
“The So-Called Dignity of Labor”

by Eugene V. Debs

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A Chicago paper bearing the title of the *Industrial World and Iron Worker*, in a recent issue prints an editorial article with the caption, “So-called Dignity of Labor.” The editor starts out by saying:

A vast deal of nonsense has been written and spoken about the dignity of labor, mostly by men whose daily lives were a perpetual protest against the sincerity and correctness of their laudatory utterances. We insist, on the contrary, that there is no such real thing as the dignity of labor. What dignity is there in tasked muscles and a smirched face? What dignity is there in dropping sweat and a posture of merely physical exertion? What dignity is there in nagging strength and a tired frame? Let us not be deceived. Hardship is the most conspicuous attribute of labor. It is the outcome of the primal curse: “In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread.” It is degradation from a higher and nobler sphere of existence. Every adult member of society must work for his support, if he be not in independent circumstances; the many are obliged to labor for their daily subsistence; some are compelled to toil incessantly for the pittance which they earn; drudgery falls to the lot of these who are lowest in the community. A man wishes to complete his work; he is desirous of resting from his labor; he seeks a respite from his toll; he submits reluctantly to drudgery. Labor is hard work; toll is grievous labor; drudgery is debasing toll.

At the first glance, men may be disposed to fall in with the conclusions of the editor of the *Industrial World and Iron Worker*, and render a verdict against labor. Manifestly the editor of *Industrial World* draws his inspiration from the dictionary. He glues himself, so to speak, to the word “dignity,” as an oyster attaches itself to a rock.

He is as conservative as an oyster. His range of vision is limited. He does not see how he can make the term “dignity” play any part in the labor questions of the times. In this he does Mr. Webster,¹ the great lexicographer, serious injustice. Mr. Webster defines “dignity” as “the state of being worthy or honorable; elevation of mind or character; honorableness, nobility of sentiment and action; true worth.” That is Mr. Webster’s first definition of “dignity.” Now, then, we hold that a man at work, engaged in any kind of required labor, is in a state of being worthy, honorable. We hold that labor, work, toil, drudgery, elevates the mind and character of those who engage in it — that it is idleness that degrades mind and character, body and soul; wrecks the man physically and morally. The editor of the *Industrial World* (?) insists upon it “that there is no such real thing as the dignity of labor,” therefore and necessarily, nothing in labor that is “worthy or honorable.” The idea in the editor’s eye which obscures the dignity of labor is “dropping sweat,” “posture,” and “physical exertion, flagging strength and a tired frame.” Manifestly the editor of the *Industrial World and Iron Worker* believes there is dignity in idleness, in leisure, in laziness, sprawling in the shade, in hugging the bed. The editor of the *Industrial World and Iron Worker* would never point to the ant, to the bee, nor to the beaver, as examples of work and thrift. As between the army of dudes and the dinner bucket brigade, the dudes would have all the dignity and the toilers with “tasked muscles and smirched faces” all the degradation. The editor in getting down to business, down to his task, pen in hand and with beaded sweat on his massive forehead, declares “Hardship is the most conspicuous attribute of labor;” that “it is the outcome of the primal curse, ‘In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread.’”² He says this, when it is declared that God Himself worked six days to build His universe, and rested from His labor on the seventh day.³ He says this in the face of the fact that Jesus, the Son of God, worked at the carpenter’s trade, and in

¹ **Noah Webster** (1758-1843), was an American lexicographer who first published his *An American Dictionary of the English Language* in 1828.

² The quotation is from *Genesis*, chapter 3, verse 19: “*In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground; for out it wast thou taken: for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return.*”

³ Allusion to *Genesis*, chapters 1 and 2.

face of the declaration of the Messiah, that “Hitherto my Father worketh and I work.”⁴

But the editor of the *Industrial World and Iron Worker* grows spiritual as he proceeds. His soul gets full of sublimating, etherializing gush, and he exclaims of labor: “It is degradation from a higher and nobler sphere of existence.” Here we have it that labor is degrading, debasing, contaminating, and the lower one gets in the arbitrary classification of work, the more degrading it becomes, and with the help of a dictionary the editor of the *Industrial World and Iron Worker* classifies as follows: “Labor is hard work; toil is grievous labor; drudgery is debasing toil.” In this we have the *caste*, the germ of aristocracy, even in labor. The common laborer is the drudge, the debased, the degraded workingman, the hewer of wood and drawer of water; the outcast, the vagabond, the man cast down “from a higher and nobler sphere of existence;” a man without “true worth,” neither “worthy nor honorable;” without elevation of mind or character,” without “nobility of sentiment or action” — such are necessarily the views of the editor of a paper called the *Industrial World and Iron Worker*. It should be called the *Aristocratic World and Iron King*.

