless as death; and, by a strange perversion of mind and morals, there are those who predict national health, happiness, and prosperity from those who imperil the security and peace of the State by their rapacity, in alliance with the victims of their spoliations, who, at least, debased to the level of coolies and peons, accept degradation without resistance.

But there is a lesson taught by the Pullman strike the study of which affords a glimmer of hope and satisfaction. It has taught the nation to place an honest estimate upon George M. Pullman. It has dragged the wrecker of homes and hopes from luxurious abode and sentenced him to the pillory for life, where he will feel the pelting storms of the scorn of men, women, and children who have been the victims of his villainy.

Again, the lesson taught by the Pullman strike has forced upon the Chief Magistrate of the Republic the fact that there is a pressing necessity for investigation; that labor demands other than military methods to mould its destiny. It has taught the nation that American workingmen ought not to be subjected to Russian methods, unless it has been determined to reduce them to serfs and their homes to huts and lairs. The fact that a commission has been appointed, clothed with Federal power, to investigate the causes leading to the Pullman strike, is encouraging; and if, peradventure, such results should be obtained as shall ultimately elevate labor and emancipate workingmen from corporation slavery, and permit them to rejoice in all the fruitions of liberty, then, in that case, history will record the fact, regardless of present verdicts, that in the organization of the American Railway Union there was a "divinity that shaped its ends," and an inscrutable Providence directing its acts. Should such be the verdict, such the outcome, those who may be called upon to suffer for the good they have accomplished will be consoled and strengthened by the reflection that, innocent of riot, rapine, and blood, they were instrumental, in alliance with other forces, in ushering in an era when employer and employ shall learn war no more; when the last bullet and bayonet, sent upon their mission of death, have drawn from the hearts of oppressed workingmen their last libation to redden the altars of American liberty.

Edited with footnotes by Tim Davenport

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