
Labor Legislation

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During the month of January the legislatures of 21 states were in session, and we surmise that in each of these law making bodies bills were presented and acted upon more or less directly affecting labor. The supposition is probable, because, in all of the states, without an exception, there have been what is called, in common parlance, "labor troubles."

It is quite out of the question to catalog these labor troubles or to assign the real cause for each one of them. Legislators know that they exist, and that it is their duty to ascertain the cause, find a remedy, and apply it.

Preliminary to the discussion, we will state that it is the boast of this country that its free school system emancipates men from the thralldom of ignorance and the degradation which ignorance entails. It is accepted as a self-evident truth, that education, intelligence, is the eternal foe of servitude, enslavement, hence, in this God favored land, a schoolhouse is freedom's citadel, and the spelling book, the reader, the arithmetic, the pen, ink, and paper, put into the hands of American youth are the weapons which are designed to beat down all opposition to the triumphant emancipation of American workingmen. The process is going steadily forward, and he who does not see it is as blind as a bat, and he who does not hear the harbinger notes of the new dispensation is as deaf as an oyster. And this fact, which glows and burns like a star of the first magnitude in the firmament of our political system, like Bethlehem's star, foretells the coming of a time, now near at hand, when the ballot in the hands of workingmen, redeemed from ignorance by the genius of universal education, shall inaugurate an era of equality before the law, in fact as well as in theory. This done, gilded villainy, "robed in purple and fine linen,"¹ will

¹ Allusion to the rich man in the story of Lazarus from *Luke*, chapter 16, verses 19-31.

be sent “over the road,” in a line as direct to the prison as he of less cash, less hypocrisy, and a lower (?) position in the social scale.

But, to our subject. What is labor demanding at the hands of legislators? If one measure is proposed not in the interest of society at large, some organ or advocate of monopoly ought to point it out.

It has passed into a maxim worthy of high commendation, that ours is “a government of the people, by the people, and for the people.” It is not, at least it was never intended to be, a government of capital, by capital, and for capital. It was never designed that this government should be of monopoly, by monopoly, and for monopoly. If for the people, the government should protect the weak against the strong, the poor against the rich, the employee against the employer. The working people, the wage earners, the bread winners, the wealth creators, are in the majority. These people, the most vitally concerned in good government, simply demand at the hands of legislators, justice. Take, for instance, the proposition recently up for debate in the legislature of Indiana. In that state it has been the practice of employers, in numerous instances, to pay their men in scrip receivable for goods at the employer’s store, but when this scrip was offered, the employee found that he was charged 10, 15, or 25 percent more than was charged others who paid cash.

Since the day when Jehovah, amidst the thunders of Sinai, said “Thou shalt not steal,”² was there ever a proposition submitted to legislators bearing more distinctly the impress of justice? To charge more when the employee offered the scrip than when cash was offered, would be ironclad, conscienceless scoundrelism, and the difference between the scrip and the cash, would be nothing less than robbery, taking the advantage of conditions to perpetrate piracy — not capital antagonizing labor, but a venal, heartless capitalist, or employer, taking advantage of poverty, of necessity, of conditions, to increase the inconveniences, the embarrassments which environ labor, to degrade labor and humiliate the workingmen. It is such gold-plated knaves, such mercenary miscreants, such sleek, plausible scoundrels who have, in a thousand ways, brought about labor troubles in every section of the land, and hitherto they have had legislatures and courts at their command, to do their bidding, and even yet, there are men in legislative halls who boastfully and impudently oppose measures designed to make employers take their claws from the throats of workingmen and their vulture beaks from out of their

² *Exodus*, chapter 20, verse 15.

hearts, and in the pursuit of their damnable designs, have the effrontery to claim they are serving the best interests of the state. No more pitiable exhibition of the wreck of integrity, of mental debasement, of corruption and rottenness was ever made, or ever will be made in legislative halls.

In the name of all that is of good report, what is the chief, the highest, the most imperative demand of society? Is it not that justice shall be enthroned? Is it not that truth shall be exalted, and a lie stamped into its native hell? Is it not that virtue shall be extolled and vice overthrown? We have said that in January, 1887, 21 legislatures were in session; Congress was also in session, all at a cost of not less than \$1 million a day. Why this vast expenditure, to be paid out of the earnings of labor, if labor is to be thrust aside when it demands exemption from wrongs as flagrant as ever cursed the World, since Egyptian slaves built the pyramids? And what in God's name is labor demanding? Protection in the mines, protection on the rail, and when labor has earned its dollar, that no man, nor combination of men, under cover of law, precedent, custom, or any subterfuge whatever, shall cheat him out of a fraction of a mill.³

Look abroad, survey the field, note the toilers, the dinner bucket brigade, in mine, factory, mill, shop, carrying forward all the great industries of this wonderfully active, progressive age. They are earning the revenues of the state and of the republic; only work produces revenues, only work produces wealth. Work builds, repairs, sustains, and yet, there are blatherskites, the paid attorneys of monopolies, the beneficiaries of pools and lobbies, who assert that were it not for the capitalist, labor would starve. The fact is, that were it not for work, the advancing armies on all the highways of progress would stand still. No anvil would ring, no forge would blaze, no shuttle would fly, no wheel would revolve, no plow would turn a furrow, from valley to mountain top no locomotive whistle would be heard. Such self-evident truths the wage men of America are comprehending in all their lifting, humanizing power, and when they ask of legislators that simple justice be done them, it will be the part of wisdom to heed the demand. If labor is honestly paid, if it receives an equitable share of the wealth it creates, if it is honestly dealt with by legislatures, laws and courts, society, as its high reward, will receive a baptism of peace and prosperity. Then labor troubles will cease, the strike, the lockout, the boycott will disappear, and the senseless gabble about the conflict

³ A mill is the smallest unit of American currency, defined as 1/10th of one cent.

between capital and labor will cease. The occupation of the spotter, more infamous than that of hangman, will be gone, and that unspeakable atrocity, the “blacklist,” the weapon of the assassin, will live only in history, a relic of civilized savagery, worse, if possible, than thumb screw, wheel, or fagot.

We congratulate and felicitate the wage men of America upon the advanced position of their cause, which is the cause of good government, at once a revolution and a revelation. Federation will win. Education is doing its work. Intelligence, a comprehension of the situation, is bringing about the unification of the wage men of America, and the great republic is to be in a nobler sense than ever, since the declaration of independence was read, the land of the free. The aristocracy of cod fish, coal oil, bank, bucket shop, and corporation, are to find that laws and prisons are made for them as well as for those whose skill and muscle have redeemed the continent from a wilderness, planted Edens of beauty and fruitfulness from ocean to ocean, and from the land of the orange and cotton to the land of apples and corn, who have built the cities, laid the iron rail, bridged the rivers, tunneled the mountains, plowed and sowed and reaped, until all may sing with the spirit and the understanding in loftier and more animating strains than ever made free men rejoice or tyrants tremble

Workingmen united, workingmen are free.
With ballot in their hands, they will issue their decree.
And he who refuses aid, Justice to enthrone,
Invites for this Republic the decline and fall of Rome.⁴

Edited by Tim Davenport

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⁴ The source of this poem is unknown.