The editor of the *Industrial World and Iron Worker* represents a class of men whose education, if in any proper sense they can be said to be educated, makes asses of them in a superlative degree. In the broad field of labor the workers, by an irrevocable law, are one, and strange as it may appear, those whom the editor of the *Industrial World and Iron Worker* would assign the lowest place are of the first importance. He says:

The engineer who operates the machinery of some steamship by opening or shutting a few valves with a very small outlay of corporeal strength, occupies a higher position in the scale of labor than the fireman who sweats and tolls before the furnace doors, with an incessant drain upon his physical resources; while the captain — the executive of the vessel — who examines charts, determines latitude and longitude along his course, issues orders, and bears the great burden of responsibility, holds a position and exercises functions higher still. Like gradations of the skill, dexterity, and judgment with which labor is applied, exist in all occupations.

⁴ From *John*, chapter 5, verse 17.

The engineer is of no more importance to the steamship than the fireman, since there would be no opening and shutting of valves were it not for the fireman; but for the man who makes the fire that makes the steam, the steamship would never move from her moorings. But behind the captain, the engineer and the fireman, away somewhere underground, a man with "tired muscles and smirched face" is delving for the fuel. And thus it happens, nor can it ever be otherwise; it is the law as irrevocable as the law of gravitation, that a condition of interdependence exists, and when the world is called upon to admire the splendid triumphs of skill, the award, whether it be gratitude or glory, belongs to all the workmen alike, and to deny this would find its vicious parallel, should the eye say to the ear, or the hand to the foot, "I have no need of thee."

The dignity of labor may be and ought to be determined by results which labor produces, and since labor produces all things the task for those who chose to glean for facts will not be over arduous. The monuments of labor are on every hand. Had we the space at our command it would afford us no little satisfaction to dignify labor by something more than mere mention. What the editor of the *Industrial World and Iron Worker* calls the "primal curse" is such only in the minds of cranks and visionaries, who think work degrading. In work man becomes a co-laborer with God Himself. He gives the sunshine and the rain, and the farmer sows the seed and the world joins in the harvest home songs.

The editor of the *Industrial World and Iron Worker* closes his article as follows:

Every step in the progress of the sciences and the arts which helps to transform drudgery into toil, toil into labor, labor into work, and work into healthful exercise, is a movement in the same direction — is an advance toward what the Bible calls "the times of the restitution of all things" — is a nearer reach toward the Adamic blessedness in the Garden of Eden.

Just what the editor of the *Industrial World and Iron Worker* means by "Adamic blessedness in the Garden of Eden," can only be assumed. It is stated that God Himself came down and "planted the garden eastward in Eden," engaged in horticulture, and placed Adam in the garden to "tend it," to engage in labor, toil, drudgery, for such is the fate of all practical horticulturists. They are required to dig, remove weeds, hoe, etc., and it is not probable that Adam was exempt from

such duties. This was the “Adamic blessedness” to work in a garden. The editor of the *Industrial World and Iron Worker* has visions, and dreams dreams. He sees the good time coming when costumes will be fig leaves and all will be Eden gardeners. He does not apprehend another serpent to beguile the Eves, nor another eviction on account of forbidden fruit. He is doomed to disappointment, but he will see if he lives long enough, old moss-grown, despotic ideas of an aristocracy in labor knocked higher than Gilroy’s kite,⁵ and possibly a time when papers bearing the title of *Industrial Worlds and Iron Workers* will cease being the organs of aristocrats, and will learn that honest toil is not debasing.

Edited with footnotes by Tim Davenport

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⁵ Archaic expression derived from a fearsome 17th Century Scottish robber Gilderoy (Gilroy) who was hung higher than all others from the gallows — so high that he resembled a kite in the air.