
The Outlook of Labor

by Eugene V. Debs

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In every section of our broad land men, regardless of trade, calling or profession are studying the outlook of labor — prognosticating, questioning, and reading the signs of the times. Capitalists, merchants, manufacturers, agriculturalists, politicians and statesmen, philanthropists, and economists are profoundly interested in the outlook of labor. This is not surprising, since it is fundamentally true that when labor is prosperous general prosperity, happiness, and contentment prevail, and when adversities befall labor every interest feels the baneful consequences. If hitherto such facts have not been fully recognized, they are now admitted and their force fully comprehended by all thoughtful men, and they are daily coming into more pronounced conspicuousness. Men laugh at the Coxey “commonweal” demonstration,¹ when in fact it would be difficult to find its parallel in grim, haggard, and dangerous characteristics. The calling together from all parts of the continent of a horde of men forced into idleness by no fault of their own, ragged, hungry, and homeless, seeking work or subsistence, levying contributions as they march, everywhere creating unrest and alarm, is a spectacle which no prudent citizen can contemplate with composure. It is a symptom of a national disease ceaselessly boding evil. It is organized poverty, an army of hungry, ragged men, always on the verge of despair, inviting recruits from the ranks of the wretched and forlorn wherever they are found. On all sides we hear it said that Coxey is a crank, that no good can come to him, to his army, or to others by this “commonweal” demon-

¹ **Jacob S. Coxey, Sr.** (1854-1951), an ambitious Ohio populist politician, led a march of unemployed workers to Washington, DC in the wake of the 1893 economic meltdown. This group of protesters, which sought expanded public works spending to guarantee jobs, was formally known as the “Commonweal of Christ” and popularly nicknamed “Coxey’s army.” The campaign began March 25, 1894 in Massillon, Ohio, and culminated on May 1 when Jacob Coxey and others were arrested before Coxey could deliver a prepared speech from the Capitol steps.

stration. The conclusion is correct, no good can possibly come from forced idleness, prolonged hunger, such shelter for men as is provided for beasts, and often no shelter at all. No good can come from bringing together from east, west, north, and south large bodies of men, who, if not clothed and fed and sheltered will find ways to obtain such essentials at any risk, because “hunger knows no law.”² Coxe, though he will not extort from Congress the enactment of laws which operate to give the idle work, nor provide for them in any way, it is becoming painfully apparent that he has begun a movement well calculated to breed discontent and make it epidemic throughout the country, and just what results will follow no one can foretell.

If an army of 100,000 enforced vagabonds should manage to reach Washington they would constitute an object lesson, such as the world never beheld since the Israelites marched out of Egypt through the Red Sea;³ statesmen, politicians, philanthropists, educators, and divines could contemplate it and exclaim, “Here is one of the evidences of progress, religion, education, and civilization in a government of the people, by the people, and for the people. Here is seen the fruits of class legislation. Here is an exhibition of plutocracy, corporation, trust, monopoly, and robbery on the one hand, and poverty, hunger, squalor, and degradation on the other hand. Here are two exhibits in the great Columbian Fair No. 2, held in the capital of the nation, AD 1894. Look! By all the pagan gods in a pile, above the army of *citizen* vagabonds, without food, clothes, or shelter, floats the star spangled banner, ‘Old Glory!’”

We do not suppose Coxe will march into Washington a hundred thousand hungry, ragged, shoeless, hatless, frostbitten American citizens, but it will not be because there are not one hundred thousand idle workseekers in the country, for there sure millions of them, but enough will straggle into Washington to humiliate the nation — enough, as we have suggested, to make an object lesson for the study of statesmen, if any are found in the capital of the nation.⁴

In studying the outlook of labor the inquiry goes round, What are employers doing to improve conditions? The reply is, in some cases nothing, in others as little as possible, while almost invariably those who are doing anything in the way of giving employment, a reduc-

² English proverb.

³ Allusion to *Exodus*, chapter 14.

⁴ Approximately 500 were on hand to finish the march to Washington with Coxe.

tion of wages in some form is insisted upon. In numerous cases the cut is direct, ranging from 5 percent to 25 percent, the average being fully 10 percent. If, however, the wages per day or per hour are maintained the reduction is reached by reducing the number of hours per day, or the number of days per week, often equivalent to a direct cut of from 10 to 50 percent. Nor are these cuts of wages, direct and indirect, the only burdens imposed upon labor. In addition there has been going on a ceaseless discharge of employees who are forced into idleness without an opportunity to earn any rate of wages.

In carrying out their program of reduction employers claim in every instance that they are in the grasp of imperative necessities that can not be avoided, the result of conditions they had no hand in creating, and which they can neither control nor modify. The facts seem to warrant such declarations. There is universal business demoralization — and what is being done is, as we have remarked, at reduced wages. It is not to be doubted that almost every form of investment in industrial enterprises pays, just now, small dividends or no dividends at all, and that in numerous cases operations are continued at a loss. Be this as it may, labor in the United States is paying the severest penalties ever imposed upon it since the government had an existence, and there never was a time in the history of the country when the outlook of labor was more gloomy.

The inquiry goes round, When can a change in the outlook be expected? In reply, men well posted in dates and data say that the panic of 1873, less serious than that of 1893, dragged along for six years, and that the country did not fully recover from its effects till 1879, hence no time can be named when the business depression now afflicting the country will disappear. Those who pretend to know whereof they speak, on the one side, contend that the mood of the country demanded the coinage of what is called the “seigniorage” silver in the treasury, and Congress enacted a law providing for such coinage of silver dollars, but the President, thrusting aside the action of Congress, interposed his veto, and that source of relief disappeared.⁵ There are those who have clamored for sweeping reforms in tariff legislation proposing to relieve the people of intoler-

⁵ *Seigniorage* is the difference between the sum of the intrinsic value of metal in a coin plus its manufacturing cost versus its face value — the “profit” derived by the issuing entity. Issuance of silver dollars containing a substantially reduced value of rare metal vis-à-vis gold coinage would have provided an additional source of government income, thereby allowing an expansion of relief spending.

able burdens of taxation, but the party in power⁶ wrangles and factionizes until all hope of relief in that direction disappears. Meanwhile the country suffers, and labor more than any other interest. Nothing can be hoped for from legislation, but during this period of suspense and uncertainty, confidence in the future is semi-paralyzed and the day of relief postponed.

Under such circumstances and in such conditions what can labor do? Can labor set industrial enterprises in operation? Can labor, even if organized, obtain fair wages per day? Is not labor so conditioned, as a general proposition, that it must accept reduced wages or remain idle? Would a strike improve conditions? Such is the character of the questions with which labor is called upon to wrestle. If any one has prudent advice to give, the present is a time when it will be patiently considered.

As we write, a case under our observation occurs. Carpenters demand 30 cents an hour. Contractors will pay 25 cents an hour. Carpenters refuse. Contractors remain firm. Pending the controversy nine houses which were to be constructed are abandoned and a contract to build a \$150,000 block is in peril. Meanwhile carpenters are idle. Contractors refuse to consult unions and contract with individuals. Such are the facts disclosed. Conditions are abnormal. Labor leaders now have an opportunity to speak. What will they say? As the English say, Hear! hear!

Edited with footnotes by Tim Davenport

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⁶ The Democratic Party controlled the 53rd Congress, elected in November 1892. It was swept out in a landslide in November 1894.