
Current Disagreements Between Employers and Employees

by Eugene V. Debs

Published in *Locomotive Firemen's Magazine*, vol. 10, no. 5 (May 1886), pp. 262-264.

There never was a time in the history of the country when the disagreements between employers and employees were as numerous and as varied as at present. Thoughtful men are diligently seeking for the cause — for the reasons why. Scarcely any locality is exempt. Complaints come from every trade and occupation. Strikes are numerous, some of them extensive and exceedingly embarrassing, and each involves complications which require consummate ability to unravel.

In this connection we esteem it pertinent to introduce the thoughtful conclusion of Mr. Arthur T. Hadley, Commissioner of Labor Statistics of Connecticut.¹ In his report to the Governor Mr. Hadley says:

The relations between labor and capital cannot be treated as a mere matter of private business, but involve social and political questions. The fact is becoming clearer every day, whether we like it or not. The state of things is this: *The men who do the most physical work, as a class, seem to have the least to show for it.* Their wages are often barely sufficient to meet the expenses of living. They sometimes cannot get work at all. At best, they are working for others, with little independence of action, and often with little hope of anything better. In their life, their work and their relations to their employers, evils and abuses have arisen, which it seems impossible for any individual to prevent, while the attempt to remedy them by organized action often proves worse

¹ Economist **Arthur Twining Hadley** (1856-1930) is best remembered as the President of Yale University from 1899 to 1921.

than useless. In this difficulty there is a demand for public investigation, and *for legislative action*.

The fact that men who perform the most physical labor have less than anyone else to show for it, might not of itself create disturbances, as in all the ages past, no one has ever been able to determine how much an honest day's work is worth; but when an honest day's work does not secure a sufficient supply of the absolute necessities of life, then everybody knows, and everybody possessed of a soul is willing to admit that a cruel, flagrant, stupendous wrong has been done the workingman or woman. To reach that conclusion, political economists, mathematicians, persons learned in logic and law, are not required. "The wayfaring man though a fool," will not err in his conclusion.² Hunger with its gnawing agonies bears testimony to the fact. Homes destitute of comforts denounce trumpet tongued the wrong. Shivering mothers and children pronounce that a curse, cancer-like, is upon them, and is sending, deep down into their vitals, its poisonous and destroying roots.

If, then, the question is asked, why this widespread unrest in labor circles throughout the land? The answer comes quick, emphatic and conclusive: workingmen are not receiving fair wages — by which we mean, here, sufficient wages to supply themselves and those who are dependent upon them, a respectable support.

There may be — indeed there are other causes assigned for the labor infelicities which now exist. We shall not attempt to enumerate them, nor is it required. Locomotive Firemen are keeping abreast of the times, and are familiar with the causes which are creating the widespread unrest. But it may be well to say, that hours, working time, enters largely into the deliberations of workingmen. They declare that not only are wages too low, but that they are required to work too many hours to secure even such wages as they do receive. They contend that they are placed between two wrongs, between the upper and the nether millstones, *overwork* and *under-pay*, and that they are simply trying to escape from the grinding, crushing curse.

Now, it should be understood, that there never was a time in the history of the country, when workingmen were asking themselves so many questions as now. We doubt, if average citizens, however intelli-

² Adapted from *Isaiah*, chapter 35, verse 8: "And an highway shall be there, and a way, and it shall be called *The way of holiness*; the unclean shall not pass over it; but it shall be for those: the wayfaring men, though fools, shall not err therein."

gent and thoughtful, have prudently estimated the lifting, expanding, invigorating and disenfranchising power of intelligence, or, if they have stopped to inquire to what extent this growth of intelligence is responsible for the present perplexities and embarrassments which now surround the labor interests of the country?

We boast of our schools and libraries, and the disappearance of illiteracy — and well we may — and it is this universal diffusion of knowledge which is bringing workingmen to the front and emboldening them to assert their claims to a larger share of the products of their toil. And it is vastly material to say in this connection, that American workingmen are resolving to live like American citizens — not like the heathen Chinese. If this is done, better wages must be secured, and will be secured, and a reasonable advance in wages will, in no respect whatever, prove detrimental to employers.

We have said, that workingmen are now everywhere engaged in asking themselves questions — and this done, they are extending the area of the field of interrogatories until the great public stops to listen and to answer.

We have what is called a Christian civilization. We refer to the present as the high noon of the Christian era. We boast of our schools and our churches, we talk of the nation's wealth and power, we discuss and tabulate the fabulous productions of our soil and of our ability to supply other nations with food. We get bewildered with the sum totals of our foreign and interstate commerce, and yet we are today confronted on all sides by harrowing conditions, and hear the declarations of men, women and children, that hunger is gnawing at their vitals, that they are cold for the want of comfortable clothing, and that their homes in thousands of instances are little better than hovels. There is idleness and destitution, because, with all our boasted civilization, wealth, culture, progress, and Christianity, we are unable to do simple justice by those who create the wealth and carry forward the great enterprises of the period.

