

Roosevelt's Labor Letters

(May 18, 1907)

The letter of President Roosevelt to the Moyer and Haywood conference of New York is in strange contrast with the one previously addressed by him to the Chicago conference on the same subject. The two letters are so entirely dissimilar in spirit and temper that they seem to have been written by different persons. In the first the president bristles with defiance, in the last he is the pink of politeness. The first letter utterly failed of its purpose.¹ Organized labor did not lie down and be still at the command of the president. On the contrary, it growled more fiercely than before; in fact, showed its teeth of the president who has become so used to exhibiting his own. And lo — what a change! The president receives a labor committee, talks over matters for an hour, and then addresses a letter to the conference through the chairman, beginning "My Dear Mr. Henry," explaining that he is ready to perform his duty if only the conference will point it out to him, and putting the whole blame on "Debs and the socialists," whom he charges with using "treasonous and murderous language," but not a word of explanation does he vouchsafe in regard to his denunciation of Moyer and Haywood, the real and in fact the only point at issue.²

Again has the president vindicated his reputation as one of the smoothest of politicians and one of the most artful and designing of demagogues.

We hope the lesson here taught as to what workingmen can accomplish by the power of united effort is not lost upon the working class. The first letter of the president was an insult to labor and had labor submitted, the president's contempt for it would have been intensified by its cravenness.

The second letter was a virtual apology and nothing less than the firm attitude of labor extorted it.

The president's position, however, is not less enviable than before. Since he seeks escape from castigation for his outrageous attack upon Moyer and Haywood upon the ground that Debs had used "treasonable and murderous language" and that it was his duty as president to denounce it, a few questions will be in order and when the president has answered these we have a few more to which answers are also desired.

Did the president ever hear of one Sherman Bell?

Is it not a fact that said Sherman Bell is a personal friend of the president and that in a letter written in the president's own hand he commends said Sherman Bell in the most exalted terms?

Has the president ever heard of the expression, "To hell with habeas corpus; we'll give 'em post mortems," commended as "patriotic by the capitalist press at the time it was made?"

Does not the president know that it was his highly esteemed personal friend, Sherman Bell, who coined this phrase?

Is it "treasonable and murderous?"

Did the president condemn it?

Will he do so now?

Would he have done so if it had been Debs instead of Bell?

Why does he "conceive it to be his duty" to condemn Debs and not Bell?

Because Bell stands for capital and Debs for labor?

Has Debs ever said anything that, with reference to treason and murder, can be compared to this expression of his boon companion, Sherman Bell?

Will the president please answer?

Again, has the president ever heard of one Lieut. T. E. McClelland?

And of the expression, "To hell with the constitution," made by said McClelland?

Is this treasonable language?

Did the president condemn it?

Or, is it patriotic language when used in defense of capital and treasonable only when used in defense of labor?

Does the president know one Adjutant General Bulkley Wells,³ the "officer of the law" who forcibly seized Moyer, Haywood, and Pettibone and "special-trained" them to Idaho?

Does he know that his labor commissioner, Carroll D. Wright, condemns said Bulkley Wells as a "mob leader" in his official report of the Colorado troubles?

Does the president approve of mobs?

And consort with mob leaders?

While denouncing mobs?

Has he denounced Bulkley Wells?

Will he do so?

Is the president aware that the Mine and Smelter Trust behind the persecution of Moyer, Haywood, and Pettibone bought the legislature of Colorado outright, thereby defeating an eight-hour measure which a popular majority of more than 46,000 votes had commanded said legislature to enact into law?

And that those mine and smelter owners are among his personal friends?

Is there any treason in this?

Has the president condemned it?

Dare he do so?

Is this idea of "exact justice?"

A "square deal?"

Again, is kidnapping according to "law and order?"

If the kidnapped are workingmen?

And charged with their kidnappers with being murderers?

And by the president as "undesirable citizens?"

