
A.M. 5894 — A.D. 1891

by Eugene V. Debs

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According to accepted chronology the work of the Creator in building the universe was completed 4004 years before the advent of Christ; add to this the 1890 years constituting the christian era and we have a sum total of 5894 years since the "morning stars sang together and all the sons of God shouted for joy" when the foundations of the earth were laid.

Some people are disposed to correct our chronological tables. They will have it that the figures used to indicate the number of years since

"The perfect world, by Adam trod"¹

was completed, and the "evening and the morning was the sixth day," that millions of years have come and gone, and that we nurse the most egregious errors relating to what we call "time."

Possibly, nay, most positively, it is a vagary to suppose that 5894 years measure the distance between the laying the "foundations of the earth" and the present. But wherefore bother with such problems?

"Think we or think we not, Time hurries on
With a resistless, unremitting stream;
Yet treads more soft than e'er did midnight thief
That slides his hand under the miser's pillow
And carries off his prize."²

This has been true from the "beginning" — whether that be 5894 years in the past or that many millions of years. The past and the fu-

¹ Line from a poem by Nathaniel Parker Willis (1806-1867): "*The perfect world, by Adam trod / Was the first temple, built by God...*"

² Short passage from the poem "The Grave" [1743] by Robert Blair (1700-1774).

ture make up the circle of eternity, and it were sheer folly to attempt the incomprehensible. We deal with the present — the now. The past is gone; it can return no more. It has exhaled the dew of life; its glory — whatever it was — has departed. True, some records of wisdom, of folly, of ambition, of victories, of failures, have been preserved, but unless they teach men to be industrious, independent, self-reliant, virtuous, and strong, they are of no value to the living, and all the years, and centuries, and cycles become, with all their hoarded treasures, utterly worthless. We may sip the cup of promise, and with eager lips drain its nectar till the fume mounts kindling to the heated brain, to realize at last that all is dead sea fruit — that the one road to success is work; work with hand and brain; work early and late; work, as does the silkworm, the bee, and the ant. Time is relentless and autocratic. Its mandate is, work or starve; all too often, work and starve; work in rages, live in dens, in filth, in wretchedness, and die, at last, as do the beasts of the field and of the forest!

Time ought to be an educator. Its lessons ought to be written upon the minds of men as old Job wanted to preserve his words, “graven with an iron pen and lead in the rock forever.”³ That is an educator to some extent is shown by the uprising and the organization of the workmen.

A poet refers to Time as a “tomb builder.” In the past he has been a throne builder as well. Apparently, he is becoming tired of the vocation and is turning his attention to building lodges — parliament houses, where workmen deliberate. The indications are that workmen will no longer

“...Plot in sluggish misery,
Rotting from sire to son, and age to age.”⁴

And of all the lessons Time has taught, not one is of more value than that which teaches the men who toil that they can, if they will, be free; and they are saying so to those who oppress and degrade them,

“Go tame the wild torrent, or stem with a straw
The proud surges that sweep o’er the sands that confin’d them;
But presume not again to give *Toilers* a law,

³ *Job*, chapter 19, verses 23-24.

⁴ Lines from “Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage” [1818] by Lord Byron (1788-1824).

Or think with the chains they have broken to bind them.”⁵

The last decade — from 1880 to 1891 — has been fruitful of inspiring progress.⁶ Labor has won victories and experienced defeats, but, on the whole, surveying all the battlefields where the hosts of labor struggled against a rich, well-disciplined, and arrogant foe, the verdict is—

“The God of battles smiled and Justice triumphed.”⁷

We now enter upon another year — 1891, and another decade, which at its close will usher in the 20th Century, during which [Edward] Bellamy’s millennium is to dawn. We are not particularly interested in a future so far away, but we confess to special interest in A.D. 1891. It is with us. We stand upon its threshold, but, alas, we are not a seer! No seraphim has touched our lips with “a live coal from off the altar.”⁸ We know not what there is in store for workingmen. We may, with others, admire the covenant bow upon the brow of the storm-cloud, and say “seed time and harvest shall come” in regular order, the “early and the later rain,” but let it be remembered that while the seasons may come with their “seed time,” “the harvest” will not come unless the seed is sown and the plants nourished.⁹ There must be work.

We do not doubt that the year 1891, and all the years to 1900, will give workingmen numberless opportunities to sow precious seeds of truth, and if sown, abundant harvests will be garnered and splendid progress made.

“There is a tide in the affairs of men
That, taken at the flood, leads on to fortune.”

⁵ Passage from “The Spanish Patriots’ Song,” a frequently reprinted anonymous poem, into which Debs substituted “Toilers” for the original “freemen.”

⁶ This periodization matches the time that Debs served as editor of *Locomotive Firemen’s Magazine*.

⁷ Quote from an undetermined source.

⁸ Line from *The Apocalypse Explained According to the Spiritual Sense*, by Emanuel Swedenborg (1688-1772).

⁹ The first of these quotations is from “On Intemperance,” by Roswell Rice (1803-1881).

But the tide must be taken “at the flood,” for if

“Omitted, all the voyage of their life
Is bound in shallows and in miseries.”¹⁰

As we write, we surmise that the spirit of brotherhood in the ranks of workingmen is stronger, more active and conquering than in all the past since time began. It is the spirit that animated David and Jonathan which has gone forth into the world and is glorifying fellowship, creating confidence, breaking down the barriers of envy and jealousy, and establishing brotherhoods, and sending Robert Nicoll’s song, “We are Brethern, a’,” around the world—

A happy bit hame this auld world would be,
if men, when they’re here could make shift to agree.
An’ ilk said to his neighbor, in cottage an’ ha’,
“Come, gi’e me your hand — we are brethren, a’.”

