
To the Hosts of the Social Democracy

[An 1897 Labor Day Message]

by Eugene V. Debs

Published in *The Social Democrat* [Chicago], v. 4, no. 19 (Sept. 2, 1897), pg. 2.

There are periods of time in the course of human events when every sentiment of fealty to humanity prompts men to make declarations involving new departures from the old beaten pathways in which men have tramped and wrought and starved and died, and left as an inheritance to their children the same deplorable condition — lives in which the agony of trial, beginning in the cradle, pursues its victim until deal closes the scene; a condition in which high aspirations and noble ambitions live for a time to allure their possessors and then

Like Dead Sea fruits that tempt the eye,
Turn to ashes on the lip.

a condition which tells by the wounds and bruises which afflict the victims how deep has penetrated the steel of oppression when selfishness and greed directed the blow.

I would not, if I could, exaggerate conditions. I know of no words in the lexicons of our language which, though they were pigment and brush in the hands of a Raphael, could be made to paint a darker picture than the unadorned facts present for our contemplation. Nor could words, though wielded by the matchless imagination of a Dante or a Milton, whether describing Hell or Paradise Lost, be made to exaggerate the distress of the poor in the United States of America.

It is told of Parrhasius, an Athenian painter, that his ambition was to “paint a groan,” and for the purpose subjected a slave to torture. If

groans extorted by torture in the United States could be painted and hung in the corridors of Inferno, Satan could appoint a jubilee day for the delection of his hosts, and if Heaven could but catch a glimpse of them the saints would rend their white robes and tear off their crowns and all the harps in the Celestial City would be tuneless and silent.

Labor Day has come again and the sons and daughters of toil are to celebrate its coming. Is it to be an old-time celebration, with music and dancing and feasting, a day of revelry? When the rising sun that ushers in Labor Day sends forth his avant couriers of streaming light and gilds all the horizon in ineffable glory, had he, like a monster of mythology, 50 ears, or, like a fabled Argus, 100 eyes, what would he see and hear as in his sublime march he mounts to the meridian? Shedding his light on the fairest and most fruitful land from Orient to Occident and once the freest, he would see an army of 150,000 coal miners, who with their wives and children swell the number to a million, struggling for bread, and his ears would be saluted with prayers, imprecations, and wails, blending in one long agonizing lament over conditions forced upon them by an accursed wage system that has reduced them to peons and pariahs, for which under that system there is no relief but in death.

One hundred and fifty thousand begrimed men coming up out of the bowels of the earth to assert their right to live is enough to make the "dry bones" Ezekiel saw in his vision stand up and swing their skeleton arms in approval of the crusade — a crusade not like that of Peter the Hermit for the sacred shrines of Palestine, but to wrench from the grasp of a soulless plutocracy the sacred shrines of homes despoiled by pirates who build palaces of poor men's skulls and cement them with workingmen's life blood.

I do not care at this time to discuss strikes as a means of securing better conditions for working people. To a limited extent, in some instances, strikes have succeeded, but in almost every instance the victory won has been ephemeral. Defeated capitalism has found a way to regain its lost ground and make another strike a necessity, and in practically every effort upon a large scale in industrial enterprises involving public interests, failure has been written with an "iron pen and lead in a rock forever."

Why is this fact woven into strikes which involve public convenience? It is because the public will not be inconvenienced for any length of time, though every toiler is found dead in his hut and wives and children become the victims of conditions in the description of which all language is meaningless.

Nevertheless, those whose blood is not warmed in seeing Americans strike against tyranny of any and of every description would have had, had they lived when Washington and his compatriots were leading and fighting forlorn hopes, on the side of the enemies of liberty and independence — traitors to country and humanity.

I know it is the old, old story, the old song, the old refrain, but God pity us all when the old story of the struggle for liberty and independence no longer inspires us to deeds of valor and sacrifice; when Patrick Henry's defiant words, "Give me liberty or give me death" cease to thrill the American heart; for when that time comes, and its ominous shadows, black as Plutonian darkness, are even now lying athwart our pathway, the republic will have been divided into two classes — brigands and beggars, masters and slaves — and the glory of the nation will have departed to return no more forever.

Present conditions startle the most apathetic. If there are those who can discern emancipation from spoilation by nursing into a more vigorous life the schemes of robbery now rife and growing in strength and ferocity, the theory must be that poverty is a crime to be denounced and punished while wealth is a virtue to be protected and applauded. That this is the view taken by the federal judiciary has long since passed beyond the realm of debate and no longer admits of controversy.

