
The Tyranny of Austin Corbin

by Eugene V. Debs

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Impudence, hypocrisy, chicane, knavery, and such other mental and moral defects as go to make up the modern scoundrel have no limits, and if such moral monstrosities have cash, as in the case of Corbin, they are able to push themselves to the front, and with exhibitions of effrontery that defy exaggeration or characterization, play the role of injured innocence, and demand for themselves a verdict of endorsement in the face of facts which pronounce them irredeemably vile, depraved and capable of perpetrating deliberate crimes, richly meriting the title of villain, and which ought to subject them to penal servitude.

The times, prolific of such abnormal productions, have not brought to the surface a creature of mental and moral deformities more repulsive than Austin Corbin, who in the October number of the *North American Review*, writes of "The Tyranny of Labor Organizations."

Austin Corbin has money, a boast that any successful burglar, counterfeiter or pirate can make with equal nonchalance. Money, more than charity, is made to obscure a multitude of faults, but in Austin Corbin's case, while money paralyzes justice, thereby permitting him to practice his schemes of knavery, it has not saved him from the detestation of all honorable men. He is known to be a depraved wretch capable of concocting schemes of robbery, and this he has done with such a reckless disregard of law, with such shameless perversity, with such a piratical defiance of right, justice and public opinion, that the Congress of the United States was called upon to investigate his deep laid schemes of wreck and robbery, and a committee of Congressmen visited the "black hills," where his rule has produced poverty, degradation and famine, and as directed, have prepared a bill,

which if it becomes a law, will, in some measure, at least, check the evils his rule has inflicted.

That such an abnormal combination of all that is loathsome in greed, of all that is depraved in morals, of all that is disreputable in business, of all that is false in profession, not content with a reputation for infamy which makes his name the synonym of all things despicable, should seek further conspicuousness by slandering labor organizations, can be accounted for only upon the hypothesis that his inherent venom, like that of the rattlesnake at certain seasons, has so diffused itself through his mental, moral and physical organism as to render him blind to all things decent. There is not a labor organization on the continent that does not loathe the name of Austin Corbin, and his paper published in the *Review* will serve to intensify their detestation.

Austin Corbin, more properly Austin Cobra, starts out by saying, "it is a mistake to assume that employers are always wealthy capitalists." No labor organization in the country ever made such a mistake. On the contrary they know, as well as does Cobra Corbin, "that in a vast majority of cases employers are not men of great wealth." Many stockholders in great enterprises are people of moderate means. Such was notably true in the case of the Philadelphia & Reading Railroad, in which widows and orphans and men of small means made investments and received large dividends, but when such men as Cobra Corbin got hold and dominated the affairs of the splendid property it was wrecked and became the most corrupt corporation on the continent, but never until Cobra Corbin inserted his fangs into the corporation did it reach such a low degree of demoralization as to demand of the Congress of the United States an investigation and legislation to check, if possible, a career of unprecedented scoundrelism. The rascalities of Corbin are now as well understood as the treason of Benedict Arnold, or the colossal boodle career of Boss Tweed.

This superlative record of knavery is now known to the nation by virtue of the report made by the Congressional committee. It is not given to every scamp to have a national reputation, nor is every exposed knave proud of notoriety. Corbin is an exception. He seems to glory in his infamy, and has the vanity to suppose that by denouncing labor organizations his name will go down to history after the fashion of the fool bull that tried to arrest the speed of a locomotive.

In his article on "The Tyranny of Labor Organizations," Corbin asserts "there never has been a time," and assumes "there never will

be” a time the worker will not be permitted to leave “his employer’s service,” and upon the heels of this old chestnut remarks, “the worker in this country at least, under the law, happily, is not a slave.” By all the Pagan gods at once, what a discovery! Not a slave “under the law.” Ho! all ye workingmen, are you not under lasting obligations to Co-bra Corbin for the declaration? And yet this embodiment of bate toward labor organizations without law, has compelled men on the Philadelphia & Reading Railroad, and in the mines controlled by that corporation, to play the part of slaves, to renounce their rights as men and as citizens, and yield to his dictation, the penalty of refusal being idleness. “Some employers,” says Corbin, and he is of the number, “employ no new men who are members of any of the labor unions: applicants are required to promise not to join any while retaining their employment; those who prefer the unions are required to quit the service and promotions are entirely confined to those of undoubted loyalty to their employer and hit policy.”

It is eminently worth while for the working men, and all others who are interested in labor problems, to compare the “tyranny of labor organizations” with the tyranny of Corbin’s rule in the anthracite regions of Pennsylvania, as set forth in the paragraph we have quoted. But preliminary to such comparisons the terms “tyranny” and “tyrant” should be defined. In this country the laws recognize neither one nor the other; nevertheless, in defiance of laws men exercise tyrannical authority over the affairs of men as autocratic and despotic as characterizes the reign of a Russian tsar, and this has been done by Austin Corbin to an extent that the Congressional committee which investigated his methods did not hesitate to say he had “Russianized” the anthracite coal regions of Pennsylvania. To accomplish his tyrannical purpose he found it necessary to attack labor organizations, not because such organizations were tyrannical in their methods of operation, but because they stood in the way of his despotic sway.

