
Power vs. Power

by Eugene V. Debs

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In discussing federation it should be understood that the proposition is power versus power. It presupposes antagonistic forces, the right confronted by the wrong, truth arrayed against error, etc. If there are those who believe that human nature has undergone any radical change since our first parents ate the forbidden fruit, they are, to put it mildly, the victims of a hallucination, too serious in influences for jest or raillery. It is the same old human nature, with good and bad elements so intermixed that only indomitable patience, inspired by hopes that will not down at the bidding of adversity, can so mold and fashion it as to bring out its redeeming and conquering power. It was said by Washington: "In peace, prepare for war," a maxim the nations of the earth accept as the very essence of wisdom. Why? Simply because human nature, in its normal condition, is for strife. From savagery up through all the gradations to the highest civilization, we find human nature exhibiting its native characteristics: greed, war, conquest, and oppression; the strong lording it over the weak, crushing and degrading them compelling them in numberless ways to pay tribute.

I do not antagonize the sentimental forces in operation to sublimate human nature. I have no criticisms to offer in this connection, relating to the operations of the school, the stage, the press, and the rostrum. I simply look abroad and observe, after all their agencies have been accomplished, that the strong, in defiance of their teachings, oppress the weak — rob them, degrade them, and make life a burden to them, and viewing this deplorable picture in panorama, I am as thousands of others are, persuaded that to adjust affairs upon principles of approximate justice, some other agency must be sought and introduced.

I might wish things to be different, I might wish the world could be redeemed from the consequences of vicious human nature by

prayer or pulpit oratory; but such is not the order at present. The millennium is not in sight. If the lion nowadays lies down with the lamb, the lamb is inside of the lion. It is sheer folly to talk of peace. The world is in a state of war, of war feeling, and peace exists only because preparations for war restrains the war spirit. The saying is credited to Napoleon that "God is on the side of he heaviest artillery" — in other words, if the weak go against the strong, though the weak are in the right and the strong are wrong, Providence does not come to the succor of the weak, they go down.

Whatever may be said of the past, the present is not an age of miracles; on the contrary, it is an age of reason, an age of investigation. There are a thousand students of human affairs today where there was one a hundred years ago. I inquire: Who are these students? And I answer: They are men of the shop as well as men of the school. They study the census reports and say: "Here are 10 million workers, and there are 100,000 capitalists; they are fabulously rich and we are miserably poor. They exact enormous tribute from our earnings, and we pay it." They ask themselves, "Why does this state of things exist?" and the answer comes, "because we are disorganized, because we act separately when we should act together." This fact has been discussed and working men are aroused; organization is going forward. It is a grand beginning. It is the glory of the 19th Century, distinguishing it from all the centuries that have gone before; with organization, many victories have been achieved, but there has been defeat as well — crushing defeat, entailing numberless woes upon the defeated. With forced idleness as the result of defeat, and the poverty, hunger, rags, and dirt it entails, many a man has lost heart and sighed for old bondage. But others, whom defeat inspires with fresh courage, whose bugle-blast is worth 10,000 men, born leaders, inspire new hopes by setting forth the fact, though one organization was defeated, if all the organizations having interests at stake had federated for the fight, victory would have flashed along the lines of the workingmen and perched upon their banners.

Is it required to demonstrate self-evident propositions? Is it demanded that I should prove that the sun shines when he mounts to meridian glory in a cloudless sky? Shall I stand in the presence of Niagara and discuss the proposition that water flows downhill? I do not care to occupy space in that way. If organization of workingmen, having interests in common, will organize and federate, I believe the day of their defeat in any contest with the common enemy is past and

gone forever. I am persuaded that federation is not only the best thing, but the only thing that can solve the labor problem, when the toiler demands his fair share of the wealth he creates.

I have at this writing no desire to discuss methods of federation. Certainly any system is better than none at all, and the discussion of the best system can be postponed to the time when all organizations of laboring men have determined that federation is essential to success. And to this it is coming. Of the fact, I do not permit myself to indulge a doubt. I do not permit myself to assume there will be no back-sets, no halting, division of counsels, wranglings here and there. Human nature will get in its work. There will be kickers and croakers, but the grand army of workers will advance. The line of march is to higher elevations of thought and purpose. There will be no return to the "fleshpots of Egypt."

In a matter which is serious, from alpha to omega, I, too, would be serious. I see little opportunity for sentiment. I recognize the fact that the battle is on. Without egotism I have a fair comprehension of the power of opposing forces; but on the other hand, I comprehend the power and purposes of the federated army of workers. As they achieve success I see them better paid; living in better, brighter, and happier homes; vines climb around the porch, flowers bloom in the garden, there is music in the parlor and there are pictures on the wall. It is the American workingman's home secured to him by the omnipotent power of organization and federation. On the other hand, if federation fails, if those who advocate it overestimate its power for good, if recognition and arbitration, compromise and concession cannot be secured by federation, then what? History will repeat itself, and on American soil the Pharaohs of oppression will be taught a lesson, the contemplation of which, even at this distance, is well calculated to thrill the mind with horror, for

Often do the spirits of great events
Stride on before the events
And in today already walks tomorrow¹

Eugene V. Debs.

¹ Lines by English poet and philosopher **Samuel Taylor Coleridge** (1772-1834).