
The Coming Workingman

by Eugene V. Debs

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Yet thus to pass away!—
To live but for a hope that mocks at last—
To agonize, to strive, to watch, to fast,
To waste the light of day,
Night's better beauty, felling, fancy, thought,
All that we have and are — for this — for naught.¹

I have read of the coming billionaire, of the pomp and circumstance that will attend him and of the power that he will exercise. A man with a thousand millions. Why not? Men of three hundred millions are already here, and \$300 million earning 6 percent interest would in something over 55 years, earn a billion. It is, therefore, not only possible but highly probable that by A.D. 1947, the billionaire will bloom. I challenge any man to suggest why the promised billionaire will not come, and I challenge any man to exaggerate the power that he might wield in human affairs.

If it be possible, and this is conceded, within the next 25 years, for a man with \$300 million by the simple process of interest to become a billionaire, it is one of the simplest sums in arithmetic to show what would be the amount controlled by the heirs of men who today represent fortunes ranging from \$5 million to \$200 million during the period named, 55 years.

What is the tendency of money today? Is it not consolidation, aggregation? The unification of vast sums to control the business enterprises of the country? Does anyone deny the tendency? Do not all intelligent people see it, know it, and admit the truth of the proposition that wealth is combining for the purpose of exercising absolute control over the industrial and commercial enterprises of the country?

¹ Stanza from "The Dying Alchemist" (1830) by Nathaniel Parker Willis (1806-1867). Checked to the original.

By such assertions do I deal in vagaries? Is not the element of absolute truth so large as to startle men who are students of cause and effect, who are capable of looking beyond the present and of pointing out results if present methods go forward undisturbed?

The growth of wealth is by processes as silent as the ebb and flow of the tides, and the processes of consolidation are equally quiet. There is no blast of trumpets, no speechmaking, no parades, no banners bearing devices; all is calm and serene and the world knows what has been done only when the announcement has been made that capitalists have combined to control this, that, or the other great industry which employs labor and fixes prices. Already the name of trusts are legion; they are steadily increasing. It is now seen that trusts are controlled by men who are less than millionaires, running up the scale until millionaires are included and when a great industry combining all the smaller industries in any one line of business forms a trust, then labor is at its mercy, and when was it known that a trust possessed the element of mercy?

Such things are the avant-couriers of the coming billionaire and the coming billionaires and thousands of millionaires. I do not doubt that there are thousands in the ranks of labor who are studying the signs, who are noting the drift of events. If the indications are that there is a coming billionaire, is there anywhere a token of the coming workingman who will be able to unify labor in a body more invincible than a Roman phalanx? I do not apprehend that labor is so stolid as not to be apprehensive of the coming crisis. If in this estimate of the foresight of labor I am correct, then, indeed, it behooves labor to earnestly inquire if the coming workingman is to be on hand when the crisis comes.

I do not doubt the coming workingman will be found at the right time, provided labor is willing to consolidate its forces.

So far, labor has been fruitful of leaders, but unfortunately these leaders, with rare exceptions, even if exceptions can be found, are not seeking to unify the hosts of labor for any trial of strength with the billionaire and his forces. They are not seeking the federation of all the labor forces to meet the "impending crisis." Manifestly, labor must have, where organized, a number of officials. The lodges constituting a national, international, or a continental order must have officials. There must also be a supreme power, a head for such an organization, very much after the style that an army is officiated, from a corporal to a commanding general. The real trouble, as I view the

situation, is to solve the problem of unifying labor organizations so that there shall be one superior commander like Washington or Grant, who shall command the forces when the time comes to meet the billionaire and in all conflicts that may occur under the combined forces of the millionaires who are now “moving upon the works” of labor. It is a military maxim, “in peace prepare for war,” but for labor, in the language of Patrick Henry, “there is no peace” nor truce except for that class of labor which submits to aggression and meanly wears fetters and descends to degradation without protest. No man will ever be found in their ranks to resist the boss of labor on any field when the stake is “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.”

Where, then, are we to look for the coming workingman upon whom organized labor will concentrate its hopes in the coming struggle? The answer must be, in the ranks of organized labor.

I have said there are numerous “labor leaders.” We hear of them often, we see them occasionally, but do we see them or hear them rising above petty ambitions, fraternal jealousies, expanding to intellectual proportions that pass beyond the boundaries of orders, proclaiming the eternal truth that the hope of labor depends upon the unification of the hosts of labor? In the ranks of the millionaires, awaiting the coming of the billionaire, supremacy in leadership is easily arranged. The man with the most money controls; he is awarded no title; his money talks and his reign is undisputed. Labor cannot proceed upon the money basis. It must choose a leader, if it wins a final victory, who, coming from the ranks, must be able, by virtue of his mind forces, his intellectual equipment, his identification of labor, his conscience and his courage, his self-abnegation and profound solicitude for the welfare of others, to secure the confidence of all.

Can such a man be found? Is such a man a possibility? I do not hesitate to believe he can be found and will be found. I am forced to admit such belief to avoid the admission of the dying alchemist, that after all the hopes of labor, its struggles and sacrifices, death comes before victory and all come to “naught.” What shall be the signs of the coming of such a man? Shall there be seen another burning bush and from the midst of the flames shall there come again a voice calling upon another Moses to be a leader of the oppressed?² The present is not a time of miracles. I look for no manifestations of Jehovah’s disapproval of the reign of the millionaires, except that which shall come from the intellectual advancement of the hosts of labor and the devel-

² Reference to *Exodus*, chapter 3, verses 1-15.

opment of that courage which, trusting in the right, dares fight for its supremacy.

American voters have the ballot and with it can achieve victories of a grandeur exceeding the Red Sea catastrophe.³ At their command are schools and books and opportunities for the marshaling of mind forces to promote their own welfare such as the world never beheld. This advancement, I think, will continue until labor appreciates the value of unification and then will come the time for the selection of a leader who will be more than a match for the millionaires in the contest of the coming billionaire.

Edited by Tim Davenport

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³ Reference to *Exodus*, chapter 14.