To arraign federal judges, the pampered menials of corporations, trusts and every other combine, separately or in the aggregate known as the "money power," has become an American duty as sacred as was ever imposed upon sons whose sires, in the days that "tried men's souls," placed in peril "life, liberty, and sacred honor" for the priceless boon of liberty.

I need not recite the malign decrees of judicial caitiffs in the recent past, the Woodses, Jenkinses, Tafts et al., who, to placate corporations, perpetuated crimes in the name of law which, had they been committed in Tsar-cursed Russia, would have multiplied Nihilists,

though they knew that every rod of the road from St. Petersburg to the penal mines in Siberia would be adorned by their skeletons, monumental of the glory of dying in the pangs of a struggle for emancipation. But Russia, with its absolute ruler, is as free as the United States under the sway of judges, who, having a lease of office running parallel with their lives, are growing more violent and virulent as the months go by.

Here we have a written constitution, ordained by "We the people," in which certain invaluable rights are guaranteed, but which the judges of the federal judiciary treat with contempt, and issue their injunctions with an abandon which discloses the most flagrant usurpations of power known to any land or nation, and in almost every instance for the protection of capitalism and the spoilation of workingmen.

The coal miners were adjured to "keep the peace," to perpetuate no "act of violence." Betrayed, robbed, degraded, and enslaved by corporate capital, half fed and half clothed, feeling the deep damnation of their wrongs — women wailing and children crying, but still obedient to law, they simply exercised the right of free speech. Wilding but one weapon, that of persuasion to call out men to join the army fighting for bread, they found themselves confronted by injunctions issued by judicial fleas rioting in the hair of corporation dogs, striking down the right to march and hushing to silence, as if by a mandate of Jehovah, every voice that had been pleading for the suffering poor. The judicial satraps, Jackson, Mason, Collier, Goff, et al., as if ambitious to win an immortality of ignominy, hesitated at nothing. No constitutional barrier impeded their despotic career. Relentless as pirates and with the tenacity of sleuth hounds they pursued the miners through every lane and avenue of high and holy endeavor to obtain living wages until drums ceased to beat and flags were furled. The miners were scattered, and once more so-called freemen by the thousands were reduced to slavery and must begin anew their life work of starvation and death.

In my own state of Indiana there recently occurred an instance of the exercise of judicial power which I mention to show to what lengths and heights and depths of infamy a federal judge will go to aid a corporation to rob the people.

The capital city of Indiana has a corporation known as the "Citizens' Street Railway," which has issued \$9 million in stocks and bonds on an investment of \$2 million, upon which it has by exorbitant charges of transportation compelled the people to pay dividends.

The legislature of Indiana enacted a law requiring the corporation to charge 3 instead of 5 cents fare, and the Supreme Court of the state decided the act constitutional. In this emergency the corporation took its case into the federal court before one Showalter, a despot of regulation make and mind, who issued an injunction forbidding the governor from executing the laws of the state, and he promptly obeyed. Disrobed and degraded, the governor of a once sovereign state, without a word of protest, pockets the insult without an effort to meet the obligations imposed by the sanctity of his oath of office that he would execute the laws of the state. Surely if the governor of a state can stand such a humiliation, it is not surprising that coal miners should yield to the mandates of a judge.

In view of such facts what will there be in connection with the annual holiday of labor to rejoice over? What one fact looms aloft which presages for labor better conditions in the immediate and remote future?

On the deck of the storm-tossed ship of Labor millions of eyes are seeking to penetrate the surrounding gloom. Millions of voices, listening to what the billows say, would, if they could, interpret the message and point to a haven of safety and repose.

In this supreme hour, when hope is giving way to despair, and stout-hearted men are yielding to what they term the "decree of fate," the star of the Social Democracy, like that which the wise men saw when Christ was born, blazes above the horizon and hope revives and again is heard by ears attuned to the minstrelsy of humanity, "Peace on earth, goodwill toward men."

Once more comes into view the "brotherhood of man," and the old-time shibboleth "Each for all and all for each" is vital with new significance and power.

It is no utopian dream, not an *ignis fatuus*, not the product of imagination, not a mirage of the desert to allure and vanish, but a theory of life and labor in which the humblest individual owns himself and by his labor secures life, liberty, and happiness.

