
Labor Omnia Vincit

(Labor Conquers Everything)

by Eugene V. Debs

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I would hail the day upon which it could be truthfully said, "Labor conquers everything," with inexpressible gratification. Such a day would stand first in Labor's Millennium, that prophesied era when Christ shall begin his reign on the earth to continue a thousand years.

The old Latin fathers did a large business in manufacturing maxims, and the one I have selected for a caption of this article has been required to play shibboleth since, like "a thing of beauty and a joy forever," it came forth from its ancient laboratory. It is one of those happy expressions which embodies quite as much fancy as fact.

The time has arrived for thoughtful men identified with labor — by which I mean the laboring classes — to inquire, what does labor conquer? Or what has it conquered in all the ages? Or what is it now conquering?

If by the term conquer is meant that labor, and only labor, removes obstacles to physical progress, levels down mountains or tunnels them, builds railroads and spans rivers and chasms with bridges, hews down the forests, digs canals, transforms deserts into gardens of fruitfulness, plows and sows and reaps, delves in the mines for coal and all the precious metals; if it is meant that labor builds all the forges and factories, and all the railroads that girdle the world and all the ships that cleave the waves, and mans them, builds all the cities and every monument in all lands; I say if such things are meant when we vauntingly exclaim, "labor conquers everything," no one will controvert the declaration, no one will demur — with one acclaim the averments will stand confessed.

But with all these grand achievements to the credit of labor, how stands labor itself? Having subdued every obstacle to physical progress, what is its condition? The answer is humiliating beyond the

power of exaggeration and the aphorism, "Labor Omnia Vincit" becomes the most conspicuous delusion that ever had a votary since time began.

It will be well for labor on Labor Day to concentrate its vision on the United States of America. The field is sufficiently broad and there are enough object lessons in full view to engage the attention of the most critical, and it will be strange indeed if the inquiry is not made. What has labor conquered up to date in the United States? The inquiry is fruitful of thought. What is the testimony of the labor press of the country, corroborated by statistics which defy contradiction? It is this, that the land is cursed with wage slavery — with the condition that labor, which, according to the proverb, "conquers everything," is itself conquered and lies prostrate and manacled beneath the iron hoofs of a despotism as cruel as ever cursed the world.

To hew and dig, to build and repair, to toil and starve, is not conquering in any proper sense of the term. Conquerors are not clothed in rags. Conquerors do not starve. The homes of conquerors are not huts, dark and dismal, where wives and children moan like the night winds and sob like the rain. Conquerors are not clubbed as if they were thieves, shot down as if they were vagabond dogs, nor imprisoned as if they were felons, by the decrees of despots. No! Conquerors rule — their word is law. Labor is not in the condition of a conqueror in the United States.

Go to the coal mines, go to the New England factories, go to Homestead and Pullman, go to the sweat shops and railroad shops, go to any place in all of the broad land where anvils ring, where shuttles fly, where toilers earn their bread in the sweat of their faces, and exclaim, "Labor Omnia Vincit," and you will be laughed to scorn.

Why is it that labor does not conquer anything? Why does it not assert its mighty power? Why does it not rule in congress, in legislatures and in courts? I answer because it is factionized, because it will not unify, because, for some inscrutable reason, it prefers division, weakness and slavery, rather than unity, strength and victory.

Will it always be thus unmindful of its power and prerogatives? I do not think so. Will it always tamely submit to degradation? I protest that it will not. Labor has the ballot. It has redeeming power. I write from behind prison bars, the victim of a petty tyrant. My crime was that I sought to rescue Pullman slaves from the grasp of a monster of greed and rapacity.

I think a day is coming when “Labor Omnia Vincit” will change conditions. I hear the slogan of the clans of organized labor. It cheers me. I believe with the poet that

A Labor Day is coming when our starry flag shall wave,
Above a land where famine no longer digs a grave;
Where money is not master, nor the workingman a slave —
The right is marching on.¹

Eugene V. Debs,

McHenry County Jail,
Woodstock, Ill.,
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Edited with a footnote by Tim Davenport

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¹ Concluding stanza from “A Labor Day is Coming” (1889) by Col. **J.B. Maynard**. Checked to the original. The poem was first delivered in conclusion to a speech by Maynard to a Knights of Labor picnic at Indianapolis on Sept. 2, 1889. Debs reprinted an excerpt of this speech in the October 1889 issue of *Locomotive Firemen’s Magazine*, page 868, thereby playing an important part in the poem’s preservation. It appears that Maynard was a member of the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen from Indianapolis.