
The Aristocracy of Wealth

by Eugene V. Debs

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The world is called upon to contemplate several kinds of aristocrats, a human being “who is overbearing in temper or habits, a proud or haughty person,” and who, if by any freak of fortune obtains place and power, becomes to the extent of such power, an autocrat, a pompous, overbearing person, who—

Dress'd in a little brief authority
Plays such fantastic tricks
Before high heaven as makes the
Angels weep.¹

In the United States of America the founders of the government, having not only holy horror, but an unmitigated contempt for aristocracy and autocracy, provided in the fundamental law of the republic that “titles of nobility” should never be granted. They comprehended fully the vulgar ambition of certain degenerate creatures in the form of men, who above all things desired titles of nobility that they might strut and parade before the common people as persons who, by virtue of titles, were separate and apart from them, above and superior to them, having a right to direct and control them, and while by the constitutional interdiction these contemptible poltroons can

¹ Adapted from *Measure for Measure* (1604) by **William Shakespeare** (1564-1616). The original reads:

But man, proud man
Dress'd in a little brief authority,
Most ignorant of what he's most assur'd—
His glassy essence — like an angry ape
Plays such fantastic tricks before high heaven
As makes the angels weep; who, with our spleens,
Would all themselves laugh mortal.

not be made dukes “and a’ that,” they take advantage of wealth or position to play the role of what Josh Billings called “damphools” just the same as if they had been decorated with titles and were under the law permitted to “lord it” over their fellow-mortals who had not climbed the aristocratic pole and made themselves as ridiculous as the fabled monkey.

As the years speed by and colossal fortunes multiply, the country witnesses the steady increase of the untitled aristocrats who propose to shape the destinies of the masses and who have succeeded in their designs to an extent that well-founded alarm exists in every section of the land.

The aristocracy of wealth is now as well established in the United States as is the aristocracy of blood in any European country, and the laws as they exist confer upon this aristocracy unlimited power to compel labor to do its bidding or accept the penalties of disobedience which include idleness and all the untold ills of which idleness is the prolific parent.

It is universally admitted as an economic axiom that labor creates all wealth, but it so happens that the power which wealth creates never accrues to labor; on the contrary, this wealth, the product of labor, secured by others under the operation of laws piratical in purpose and practice, is made the most implacable foe of labor that exists in the world. And there can be found no more notable instances of this damnable outcome than are presented in the Homestead and Pullman domination of the aristocracy and autocracy of wealth, fostered, guarded, promoted, and protected by what is called law — and what is true of law in Pennsylvania and Illinois is true in every other state of the American union.

The aristocracy of wealth has everything its own way, and constitutions and laws are so framed that the men who create wealth have no rights except to accept what they can get, and if this morsel subjects them to poverty and degradation there is no redress for them. The laws of the state and the power of the state, civil and military, are on the side of the aristocracy of wealth, and there is no appeal.

It is true that workingmen, by their ballots, could change such outrageous conditions, but there are leaders (?), heaven save the mark, steeped to their eyes in partisan prejudices and jealousies, who cry out that workingmen must “steer clear” of politics, as if there was something in politics that would or could lead them into conditions still more deplorable. Thus it happens that there are labor leaders who are

playing into the hands of the aristocracy of wealth and helping on the subjugation and degradation of labor.

The question arises just here, is organized labor engaged in creating still another class of aristocrats and autocrats; men who, wearing certain titles and occupying certain positions, do the very things which preeminently distinguish the autocrats of wealth, when the supreme demand is that labor shall unify its forces in order that infamous laws may be repealed and infamous decisions reversed, without which all labor organizations are helpless and all workingmen in slavery, while the aristocracy of wealth proceeds with slight deviations and inconveniences in carrying out its policy of spoliation?

It is high time that organized labor should learn the power and the imperative necessity of a unified ballot of all who work for their daily bread without regard to color or sex. It is also high time that allegiance to parties which make laws for the protection of capitalists and the subjugation of labor should be abandoned, and that men should be found to enact and administer laws for the equal protection of labor, which creates all capital and carries forward all the industries of the world.

In this unification of labor forces for the amelioration of conditions by constitutional and lawful methods, such as are contemplated in political action, there is no need of interfering with trade unions or any of the numerous social and industrial organizations, or encroaching in the slightest degree upon their province or functions. On the contrary, labor organizations would be indefinitely strengthened by such a policy. The proposition is so self-evident as to require no argument for its elucidation.

Until that time comes capitalism will be in power and have absolute control. Capitalism will make the laws and administer them, control the army, bribe the press, silence the pulpit, and workingmen will pay the penalty of their ignorance and stupidity in abject slavery.

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