The Social Democracy deals with the possible, with the practical, with axiomatic propositions in the everyday affairs of life. It lays hold upon fundamental principles with unrelaxing grasp and challenges criticism. It makes humanity the focal, converging, and animating idea and proposes to lift it above chicanery into the clear, serene, and unbefogged realm of common sense. It beholds Labor a mendicant, half-fed and half-clothed, inhabiting hovels, forever doomed to play its part in the tragedy of toil, to die at last unknelled and uncoffined, destined to a hold in the Potters' field, and proposes to lift it up and out of its degrading environments, not by pathways decked with the flowers of fancy, but along the lines of practical endeavor, where mind, muscle, skill, humanity, and home, in holy alliance, in well-adjusted, cooperative effort liberates the enslaved, gives a new birth to hope, aspiration, and ambition, and makes the desert blossom and the waste places glad — a condition in which, when a man earns a dollar he is not compelled to divide it with a capitalist, who, as now, scourges him to his task as if he were a galley slave, but takes to himself all the fruits of his labor, and thus emancipated by industrial and economic laws which elevate, bless, and adorn humanity, the devotee of Social Democracy advances by degrees until the fangs and pangs of poverty disappear, until in his own home fears of eviction no longer breed despair, until wife and children, the recipients of the benedictions of cooperative prosperity, enjoy the fruitions of peace and prosperity, and under their own vine and fig tree live as free from carking care as the songbirds of the woodlands.

Here is a theme for Labor Day worthy of the genius of orator and poet. Fancy may plume its wings for flights to where the “universe spreads its flaming walls,” but will find no object more worthy of its powers than a home where love and contentment reign supreme — a home beyond the reach of an injunction — a home amidst pathways of peace and prosperity — a home where the call to labor has no note of degradation, but is attuned to life and liberty and joy, as when a Switzer salutes the rising sun with his Alpine horn, and from peak to peak and crag to crag the shout is heard, “Praise God.”

In writing this message to Labor and to the Social Democracy of America, I would emphasize the fact that a new departure has been inaugurated in response to a demand voiced by conditions in which

calamities are forever treading upon the heels of preceding disasters and like the tracks of animals to slaughter pens, no footprint indicates the escape of the doomed victims, It is a new departure based upon the immutable laws of love for the emancipation of humanity from degradation. The principle, ancient as creation, lives for the purpose of being applied whenever and wherever humanity lifts its bowed head and wails forth its cry for help. This it is now doing. The winds are burdened with moans, and the Social Democracy, with hope and help in alliance, comes to the front with an invitation to all who would escape from the grinding curse of wage slavery, who would place themselves beyond the reach of the jaws and paws of plutocratic tigers, to break loose from their degrading environments and come within the ramparts which the Social Democracy is building for the safety of those who have suffered long for an opportunity to work out their salvation, not with "fear and trembling," but with a faith "that is the substance of things hoped for" and willing to consecrate all their mental and physical faculties to the work of rescuing their fellow men from the grasp of a system which has enslaved them and help them to realize the full measure of happiness that comes to free and independent men.

Nearly a hundred years ago Shelley, one of England's great poets, sounded the tocsin of the Social Democracy when he wrote an "Appeal to the Men of England," which I transcribe, because it rings out an appeal to the men of America today:

Men of England, wherefore plough
For the lords who lay ye low?
Wherefore weave with toil and care
The rich robes your tyrants wear?

Wherefore feed, and clothe and save,
From the cradle to the grave,
Those ungrateful drones who would
Drain your sweat — nay, drink your blood?

Wherefore, bees of England, forge
Many a weapon, chain and scourge
That these stingless drones may spoil
The forced produce of your toil?

Have ye leisure, comfort, calm,
Shelter, food, love's gentle balm?
Or what is it ye buy so dear
With your pain and with your fear?

The seed ye sow another reaps;
The wealth ye find another keeps;
The robes ye weave another wears,
The arms ye forge another bears.

Sow seed — but let no tyrant reap;
Find wealth — let no imposter keep,
Weave robes — let not the idle wear;
Forge arms — in your defense to bear.

Shrink to your cellars, holes and cells;
In halls ye deck, another dwells;
Why shake the chains ye wrought? Ye see
The steel ye tempered glance on ye.

With plough and spade, and hoe and loom,
Trace your grave, and build your tomb,
And weave your winding sheet, till fair
England be your sepulchre.

Eugene V. Debs,
Terre Haute, Ind., August 30, 1897.

Edited by Tim Davenport

1000 Flowers Publishing, Corvallis, OR · December 2016 · Non-commercial reproduction permitted.
Second Edition (First Edition was 2006).