
The Lessons of Elections

by Eugene V. Debs

Published in *Locomotive Firemen's Magazine*, vol. 9, no. 2 (Feb. 1885), pp. 89-91.

On the 4th day of November last [1884], by the fiat of the American people, the machinery of the federal government was transferred to new hands, as provided by the laws of the Republic. It is no part of our purpose to write of the incidents of the partisan struggle which resulted in a change of public servants. We shall indulge in neither eulogistic nor denunciatory comments upon parties or party leaders. The *Magazine* is not partisan, but the patrons of the *Magazine* are profoundly interested in the lessons of elections, that it is say, that class of elections which can be said to have any appreciable effect upon the general welfare. In this connection, it may be prudently said that elections, particularly those which relate to state and federal affairs, have a profounder significance than in any other country, where the ballot is used to settle any questions relating to the public weal.

Here, with a few exceptions, the sovereignty of citizenship is acknowledged. Manhood sovereignty is supreme. It is secured to the humblest toiler, as certainly as to the millionaire. In the presence of the ballot box all men are equal, and this lesson of elections is one that can be studied with profit by those who entertain misgivings, touching the capabilities of men for self-government. There is no grander spectacle presented for the contemplation of mankind, than when 55 million free people, quietly, in a day, designate at the ballot box who shall be their rulers, their law makers, their public servants, and what shall be the policy of their government.

It would be profitable, in this article, to refer particularly to all the lessons which elections teach, and which invite serious reflection, in so far as such lessons relate to policy, and measures, rather than to men. The students of events will not fail to notice that one of the lessons taught by the recent Presidential election had special reference to labor interests. The speeches, the documents, the press, discussed, with more or less directness, labor topics. The industries of the coun-

try and the industrial classes came in for a larger share of attention than was ever before awarded to them, and it is therefore prudent to assume that the most important lessons of the election relate to the labor interests of the country. If this proposition's true, if all the facts warrant the conclusion, then it may be said that labor has advanced in the direction of influence to a plane upon which it may achieve triumphs in the future fraught with inestimable blessings.

The lesson of the election which may be studied by laboring men with special profit teaches that by national unification, legislation can be so shaped that the wealth, which labor creates, shall be equitably distributed. That means not only honest pay for an honest day's work, but that the government shall not tax labor to any extent beyond its absolute need, when economically administered. There can be no equitable distribution of the wealth which labor creates (and labor creates all wealth), if labor is taxed to any extent to maintain monopolies, and the lesson of the late election teaches the fact, beyond controversy, not because Cleveland was elected or Blaine defeated, but because the labor interests of the country were brought into such commanding prominence as to teach laboring men that, united and harmonious, they can dictate the policy of the government without reference to which party triumphs.

In discussing the lesson of the election, in so far as the labor interests of the country are concerned, we remark that the laws should be so framed as to prevent men or corporations from collecting dividends upon what is known as "watered stock." One illustration will suffice: It is known that the Western Union Telegraph Company collects dividends on \$80 million, when the investments of the corporation do not exceed \$40 million. If, as is now universally conceded, labor creates all the wealth of the country, it also pays all the debts, all the dividends; hence, laws which permit such gross injustice as the collection of dividends on "water," must be, in the nature of things, vicious. Such laws strike labor a staggering blow. And the lesson of the late election demonstrates that the united protest of laboring men against such monstrous injustice will hasten the era of reform. Labor has the ballot, and can wield it intelligently, and when it strikes at wrongs, the result of legislation, or the want of legislation, it may hope to achieve results fraught with incalculable blessings to society.

In the August number of the *North American Review*, a writer upon "The Encroachments of Capital" begins by saying: "It is one of the maxims of Machiavelli, that in order to preserve soundness and

health, all nations should often go back to first principles,” and the reason given, is that each form of government is usually framed in the outset on principles which belong to its best conditions, and that all departures, to any serious extent, are unnatural and therefore dangerous. As a general proposition, Machiavelli, in the light of events, must be regarded as a false theorist. In times gone by, when it was assumed that the few had a “divine right” to rule over the many, it may have been true that “governments were framed in the outset on principles which belonged to their best condition,” but such a theory has long since been exploded, and finds few advocates in lands where the ballot, in the hands of the masses, dictates rulers and measures. In the United States, however, it is true, that the government in the outset was framed upon principles which belonged to its best condition, and, therefore, it is the part of wisdom for the people to often go back to first principles, if they would escape “unnatural and dangerous” departures.

If capital is making encroachments in the United States, upon whom does the invasion bear most heavily? Certainly not upon the rich. Whose rights are dangerously infringed? Whose interests are the most seriously imperiled? The few do not complain. Capitalists are content. Just here the question arises. If capital is making encroachments, as is claimed, is the wrong perpetrated under cover of law, or is the injustice in violation of the statutes? In either case, the lesson of election teaches the remedy. It should be understood that labor is self-reliant. Labor demands to be let severely alone. It does not demand that wages shall be determined by statute, but it does demand that the statutes shall not embarrass labor, place obstacles in its way, impoverish and degrade it, and, if elections teach anything, they voice the declaration that labor with the ballot in its hands can remedy the glaring evils which environ it. It can deprive monopoly of its power for much of the evil it inflicts.

It is well known that capitalists combine to “corner” the essentials of life, bread and meat, by which prices are made to advance, and labor made to suffer. If the laws shield such nefarious transactions, they are vicious and should be repealed, and others enacted in consonance with the sentiments of all honest men, and labor has the power to apply the remedy. The subject suggests a broader field of thought, but our space forbids elaboration. We may refer to it again. For the present, it must suffice to say that the lesson of elections teaches working men that their duty to themselves and to the state, is to protest at the

ballot box against legislation which in its operation compels labor to bear an undue proportion of burdens, and receive too small a share of the wealth it creates.

Edited by Tim Davenport

1000 Flowers Publishing, Corvallis, OR · March 2017 · Non-commercial reproduction permitted.
First Edition.