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# The Sunday Question

by Eugene V. Debs

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There are some propositions relating to man's moral, mental, and physical well-being, which, fortunately, have passed beyond the realm of debate, among which is the statement that man requires one day in seven for rest; rest for mind and body, and it is this fact that stamps the Sinai command, "six days shalt thou labor and do all thy work,"<sup>1</sup> with divine wisdom.

The seventh day was called the Sabbath — set apart for rest and for worship. Since the day when Jehovah came down upon the mountain, amidst thunder and lightning, to talk with Moses, and with His own finger wrote His commandments upon tables of stone, the world has moved forward, and as the centuries have come and gone, the movement has gained in rapidity. Empires have arisen and disappeared; powerful nations have gone forth on the pathway of conquest, and of their pomp and power only a few scattering relics remain; their language is dead, but in all their mutations, upheavals and depressions the conquest of mind over matter, the triumphs of genius, the leveling up of the valleys and the leveling down of the mountains, there has been no change, no modification in the primal command, nor the still more primitive laws of man's mental and physical nature, requiring absolute rest from labor at least one day in seven, and those who have created circumstances making a violation of the law necessary have sinned against organic laws of man's nature — laws relating to man's moral, mental, social, and physical well-being.

When men come to investigate the subject for the purpose of determining the reason why of this violation of laws, the sad consequences of which are physical and mental wreck and decay and social demoralization, they find in every instance it results from man's inordinate greed, his cupidity, a mercenariness that obscures all sense of justice, and conceiving that gain is the chief good and the chief end of

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<sup>1</sup> *Exodus* 34:21 and *Deuteronomy* 5:13.

man, proceed, in their mad rush for wealth, with vandal ferocity, and with as little regard for consequences as man-eating tigers.

Against this submerging tide of venality the church has offered a feeble resistance, for in spite of its protests the employments requiring constant, unremitting toil have multiplied, until at last millions of men, living in lands denominated Christian, have not only no Sunday rest, nor its equivalent on any other day of the week. Their lives present only long stretches of toil without an oasis.

We need not say that the *Firemen's Magazine* is in favor of the Sunday movement. It is a righteous movement, and in consonance with man's mental and physical organism. It is an elevating and a redeeming movement. To create circumstances which deny workingmen rest, will eventually kill, as certainly as to deny them of food. It is a condition that not only kills, but it demoralizes. It not only wears the hand but it paralyzes the brain and ossifies the heart. It makes men strangers in their own homes, strangers to wife and children and to the hallowed associations which should distinguish the family circle. There is no doubt but that such is the tendency of this everlasting grind, in which of a year of 52 Sundays there is not one the toiler can call his own, when he can walk forth in his Sunday clothes to church, to the fields or woods for rest, for enjoyment, to find recuperating pleasures in a world where the Creator is, in all the circling seasons, showering benedictions upon those who have hearts and minds and souls for their appreciation.

The question arises, can we have a cessation of Sunday work for railroad employees? We answer, it is possible, but we doubt the probability of such an era. Circumstances have been created that it will be found difficult to abrogate. The world has been adopting new theories of business, old things have passed away. The present is an era of such immense activity, of such momentum that to get back to old practices is apparently out of the question, and practically impossible. Let us see what railroad officials of high authority say upon the subject. On Monday, evening, February 11, 1889, President H.B. Leydard, of the Michigan Central Railway, in an address, delivered in the city of Detroit, said:

The work of running Sunday trains does not simply require conductors, brakemen, engineers, and firemen, but It requires train dispatchers, operators, section men, car repairers, foremen of engine-houses, hostlers, and yardmen; in fact, I might say almost the entire force, with the exception of the clerks, to be on

duty either wholly or partly. *To this army of workingmen no day comes for rest.* While it is a rule with every railroad company that no man shall be allowed to go out for work if he has not had enough sleep since his last trip, I refer now to another and higher kind of rest, the rest for the mind and soul; to the day given to a man when he can pull himself together and think what there is behind him and what the future holds for him. Every merchant, every manufacturer, every banker closes his doors on Sunday, and until Monday morning rest is taken. On that day the mechanic, the laborer, has his period of rest, *but here is an army of men, on whose conservatism, on whose intelligence, on whose physical and mental condition rest daily the lives of millions of people.* Why should they be denied that day of rest, the necessity for which is so imperative. \* \* \* I have stated what is not a fanciful picture of the situation. You will probably ask me for the remedy; that I cannot give. I have struggled my best to decrease Sunday work, and I know that such is the desire of nearly every railroad manager in this country; but circumstances are too strong for them, and whenever anything has been done, it has proved of little avail. A railway company, leaving out its obligation to the public, is in the simplest sense a corporation, which has but one thing for sale, namely, the transportation of persons or property. It must receive its entire income from this one source, and therefore it follows that the company which has the best to sell for the least money can sell the greatest amount of transportation, or in other words, do the largest business, and earn the most money. [Italics ours. —EVD]

Mr. Ledyard proceeds to show the sharpness of competition between railway lines, and how completely the railroads are in the grasp of merchants and shippers and the traveling public, and adds:

You may blame the railroad companies for doing this, and probably they are not blameless, but behind them stands the stronger force of competition, backed by public opinion. The absolute cessation of Sunday work would not be practicable, or if practicable, might not, perhaps, be wise. It would in many cases entail suffering and perhaps loss. If one of you should be called tomorrow to California on account of the severe illness of some member of your family, you certainly would not feel very kindly toward the railroad company that might land you in Ogden on Saturday night and keep you there until Monday morning. These transcontinental trains between the Atlantic and the Pacific, in the interest of the public, in the prompt dispatch of the mails, ought perhaps to be run; but that the amount of Sunday work

now going on would be necessary with a change of public opinion, no well-informed person believes.

We regard the foregoing remarks of President Ledyard as a fair presentation of the Sunday question from a railroader's point of observation. It is in consonance with our own observation and reflections. We deem it impracticable to stop Sunday trains. The mail trains must go. To stop them requires the action of Congress. This might be obtained eventually, but it is not in line with probabilities. Perishable freight stopped en route would entail incalculable disasters. Turn which way he will insuperable difficulties arise which are readily suggested to every railroad employee.

We italicized this remark in President Ledyard's address, "To this army of working men no day comes for rest." This is the haggard statement, and for this tremendous wrong a remedy can easily be found and applied. The necessity of one day of rest in seven is admitted. The proposition is not controverted. It is axiomatic, pivotal, commanding, and convincing. There is not one good reason why it should not be had. Some Sunday trains can be stopped. To this railroad managers assent. All cannot be stopped, hence some men must work on Sundays. Still, the one day rest in seven can be secured for all on some one day of the seven. It will involve the employment of extra men, that is all. It is simply on the part of the railroad manager a financial question. There need be no sentiment in it; there need be no discussion of the Sabbath, of worship — simply a day of rest — and whether it be Monday or Tuesday, or any other day of the week, it will be a day of rest; a day sacred to mental and physical repose, for the recuperation of mind and body, and therefore, in every essential, a Sabbath day. This is practical. The solution of the problem, so far as railroad managers are concerned, is in dollars and cents. Nor do we see in what particular the railroads would be financially inconvenienced. The pecuniary loss, if loss were to occur, would fall upon the employee, and not upon the employer. The employee would wisely sacrifice one day's wages for the vitalizing influences of rest, and if an extra hand took his place, wages would be the same, the sum total for wages would not be increased, and the rest problem would be solved.

*Edited with a footnote by Tim Davenport*

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