Would the president have taken the same view if workingmen had kidnapped capitalists instead of capitalists kidnapping workingmen?

If it had been Ryan, Root, and Paul Morton, instead of Moyer, Haywood, and Pettibone?

Will the president kindly answer?

Has the president ever heard the expression, "they shall never leave Idaho alive?"

Is this "murderous" language?

Except when used by "officers of the law?"

Has the president condemned it?

Does he approve it?

Has the president heard of one W. E. Borah, senator-elect, indicted for theft?

Visiting at the White House and coming out "smiling and confident?"

Is he innocent and desirable in spite of his indictment and Haywood guilty and undesirable in spite of the lawful presumption to the contrary?

Has the president ever hear of one Theodore Roosevelt?

Charged by the New York Tribune and other leading capitalist papers in 1896 with threatening to lead an armed force to Washington to prevent the inauguration of a lawfully elected president of the United States?

Is there any "treason" or "murder" in this?

Does the president remember one John P. Altgeld?

And one Theodore Roosevelt who in the same year of 1896 said that said Altgeld and one Debs should be lined up against a dead wall and shot?

Which said Roosevelt never denied until four years later when he became candidate for vice-president?

Is this the “temperate” language of a perfectly “desirable” citizen?

Does the president remember one Governor Roosevelt, of New York, who ordered his militia to Croton Dam to shoot some of the workingmen who elected him for venturing to ask the enforcement of the eight-hour law of the state?

And to protect the contractors who were violating the law?

Is this more of the president’s “exact justice for all?”

Will the president kindly explain what he regards as inexact justice?

Or exact injustice?

Or injustice of any kind?

Or if his “exact justice for all” is not buncombe served in stilted style?

Can the president say or do anything wrong?

Would he admit it if he did?

Has he ever done so?

When the president rebuked the labor unions for attempting to “influence the course of justice” did he not know it was violent kidnapping they were protesting against?

That they were seeking to influence the course, not of justice, but of injustice?

Resisting, not law, but mob violence cloaked as law?

At the time the president administered this rebuke had he not himself read his letter condemning Moyer and Haywood to members of the supreme court when their case was pending in said court?

Was this not an attempt to “influence the course of justice?”

Will the president publicly rebuke it?

When Moyer, Haywood, and Pettibone, three workingmen, rugged as Patrick Henry, honest as Abraham Lincoln, and brave as John Brown, were brutally kidnapped and told that they would be killed by the outlaws who kidnapped them; when two conspiring governors were the instigators of the kidnapping and all legal rights denied; when the special train lay in wait to rush them to their doom while their wives listened in vain all night long for their returning footsteps; when all law was cloven down, all justice denied, all decency defied, and all humanity trampled beneath the brutal hooves of might, a monstrous crime was committed, not against Moyer,

Haywood, and Pettibone merely, but against the working class, against the human race, and, by the eternal, that crime, even by the grace of Theodore Roosevelt, shall not go unwhipped of justice.

“Undesirable citizens” they are to the Christless perverts who exploit labor to degeneracy and mock its misery; turn the cradle into a coffin and call it philanthropy, and debauch the nation’s politics and morals in the name of civilization.

“Undesirable citizens” though they are, these are the loyal leaders of the men who have toiled in the mines and who have been subjected to every conceivable outrage; “who have had their homes broken into and who have been beaten, bound, robbed, insulted, and imprisoned;” who have been chained to posts in the public highway, deported from their families under penalty of death, and bullpenned while their wives and daughters were outraged. In the light of all these crimes perpetrated upon these men in violation of every law by brutal mobs led by the president’s own personal friends, as the official reports of his own labor commissioner will show, without a word of protest from him, it requires sublime audacity, to put it mildly, for the president to affirm that he stands for “exact justice to all” and that he “conceives it to be his duty” to denounce “treasonable and murderous language.”

