

An Ideal Labor Press (May 1904)

The primal consideration in the present industrial system is profit. All other things are secondary. Profit is the life blood of capital — the vital current of the capitalist system — and when it shall cease to flow the system will be dead.

The capitalist is the owner of the worker's tools. Before the latter can work he must have access to the capitalist's tool house and permission to use the master's tools. What he produces with these tools belongs to the master, to whom he must sell his labor at the market price. The owner of the tools is therefore master of the man.

Only when the capitalist can extract a satisfactory profit from his labor-power is the worker given a job, or allowed to work at all.

Profit first; labor, life, love, liberty — all these must take second place.

In such a system labor is in chains, and the standard of living, if such it may be called, is cornerstoned in crusts and rags. Under such conditions ideas and ideals are not prolific among the sons and daughters of toil. Slavery does not excite lofty aspirations nor inspire noble ideals.

The tendency is to sodden irresolution and brutish inertia. But this very tendency nourishes the germ of resistance that ripens into the spirit of revolt.

The labor movement is the child of slavery — the offspring of oppression — in revolt against the misery and suffering that gave it birth. Its splendid growth is the marvel of our time, the forerunner of freedom, the hope of mankind.

Ten thousand times has the labor movement stumbled and fallen and bruised itself, and risen again; been sized by the throat and choked and clubbed into insensibility; enjoined by courts, assaulted by thugs, charged by the militia, shot down by regulars, traduced by the press, frowned upon by public opinion, deceived by politicians, threatened by priests, repudiated by renegades, preyed upon by grafters, infested by spies, deserted by cowards, betrayed by traitors, bled by leeches, and sold out by leaders; but, notwithstanding all this, and all these, it is today the most vital and potential power this planet has ever known and its historic mission of

emancipating the workers of the world from the thralldom of the ages is as certain of ultimate realization as the setting of the rising sun.

The most vital thing about this world movement is the educational propaganda — its capacity and power to shed light in the brain of the working class, arouse them from their torpor, develop their faculties for thinking, teach them their economic class interests, effect their solidarity, and imbue them with the spirit of the impending social revolution.

In this propaganda, the life-breath of the movement, the press is paramount to all other agencies and influences, and the progress of the press is a sure index of the progress of the movement.

Unfortunately, the workers lack intelligent appreciation of the importance of the press; they also lack judgment and discrimination in dealing with the subject, and utterly neglect some good papers, and permit them to perish, which others that are anything but helpful or beneficial to the cause they are supposed to represent are liberally patronized, and flourish at the expense of the ignorance and stupidity that support them.

The material prosperity of a labor paper today is no guarantee of its moral or intellectual value. Indeed, some of the most worthless labor publications have the finest mechanical appearance, and are supported by the largest circulations.

Such a press is not only not a help of labor, but a millstone about its neck that only the awakening intelligence of the working class can remove.

How thoroughly alive the capitalists are to the power of the press! And how assiduously they develop and support it, that it may in turn buttress their class interests.

The press is one of the most valuable assets, and, as an investment, pays the highest dividends.

When there is trouble between capital and labor, the press volleys and thunders against labor and its unions and leaders and all other things that dare to breathe against the sacred rights of capital. In such a contest labor is dumb, speechless, it has no press that reaches the public, and must submit to the vilest calumny, the most outrageous misrepresentation.

The lesson has been taught in all the languages of labor and written in the blood of its countless martyred victims.

Labor must have a press as formidable as the great movement of the working class requires to worthily represent its dignity and fearlessly and uncompromisingly advocate its principles.

Every member of a trade union should feel himself obligated to do his full share in the important work of building up the press of the labor movement; he should at least support the paper of his union, and one or more of the papers of his party, and, above all, he should read them and school himself in the art of intelligent criticism, and let the editor hear from him when he has a criticism to offer or a suggestion to make.

The expense of supporting the labor press is but a trifle to the individual member — less than the daily outlay for other trifles that are of no benefit, and can easily be dispensed with.

The editor of a labor paper is of far more importance to the union and the movement than the president or any other officer of the union. He ought to be chosen with special reference to his knowledge upon the labor question and his fitness to advocate and defend the economic interests of the class he represents.

The vast amount of capitalist advertising some labor publications carry certifies unerringly to the worthlessness of their literary contents. Capitalists do not, as a rule, advertise in labor papers that are loyal to working class interests. It is only on condition that the advertising colors and controls the editorial that the capitalist generously allows his patronage to go to the labor paper.

The workingman who wants to read a labor paper with the true ring, one that ably, honestly, and fearlessly speaks for the working class, will find it safer to steer clear of those that are loaded with capitalist advertising and make his selection from those that are nearly or quite boycotted by the class that lives and thrives upon the slavery of the working class.

The labor press of today is not ideal, but it is improving steadily, and the time will come when the ideal labor press will be realized; when the labor movement will command editors, writers, journalists, artists of the first class; when hundreds of papers, including dailies in the large cities, will gather the news and discuss it from the labor standpoint; when illustrated magazines and periodicals will illuminate the literature of labor and all will combine to realize our ideal labor press and bless the way to victory.

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pp. 1, 4. Included in *Debs: His Life, Writings, and Speeches* (1908), pp. 239-242, in which it is wrongly attributed to *The Metal Worker*, a different publication.