
Fair Wages

by Eugene V. Debs

Published as "Wages" in *Locomotive Firemen's Magazine*,
vol. 15, no. 1 (Jan. 1891), pp. 10-11.

In defining the term wages, a high authority says:

That which is covenanted to be paid for work done; hire; reward; that which is paid or stipulated for services; price paid for labor; the return made or compensation paid to those engaged to perform any kind of labor or services by their employers; recompense; fruit; that which is given in return. The term is commonly applied to the payment of manual or mechanical labor, other than that performed by the more educated classes, to which the word *salary* bears reference.¹

The foregoing affords the reader all the information required relating to the meaning of the term "wages."

In very many regards, wages is one of the most important words in our language. It is a word that has more to do with the happiness or misery of millions of people than any other word we can think of.

The discussion of the subject brings up numerous questions, each of which is of such importance that it is difficult to select those which should have preference.

Wages is compensation for work; hence, wherever work is performed, wages has precedence. It is the bedrock, the fundamental, the supreme question. We write of the rule, not exceptions. We speak for the intelligent, the self-respecting, the ambitious and courageous workingman, not for the scab.

We have no objection to the mottoes of labor organizations. They read well and sound well, but they seldom, if ever, indicate the pivotal purpose. It may be, indeed, it is, true that labor organizations are pro-

¹ *Zell's Popular Encyclopedia: A Complete Dictionary of the English Language with a Pronouncing Vocabulary and a Gazetteer of the World...* In Five Volumes. Philadelphia: T. Ellwood Zell, 1883; vol. 4, pg. 2469.

foundly interested in promoting morality, sobriety, intelligence, and all virtues, and yet, but for the question of wages, it is doubtful if they would exist at all.

It is well enough to extol the virtues throughout the entire list. It is an easy thing to do, and some people never weary of it. The moral reformers are exceedingly felicitous in showing how easy it is to be good, notwithstanding that the “world, the flesh, and the devil” are everlastingly on the warpath.

Just here it should be said that the pulpit, which thunders its anathemas at sin, has an eye to *salary*, which stands for wages, and but for the *salary* of the pulpit would be as silent as the grave of Adam.

This is no reflection on the pulpit; it is simply the recognition of the supreme importance of wages, compensation for services, which in the case of the pulpit, frequently runs up into thousands, giving the preacher a salary equal to that of a railroad or a bank president — a fact which, however much may be said about a “free gospel,” makes it occasionally as high prices as any imported luxury.

The point we make is that, say what we will, the chief concern is *money*, wages, compensation for work performed. It is everywhere, and nowhere is it as important as in the ranks of workingmen. Their happiness, comfort, advancement, intelligence, and independence hinge upon, hang upon wages.

If it be the purpose of any man, or class of men, to degrade workingmen, the first move is to reduce wages, make it difficult or impossible for a workingman to live decently, force him into habitations unfit for the abode of human beings, compel him to insufficiently clothe himself, his wife and children, and to subsist upon insufficient and unwholesome food.

This done, and the work of degradation and demoralization goes steadily and rapidly forward. It is inevitable. No law of the universe operates with greater certainty. With advancing wages, with fair and honest wages, a movement in the opposite direction occurs; workingmen have better habitations, better clothing, better food, and in abundant supply.

But this is not all. With fair, honest wages, the workingman not only has better habitation, better clothes, and better food, but he is enabled to have a few books and papers. His home becomes brighter and more joyous. There is better furniture, there may be pictures on the walls, an instrument of music may be had, and the refining, elevating influence of music felt. Nor is this all; with fair, honest wages

children of the workingmen are properly clothed to attend school and church and early in life imbibe ideas of worth and moral rectitude which influence their future lives for good.

Reduce wages, deny the workingman fair wages, subject him to wrong and injustice, and the home at once exhibits the consequences, society feels the shock, and the inmates of the poorhouses, asylums, and prisons are increased.

The man who denies his employees fair wages is a public enemy, nor does any amount of slobbering over the ills incident to work condone the wrong or make him less a monster. To studiously rob men of wages, and take the money thus obtained to build gymnasiums and bathhouses for the victims of their studied piracies, and ask the public to behold the exhibitions of their interest in poor men, is a species of Phariseeism that it would be difficult for the devil to duplicate. And that workingmen should, anywhere, accept such duplicity for genuine interest in their welfare is a most humiliating confession of abasement.

The question arises, how can workingmen secure fair wages for work and maintain the just standard? We answer, through the influence and power of federated organizations. There is absolutely no other way to be devised in harmony with law and justice. Legislation cannot bring about such a result, nor is it desirable. Legislation can and ought to correct numerous wrongs which aid employers directly and indirectly to rob labor and degrade the workingman. Trust, syndicates, combinations of all descriptions, organized for the accumulation of wealth at the expense of workingmen, can be and ought to be abolished. Men who water stocks and seek to declare dividends on values which do not exist, can and ought to be squelched, but no law can fix the standard of wages. Workingmen can do that if once they can be persuaded to act in concert.

Nothing is more common than reference to the "labor market" and the "supply and demand" of labor.

When wages go down the "labor market" is referred to as being overstocked — the supply of labor being greater than the demand.

Labor is referred to as a "commodity," to take its chances like hides or hair, guano or jute, or any other article of trade.

Take the "labor market" and supply it with Poles, Huns, and Dagoes, and wages go down to a level which would not furnish subsistence to a millionaire's poodle or parrot. In such an event, the American workingman has one hope, and only one, and that is to organize

and federate, and say to employers that the standard of wages is thus and so, and all the Huns and Poles and Dagoes on top of the ground, backed by the American scab, cannot lower the standard. It is the American standard, and organization and federation is the American way to maintain the standard. Let others do as they may, American workmen should say, "we will not be degraded nor enslaved."

Is this to be the outcome? Have organizations made up their minds to federate and resist all encroachments upon their right to live as human beings? Manifestly, the trend is in that direction.

The discussion of the eight-hour day is well enough, as also the single tax, currency and tariff reform, but the question of wages towers above them all. It is an ever present and vital question. It brooks no delay. With fair, honest wages the workman advances in intelligence, power, and influence. Deny him that, and as certain as the law of gravitation, the work of degradation begins, nor ceases until the strand is lined with wrecks.

Edited by Tim Davenport

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First Edition.