
Labor Deliberation

by Eugene V. Debs

Published in *Locomotive Firemen's Magazine*, vol. 17, no. 5 (May 1893), pp. 355-357.

At Muskegon, Michigan, the state federation of labor recently held a meeting and deliberated upon certain propositions relating to labor, law, military affairs and politics. "A short day for women and children," was proposed and adopted. It would have been better to have proposed that there be no workday at all for children, long or short. Children should have no labor tasks. Their bodies and their minds should not be dwarfed and stunted by toil. Children all over the country are made physical, moral and mental deformities by excess in work, and the land everywhere is being filled with the degenerate progeny of women who were over-worked in childhood. When parents become so debased and brutified as to drive their children to work during their tender years, their children should be removed from their custody. They are disqualified for rearing children.

A proposition was debated to appoint a union workingman as the commissioner of labor for the state. A move in the right direction and eminently consistent with the prevailing policy in such matters, since, if there is to be appointed a commissioner of banking, a banker or an acknowledged financier would be sought for, and so on through the list.

A resolution was passed "favoring the approval by the people of all legislation, before it becomes operative." In this resolution is found all the earmarks of the impracticable in law making; a vagary of such proportions that even a cursory examination of it makes it ridiculous.

Suppose for instance a member of the legislature offers a bill, making it a felony to discharge a workingman because he belonged to a labor organization? And suppose the bill passes and becomes a law? What reason is there for submitting such legislation to the people for their endorsement? Suppose a legislature passes a bill appropriating money, say \$100,000, to defray the expenses of the session. To submit the question to the people would cost, say \$200,000. But suppose all

the acts of a legislature, as contemplated by the resolution, should be submitted to the people, say 150 acts or laws. What would be the outcome of such a proceeding? The mere mention of such contingencies illustrates the folly of all such schemes, and labor, when in council, should sit down upon them. They are the rankest vagaries — impracticable and practicably impossible.

The military question was brought forward by a resolution declaring it to be “contrary to the best interests of unionism for men to belong to the state troops.” There were those in the convention who held that it was well “to have union men in the militia because in a pinch they would shoot over the strikers’ heads rather than at them,” and “during the debate on state troops one delegate created a sensation by stating that in one company of militia, the Flint blues, stationed at Flint, he knew of union men who were going to withdraw because they would not go out to fire on striking unionists.” It is not surprising that labor conventions and assemblies are taking special interest in the militia business, the military machine, since it is becoming well understood that the states have no use under heaven for an army, except to respond to the requests of the Carnegies and Fricks and other robbers of labor.

Whether union workingmen should volunteer in such armies or keep out of them, is a question of two sides. But it should be borne in mind, that a soldier on duty is not permitted to exercise any discretion at all. Military power is absolute and is summed up in the motto, “Obey orders.” If this is not done, the next move is a speedy trial for treason and such penalties as the court may determine. If a union workingman soldier is ordered to shoot down a brother workingman and should be detected in firing over his head rather than at his heart, he would very speedily find out his mistake. Hence we are inclined to the opinion, if a workingman does not want to kill or wound a workingman for striking when oppressed, robbed, and otherwise outraged, he will act wisely by keeping out of the state’s standing army.

A very excellent resolution was adopted favoring “the taxing of church property.” There never was a rational reason why church property should escape taxation. In hundreds of instances, the church building, after going through the mummery of dedication, an auction is held and the pews are sold out to those who have the money to purchase, and those who have not are permitted to take the paupers’ bench and go to heaven as freight. Whatever may be regarded as prudent for such church buildings as have their doors thrown wide open

for all without charge, there should be agreement upon the proposition of taxing those buildings which sell their seats for cost, as do theaters and other buildings erected for amusement and profit.

After all, it occurs to our mind that the overmastering demand in these days is to so unify and solidify labor organizations, as to realize that when one of them is attacked by capitalist rogues, all are attacked. For until this is done the triumphs of labor will be few and far between, and defeats will be far more numerous than milestones on a turnpike.

Edited by Tim Davenport

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First Edition