The knave ye would scorn, the unfaithful deride,
Ye would stand like a rock wi’ the truth on your side;
Sae would I, an’ naught else would I value a straw,
Then gi’e me your hand — we are brethren, a’.¹¹

We belong to that class who believe that during the next ten years the decisive battles between capitalists (not capital) and workingmen are to be fought in America. This conviction is derived from our knowledge of what has transpired during the past 25 years, more especially the past 10 years. We do not overlook the fact that capitalists have vast resources at their command. We do not underestimate their tactics nor their strategy, nor do we doubt their tenacity of purpose. They hold on and fight with determination and with desperation. It has been said of “capital” that it is “timid.” It would be quite as rational to say that a boulder is timid — one is as inert as the other. Capitalists are “timid;” or, more properly, distrustful. As a general proposition, they invest their cash cautiously. They want dividends and profits, and to secure them, are cruel beyond measure. These dividends can be secured only through the agency of labor. Without labor, the investments of all the capitalists in creation would never

¹⁰ William Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar*, Act 4, Scene 3.

¹¹ Scottish poet Robert Nicoll was born in 1814 and died in 1837.

secure *one* dollar. So far as dividends are concerned, \$1.00 would be equal to \$1,000,000, or any number of millions. The vitalizing force in the world's enterprises is work; and, as a bedrock proposition, if the world's capital were sunk in an hour to irrecoverable depths, labor could and would recreate every dollar. We do not care to discuss such axioms now. The fact is that capitalists have demanded and secured, in the past, more than their fair share of the wealth that labor has created. It has been so from the first, under every form of government of which authentic history speaks or which exists in legendary lore. It is an old-time and an all-time truth, and demonstrates that an era of justice has never been known.

It might be interesting to know when the first germ of resistance to the wrong was first planted, and who was the first workingman, of all the centuries, who paid the penalty of martyrdom for daring to proclaim his abhorrence of the policy of capitalists. There was such a time, there was such a man. From that time to the present, the nature of the capitalistic class has remained unchanged — policy and theories are the same. But a new force has appeared. The workingman has said, "Let there be light," and light has come. This new light has had liberating, elevating, and redeeming power. It has increased in effulgence. Workingmen no longer walk in the dark; millions of them are no longer benighted. They stand erect, disenthralled, emancipated, independent, self-reliant. They are now demanding in America, as the demand was never more made since God said, "Let there be light," their fair share of the wealth they create.

Do the capitalists hear the demand? Yes. Do they heed it? No. Hence the coming conflict.

In view of such facts, the present generation of workingmen may owe a debt of gratitude to Time. That they owe a debt of gratitude to workingmen of the past who dared rebel against oppression, there can be no question. They owe a debt of gratitude to the workingmen of the present century that no mathematician can compute; and they will pay it — pay it in such a way that the next generation will consider how they can best bear testimony of their obligations.

We turn from such field of reflection to our own beloved Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen. It enters upon the new year, 1891, with the most cheering prospects of success and prosperity. It is strong in every principle of brotherhood. It is young in years, but old in wisdom. It has not reached its majority, and yet its policy bears the stamp of mature judgment. It numbers 20,000 members. If there is a

problem relating to permanency and prosperity that remains unsolved, let it be suggested, by friend or foe, and it will have attention. Such a problem does not now suggest itself. While it has demonstrated intelligence of a high order, it is still advancing in knowledge. It is steadily increasing in membership. We can not see the future — we have no power to draw aside the veil; and yet, judging by the past, we predict, when another century dawns, our Brotherhood, serene as the sublime elevation upon which it will stand, will be then, as now, the unfaltering friend of labor, of organization and federation; and then, as now, proud of the splendid organizations with which it is securing right and justice for railroad employees. True, we do not know what oily tongues may be invited to deliver orations at its biennial conventions whose hatred of organized workingmen is so hot and implacable that they can, if permitted, employ bands of murderers to shoot them down as if they were dogs. It may be that creatures like the President and the Third Vice President of the New York Central may be invited to sting workingmen with words like the lash of scorpions; but we do not believe it. We would rather see the Order, with all its well-earned fame, go down beneath the black waves of oblivion, than to live to achieve such monumental degradation.

Again we turn to the year that is gone with no regrets, except such as come to all for opportunities to do good which were permitted to pass unimproved; for such errors of judgment come to all fallible mortals — to all

“Poor wanderers of a stormy day!
From wave to wave we’re driven
And Fancy’s flash and Reason’s sway
Serve but to light the troubled way —
There’s nothing calm but Heaven.”¹²

The New Year Bells are ringing joyfully, and our heart is in tune with their melody. To our friends — and to enemies, if such there are — to all we send, without mental reservation, a happy New Year greeting. Let the toast go round — “A happy New Year to all;” more than that, may many happy New Years come to all. As the months come and go, the *Magazine* will go forth on its mission; and, we

¹² A stanza by Irish poet Thomas Moore (1779-1852), later set to music as a hymn.

hope, to cheer and encourage its readers, to add something to the store of their knowledge; and with this our ambition will be satisfied.

“There is, they say, a bending form of love,
Who spreads his dove-wings over us and bears
The wearied in his gentle arms above
All earth has to assail us — sorrows, cares,
Toil and disease and want, till cool, sweet airs
Breathe odors from never fading flowers
That grow in Heaven, where peace eternal wears
The same undying smile, and, as the hours
Steal silently along, descends in balmy showers.”¹³

Edited with footnotes by Tim Davenport

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¹³ From “Prometheus: Part II” [1822] by James Gates Percival (1795-1856).