
Labor Leaders

by Eugene V. Debs

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The *Railway Service Gazette*, in its issue of March 5th [1891], contains a somewhat extended editorial article, captioned, "What Shall be Done?"

It appears that a correspondent of the *Gazette* appeals to it to at once engage in some very aggressive work in the interest of the laborers of America, "because chains are being forged for their enslavement." The writer wants the *Gazette* to send forth "clarion notes" to "rouse them from their fatal slumber." The correspondent says, "the laborers of America must federate as one man, and our thunders must shake the halls of legislation so long reeking with the corruption of party dishonesty."

To this stirring appeal, the *Gazette* responds in a way indicative of an upgrade pull, with a machine sadly out of fix, poor fuel, and a scarcity of water. But, nevertheless, the *Gazette* sends forth a "warning cry" keyed up to "clarion notes," and well calculated to "rouse labor leaders" wherever they are practicing their "golden calf" idolatry.

The *Gazette* has no faith in "labor leaders" as they exist in this AD 1891. It does not refer to one, within the entire range of its observation, worthy of the name of a leader. It says:

While there are hundreds of quacks, who from the street corners and the crossroads are proclaiming that the way to salvation is perfectly familiar to them, and that they are the leaders appointed by God, we honestly believe the Moses has not yet arisen who will lead the people to the promised land, and that until the people have been far more greatly tried than they are at present, he would indeed have a rocky road to travel, did he attempt to lead them in the true direction of a betterment of their conditions.

Any reference to Moses as illustrative of the condition of workingmen in America may serve to gracefully round up a period, to embellish a sentence and, generally, beautify rhetoric, but it is hardly just. The student of the Bible will naturally refresh his memory by re-reading the graphic account of the wonderful undertaking of Moses. The bondage, the slavery, the degradation of the Jews, we conceive, was something worse than anything yet experienced by “the laborers of America,” with the exception, possibly, of the coke regions of Pennsylvania.

Again, the enslaved Jews never would have got beyond the Red Sea but for the direct interposition of Jehovah, who had to fight Pharaoh with plagues, the recital of which, even now, horrifies the mind. And after all, of the mighty hosts that crossed the Red Sea dry shod, but two were fit to enter the promised land — all had died in the wilderness, and to make matters worse still, Moses, owing to some indiscretion, never crossed the Jordan, never entered the land of “milk and honey,” which, to say the least, was pretty hard on a God-chosen leader.

Such facts lead us to the conclusion that the workingmen of the United States need not wait for a Moses to lead them from under an imaginary bondage or from the grasp of an imaginary Pharaoh.

Certainly we are not disposed to controvert the declarations of our esteemed contemporary as to the *blue* outlook of labor in many directions. Nor are we in a position to deny that there are “hundreds of quacks proclaiming that the way of salvation is perfectly familiar to them.” But what we do see, is that workingmen are everywhere organizing, and organization, to our mind, is a towering evidence of education, intelligence, self-respect and independence. What we do hear, is the “Clarion” notes of labor speakers and labor writers, urging men forward in the grand work of organization — and to ears attuned to the sounding notes of organized labor, it will be found that the rank and file of organized workingmen are themselves labor leaders, that they too know the way to the “promised land” — that they do not propose, either to die in the wilderness, or be fed on manna. They are not waiting for a Moses — nor do they expect miracles to be wrought in their favor.

What, we ask, is a “labor leader?” If there are “quacks” with their cheap nostrums, how shall we know the “simon pure” article, the orthodox remedies for the ills which afflict us?

We take it that any journal devoted to the interests of labor, and edited with the boldness that distinguishes the *Railway Service Gazette*, is a labor agitator and a labor leader, both in the highest sense of the term. We do not object to the caustic criticism of the *Gazette*, when referring to pseudo-leaders and reformers — the fact that there are such, emphasizes the splendid truth that the genuine leader and reformer exists. If the quack finds his dupes, it is equally true that the true man will have supporters. We read with special satisfaction the *Gazette's* lucid exposition of difficulties which confront workingmen. The plutocracy is here. Wealth is massing its forces; legislatures and courts are debauched; the millennium looks far distant. There are clouds along the horizon — a storm is brewing. We would withhold no fact within our knowledge. A good general wants to know as much as possible about his enemy, and the *Gazette* is equal to the occasion, when it says:

Some of the very men who rail the loudest against millionaires are the very first to lick the hand of the millionaire that permits itself to be licked, though that hand is blackened with a thousand frauds, any one of which is morally worse than those which place poor men behind prison bars. Other loud reformers, when serving on juries, never fail to tilt the scales of justice in favor of the rich and against the poor. Others still will bow, and sneak, and cringe, before the rich man, lacking both in honor and intelligence, while they turn in scorn from the man in rags, though he is honest, virtuous, and intelligent.

How many art there, even among the labor leaders and among the labor reformers, who do not bow and worship the golden calf, who do not honor dishonest wealth, and turn from honest poverty, who do not prize money above merit, who do not give their influence and patronage to the rich, and withhold it from the poor, who in a word do not each day do something to add to the volume of that mighty stream which with every increasing current is bringing all the good things to the rich, and away from the poor?

Here in Ohio is a railroad man, who with several associates was guilty of a robbery of \$4 or \$5 million. The robbery was in no essential less heinous than those that place poor men behind prison bars. He does not even take the trouble to deny or palliate the offense. He escapes through a technicality of the law, which subservient juries and subservient judges can always find, with the money of other people in his pocket. This man is one of the first citizens of Ohio. Should he come up for office he would be

enthusiastically supported by the employees of his own roads, and perhaps other roads. His offense would probably never be mentioned. With such a condition, what can we expect from legislation? Why talk of the reforming influence of political parties? But suppose the hearts of the people, the railroad men, the mechanics, the laborers, were all right, what then? Suppose everywhere this man went he was met with the withering scorn and contempt that is awarded the poor man who is guilty of a similar though smaller offense.

The foregoing is an ebon or a lurid picture as one may fancy. It represents labor leaders, Heaven save the mark, as the most abject and despicable creatures that walk God's green earth, or pollute the air with their pestilential breath. Traitors and apostates, no language can fitly characterize them and hyperbole sits dumb in the presence of the task.

Where are they? Who are they? What are their names? Where do they flourish and stink? We would like to know them that with whips of flame we might help to scourge the scoundrels through the world.

We see workmen everywhere organizing. We see lodge fires blaze everywhere, in the valleys and on mountain elevations. We see the army of organized labor marching with banners flying. We see women, too, lending their approving smiles and words. We see workmen's publications increasing in numbers, in power and influence. We see men, but yesterday, tongue-tied and silent, who to day, inspired by the genius of emancipation, telling the story of their redemption with startling eloquence. We see one of a building trade unions demanding justice of employers, and then we see other "unions" in the spirit of brotherhood, gather around, and proclaim the conquering battle cry, "We are with you." It is federation. There is in it all no "Golden Calf," no idol worship, but evidence that men's hearts are right, that they have clear perceptions of duty; that they are loyal to obligation and that the work of education with them is far advanced.

The *Gazette* having surveyed the situation and found it anything but lovely — a desert without an oasis — about as dreary as Stanley's description of the Congo forest, proceeds to point out the remedy, by saying, "if there is any material change in present conditions the reform must commence in the hearts of the people" — working people, we suppose.

We surmise the reform has come. We are inclined to the opinion that it is growing in sweep and in power — organization is the shibboleth, and the hearts of the people are not beating like “muffled drums” “funeral marches to the grave” of organization.

Edited by Tim Davenport

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