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# Will Labor Organizations Federate?

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We do not mean to be understood by the interrogatory, which forms the caption of this article, as propounding an inquiry which, however answered, would indicate a wish on our part, that all labor organizations should abandon their distinctive features, and form one grand central organization. On the contrary, we ask the question that we may put upon record such reflections *pro et con* as the subject suggests.

We do not regard as a probable result, that labor organizations will federate in any sense, that will require the abandonment of names, distinctive purposes of their membership, their constitutions, laws, rituals, etc. Nor do we believe that such a federation is desirable. It would require the abandonment of "home rule," and would, we think, result in confusion instead of order and harmony.

But we fail to discover any good reason why labor organizations of certain trades could not federate with decided and great advantages. To some extent this has already been accomplished.

Printers' unions have federated. There is a national printers' union.<sup>1</sup> There may be other national unions, which, in their annual conventions, legislate for all subordinate lodges. The idea is eminently practical, and only good results follow.

The organization of the Knights of Labor seeks to embody all trades, and to draw into its embrace all working-men, without reference to trade or employment. It is not a federation of labor organizations, but a union of all classes of laboring men and women. It seeks to combine in one fold the working men of the country, to formulate policies and enact laws and regulations, by which men of trades and

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<sup>1</sup> The National Typographical Union was formally established in 1852.

without trades shall be governed. And this being the case, the task must of necessity be herculean.

It is by no means a difficult matter to name all the trades (we refer to mechanics) known to the country. They are numerous and include a vast army of wage men. Thousands and tens of thousands of these wage men are now members of unions, peculiar to their trade. These unions, lodges, or by whatever name their organizations are known, could have state and national organizations, and delegates from state organizations could form a national organization, like the state and federal governments, exercising so much and no more power than is delegated to them. This done, there could be organizations of laboring men, who are not known as mechanics, but who are profoundly interested in labor questions, and these could be and should be organized and represented in the state and national organizations.

Do these propositions appear Utopian? Visionary? Impracticable? If so, then the federation of labor, or labor organizations, is an idea to be classified with other vagaries, and should be remanded to the limbo of hallucinations.

But federation is not impracticable. On the contrary, federation is feasible, and if labor is ever to reach the goal of equality with capital, in shaping policies, in the assertion of prerogatives, it will have to federate.

In contemplating the subject, it is quite probable, if there are those who are doubtful, that their distrust arises from the fact that the number of wage men of America is so great that hesitancy in accepting the practicability of federation is in the line of prudence. To this we reply, by using the old aphorism "Rome was not built in a day." We recognize that time will be required, and when courage, perseverance, and intelligence are in alliance with time, there is no obstacle in the pathway of human advancement which may not be removed.

The present generation may not see the glad day of the complete emancipation of labor from its enthrallments. It may not see the hand of oppression lifted from labor, but it may lay the foundation upon which other generations can build. It may send circling around the world those ideas and words, which taking root in the minds and hearts of men, shall eventually produce results to the glory of God and the emancipation of men from oppression.

We are well aware that the federation of American workingmen is not a problem to be solved in a day, and we are quite as confident that an oak whose mighty arms defy the storm is not produced in a

day. We are not required to discuss time. Time like space defies calculation. We are only interested in the purposes, the ambitions, the determinations of workingmen. The subject of "Capital and Labor" has been discussed *ad nauseam*. Be assured capital will federate, combine, organize, and will be heard. Nobody antagonizes capital, and no more apologies from labor in that direction are required.

To assume that labor has no other object in view than to fix prices, maintain prices, and determine the hours of a day's work, is a driveling estimate of the ambitions of workingmen. They demand to be heard on the subjects we have named, but there are other aspirations which animate workingmen. They demand absolute freedom from social and political ostracism. They demand a public opinion, in which the badge of labor shall no longer be a badge of degradation. Hitherto the so-called learned professions, law, medicine, theology, have had a monopoly of social and political dainties. In legislative assemblies there must be 90 percent law and of the remaining 10 percent, labor has been content with a fraction of 1 percent, or no percent at all. And as labor is the great interest of the country, it proposes to increase its percentage of importance and influence in the politics of the country, in the science of government, and this can be accomplished in its fullest measure by federation, and only federation.

No greater service could be done for society, for the welfare of all, than for thoughtful men to devise plans whereby labor organization could be brought into a grand national federation. This done, there would be something more and better than a Labor Bureau in Washington city, there would be a Labor Department of the government, and when the President called his counselors together, there would be found at the board a man able and ready to speak for men, without whom there would be no government. Therefore, adopting the poetical and practical philosophy of Longfellow, we say:

Let us, then, be up and doing,  
With a heart for any fate;  
Still achieving, still pursuing,  
Learn to labor and to wait.<sup>2</sup>

*Edited with a footnote by Tim Davenport*

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<sup>2</sup> Concluding stanza of "A Psalm of Life" (1838) by **Henry Wadsworth Longfellow** (1807-1882).