What are the methods he adopted to carry out his nefarious designs? It is in proof that by cruelty and oppression he drove his employees to resistance. He deliberately inaugurated a strike, which had these villainous purposes in view, characterized by hypocrisy, tyranny and robbery. He intended to advance the price of coal and thereby rob the public. He intended to reduce wages, and thereby rob his employes. He intended to break up labor organizations, and thereby reduce the men who would accept employment under him and the vile creatures who played the part of caitiffs in response to his orders,

to the degraded condition of serfs. His schemes succeeded. He did rob the public, he did reduce wages, and he did abolish labor organizations. Nor is this all. Corbin's villainies did reach the attention of Congress, and a committee of that body passed judgment upon him, the first instance on record, and now the scoundrel is known to the nation, not only as a tyrant, but a pirate as well, a brass cheeked, bronzed-faced monstrosity, who, metaphorically, at least, is gibbeted before the world, and has become the target for the righteous maledictions of all men who abhor hypocrisy and depravity.

Such is the imperfect characterization of the man who stains the pages of the *North American Review* with the venom of intense hatred, but the excessive malignity of the attack, like an over dose of some poisons, defeats the purpose in view, and while labor organizations are not harmed, Corbin, by a law of retributive justice, is made more conspicuously infamous.

In what regard, we inquire, are labor organizations tyrannical? Throughout their entire history they have sought to achieve for working men better conditions. Not by antagonizing capital, but by defeating the impoverishing and degrading schemes of such heartless scoundrels as Austin Corbin. To defend labor organizations when attacked by such knaves as Austin Corbin it is not required to say that they have made no mistakes; that every movement and method has been perfection, the embodiment of wisdom, and therefore deserving of approval. Labor organizations are human, and therefore fallible. This may be said with equal propriety of all human organizations, including the church; but it may be said, and should be said, because it is an eternal truth, as imperishable as the pillars of God's throne, that from first to last, every where, in all zones that belt the earth, where there has been a labor organization, their purpose has been to resist tyranny, oppression, despotism and degradation; to obtain fair wages for work; to elevate their membership in the scale of being; to obtain food, clothing and shelter befitting human beings, and something more for rainy days, for sickness and old age; to advance in educational power, consideration and influence; in moral excellence, in culture and refinement; to awaken noble aspirations, that in all things pertaining to citizenship there should be such development of mind forces, such comprehension of duties and prerogatives as would redound to the welfare of the state and be accepted as guarantees of the perpetuity of free institutions. Such are the undeniable facts of history relating to labor organizations. They have been written in

tears and blood, with “an iron pen and lead in the rock forever.” The chronicles are filled with records of victories and defeats, but every repulse has inspired defiance, and every triumph has emphasized the conquering truth, that

“Freedom’s battle, oft begun,
Bequeath’d from bleeding sire to son,
Tho’ baffled oft Is ever won.”¹

And in confirmation of the truth, there is not a breeze nor a gale that freshens and blows in all our broad land, from ocean to ocean, from gulf to inland sea, that does not touch and unfold the banner of a labor organization bearing the motto, “The final triumph of labor draweth nigh.” And yet it is these labor organizations that Austin Corbin, the bloated, cash-cursed representative of ideas as hostile to American institutions and to the genius of our government as ever sent a head to the block or a neck to the halter seeks to overthrow. What are the methods employed by virtue of which he has gained a temporary victory?

1st. To give employment to no man who is a member of a labor organization.

2nd. To require a pledge of every man employed that he will not join a labor organization.

3rd. Men employed who favor labor organizations are required to abandon their work.

4th. Promotions are entirely confined to men of undoubted loyalty to Corbin and his policy.

Corbin has at least 35,000 men in his employ who have yielded to his enslaving program. They have renounced their rights as men and as citizens; they and their wives and children are Corbin’s slaves; they are reduced to commodities; they are Corbin’s chattels, and this condition of degrading servitude, of monstrous tyranny, comes at a time when the emancipated African slaves and their descendants are manfully asserting and maintaining rights which Corbin’s employes, for considerations of bread and meat, throw to the winds. It is Buch facts that compelled the Congressional committee to declare that Corbin was “Russianizing” the anthracite regions of Pennsylvania.

¹ From *The Giaour: A Fragment of a Turkish Tale* [1813], by George Gordon Byron (1788-1824).

It must not be assumed that Corbin is the only tyrant who rushes into print with his pleas to “excuse his devilish deeds.” He is not the only gold-plated giant who uses his tyrannous strength to crush labor organizations. He may be more soulless than others of his type, may have more rattles on his tail and more fangs in his month, he may be the representative reptile, he may take mote delight than others in seeing men resign their hopes, renounce their rights and forget their wrongs, when yielding to orders from his iron lips, but there are others, animated by his example of infernal despotism, who, reveling in the weakness and wickedness of luxurious power, have determined to break the bonds of brotherhood which bind man to man, and this accomplished, make the very sun in the heavens blush for the degeneracy of American citizens, who resign their birthright at a time when the school and the church, press, poet and orator, the philanthropist and the statesman would have the world believe that ours is the “land of the free and the home of the brave.”

The time has come for workingmen to rise superior to faction, to look facts squarely in the face, and determine to unify, to federate, consolidate, and thereby successfully resist the encroachments upon their rights and liberties by such men as Austin Corbin.

Edited with a footnote by Tim Davenport

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