It is not strange, therefore, that working people are asking questions, not strange that they have grievances and that they are seeking for a remedy for the evils which have befallen their lot.

We are not unmindful of the fact that some people complain because it is their nature to be dissatisfied — they belong to the croaking-frog family of humanity — on dry land or in the water, they croak, hot or cold, sick or well, “in poverty's vail or abounding in

wealth”³ it matters not, they are discontented; but such people are the exception. The great body of men, we refer to working men, desire contentment and would suffer inconveniences rather than create derangements and commotion. The history of labor is preeminently distinguished by conservatism, and hence when there is widespread unrest, there is popular conviction that underlying the disquietude there are potent reasons — any other conclusion antagonizes common sense views of human affairs. It goes for nothing to say that workingmen make mistakes, or that their methods to redress their grievances embody errors. Such things are inseparable from human nature, and when such accusations are made, who is there among accusers to throw the first stone? Employers? Nay, verily. In the presence of facts they should remain speechless.

The demand is for an honest analysis of the situation; this accomplished, the discussion of remedies will be in order.

First, are the statutes just? Take for instance the well established fact, that if the law permitted certain foreign commodities, raw materials to be imported free of duty, certain classes of goods could be so manufactured as to compete with foreign countries in the markets of the world. This would stimulate profitable manufacturing and increase the demand for labor. Hence, labor is deeply interested in such legislation.

Again, it is believed that to make 8 hours a legal day’s work would indefinitely benefit the laboring class. We refer simply to the financial aspect of the case. The problem worked out discloses the fact that if 100 men working 10 hours a day were to work only 8 hours, the change would make room for 25 more men; hence if 1,000,000 men are working 10 hours a day, by reducing the hours to 8, room is made for 250,000 idle men who need work. The change from 10 hours to 8 more widely distributes earnings, and if wages paid for 10 hours are paid for 8 hours, then labor comes nearer than at present to receiving its fair share of its products. There is profound economical philosophy in the 8-hour proposition, and once inaugurated and honestly

³ Line from an old Christian hymn, “Believers’ Sufferings,” traced back as far as an 1822 song book, *Social and Camp-Meeting Songs For the Pious*. Fourth edition. Baltimore: Armstrong and Plaskitt, 1822; pg. 205. The original verse reads:

*In every condition, in sickness, in health,
In poverty’s vail, or abounding in wealth;
At home and abroad, in the land, on the sea,
As thy days may demand, shall thy strength ever be.*

carried out, it would exert a beneficial influence. Labor contends that the State pursues a vicious and demoralizing policy, by seeking to derive revenue from its felons, in which case honesty and good citizenship is required to compete with crime for sustenance. We have not the space now at our command to elaborate these propositions, but they enter into the present labor troubles and should command consideration. To correct such errors, whether of legislation or practice demands neither strikes nor boycotts. They simply require thought and study and an honest purpose to find a remedy and apply it.

Dismissing such questions and taking a wider survey of the field, complaints multiply, but those the most frequent relate to wages. There are localities and enterprises, where harmony between employer and employee exists, but as a general proposition, labor complains of inability to obtain fair wages. In some instances, there is a crusade against labor organizations, and again complaints are heard in regard to the flagrant wrong of "blacklisting." Each of these complaints present many and different phases, often trivial, but more frequently of such gravity as to place in peril the security of capital, the employment of workingmen, and the peace of society. But we are clearly of the opinion that for their adjustment, there are better methods than strikes or boycotting, and we still have faith that peaceful remedies will be found.

The present agitation of labor questions will, we are convinced, inure to the benefit of the wage men of America. Facts hidden from the public eye have been laid bare, and their importance is now up for discussion, and workingmen in thousands of instances have qualified themselves to present their rights and interests with such cogency and force that there need be little solicitude as to the final verdict. There have been mistakes, errors in judgment and methods, there has been headlong precipitancy, when great caution was required, there has been a resort to extreme measures where moderation was demanded by every consideration of justice and propriety, and yet we are confident when the normal condition of business is again established, every labor problem that has demanded investigation will be nearer a rational and a just solution than ever before. Having boundless faith in American workingmen and in American institutions, appreciating the power of intelligence, books and ballots, we anticipate at no distant day when logic and law, faith in man and fealty to justice and right, will place employer and employee in harmonious relations, and that the trials through which they have passed, since they led to peace

and concord, will be remembered as benedictions instead of afflictions.

Edited with a footnote by Tim Davenport

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