If the miners of Colorado had been less patient than beasts of burden, they would have risen in revolt against the outrages perpetrated upon them by their heartless corporate masters.

Were a mob of workingmen to seize Theodore Roosevelt and chain him to a post on a public street in Washington in broad daylight, as a mob of his capitalist friends seized and chained a workingman in Colorado; or throw him into a foul bullpen, without cause or provocation, prod him with bayonets, and outrage his defenseless family while he was a prisoner, as was done in scores of well-authenticated cases in both Colorado and Idaho, would he then be in the mood to listen complacently to hypocritical homilies upon the “temperate” use of language, the sanctity of “law and order,” and the beauty of “exact justice for all?”

And if he heard of some man who had sufficient decency to denounce the outrages he and his family had suffered, would he then “conceive it to be his duty,” as he tells us, to condemn the language of such a man as “treasonable and murderous” and the man himself as “inciting bloodshed” and therefore an “undesirable citizen?”

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¹ News of Roosevelt's first letter was dated April 22, 1907 and was written in response to a April 19 communication from Honore Jackson of Chicago, chair of the Cook county Moyer-Haywood Conference. Jaxson had queried Roosevelt about his reference to Debs, Moyer, and Haywood as "undesirable citizens" in recently published October 1906 correspondence with E. H. Harriman. Roosevelt rebuked Jackson for having stated "death cannot, will not, and shall not claim our brothers," charging the language "shows you are not demanding a fair trial or working for a fair trial, but are announcing in advance that the verdict shall be one way and that you will not tolerate any other verdict." This, Roosevelt contended, was "flagrant in its impropriety and I join heartily in condemning it." Roosevelt went on to declare that "Messrs. Moyer, Haywood, and Debs stand as representatives...who have done much to discredit the labor movement as the worst speculative financiers or most unscrupulous employers and debauchers of legislators have done to discredit honest purposes and fair-dealing men." Roosevelt charged that such labor leaders "habitually appear as guilty of incitement to or apology for bloodshed and violence."

² Roosevelt's second letter, sent to the Moyer-Haywood-Pettibone committee of the Central Federated Union of New York, was dated May 2, 1907 and was written as a formal response to a visit of the committee to him in Washington, DC. In it Roosevelt extensively quoted a March 25 letter sent to Attorney General Charles Bonaparte, in which he said "there must be no condonation of lawlessness on our part, even if the lawlessness takes the form of an effort to avenge the lawlessness of others." Roosevelt further declared that "the intemperate violence with which the socialistic or labor papers, like that of Debs, and I am sorry to say some labor organizations, have insisted without any knowledge of the facts upon treating these men as martyrs to the cause of labor," which "has unquestionably resulted in tremendous pressure being brought to bear upon the authorities of Idaho to discharge or acquit them, whether guilty or innocent." Roosevelt quoted the writing of Debs on the case and characterized it as "murderous and treasonable" and an effort "to obstruct the course of justice."

³ On April 12, 1904, Captain Bulkley Wells and Adjutant General Sherman M. Bell of the Colorado National Guard were declared in contempt of court by district judge Theron Stevens for failing to comply with a writ of habeas corpus calling for Western Federation of Miners President Charles Moyer to be brought to court from confinement in Telluride. Declaring that "if there is to be a reign of military despotism in this state and civil authority is to have no jurisdiction, the latter might as well go out of business," Judge Stevens ordered that Moyer be released from custody, fined Wells and Bell \$500 each, and ordered their arrest. Bell responded belligerently, declaring that he would be arrested only "over the dead bodies of all the soldiers under my command in this county," and that he would take orders to release Moyer only from Governor James H. Peabody. Wells, an 1892 graduate of Harvard University, was himself appointed Adjutant General of the Colorado National Guard in April 1905, succeeding Bell. He narrowly survived an assassination attempt in March 1908 in which his home was blown up with dynamite. In 1921 he was named president of the Comstock Mining Company.