

**As Good a City Government as We Deserve:
A Letter to the *Terre Haute Post*
(February 24, 1914)**

We are sadly mixed in our local affairs. Sensational rumors, dire threats, injunctions, special prosecutors, and special grand juries are the order of the day. But it will all blow over; no one will be hurt, and things will go on much as before.

Terre Haute is like all other cities of the same size; it is quite as badly governed, but no worse.

As long as a choice few own the community they will rule it — and why not? If it is right for them to own it, then, of course, it is right for them to run it to suit themselves, and that is all that is the matter with Terre Haute.

Where the few own the jobs and the means of life upon which the many depend for a chance to work and live, it is mockery to talk of clean politics, majority rule, and self-government.

We have just as good a city government here in Terre Haute as we want or deserve, and when we protest that we want to “clean up” Terre Haute and have a “city beautiful,” we are guilty of hypocrisy, and that is the one sine the merciful Jesus would never condone.

A city with a canker of corruption at its heart can never be made beautiful in any true sense of the term.

Everybody knows our politics is rotten and smells to the skies. Everybody! Nobody denies it or attempts to deny it.

Elections Prize Fight

Now, I am not blaming anybody in particular, nor have I any malice toward anyone. I am blaming us all. Rotten politics have a material basis, and until that is set right by ourselves, the efforts of voters’ leagues and civic clubs to “clean up” the city will have little more effect than the spraying of a cesspool with attar-of-roses.

A local election in Terre Haute is simply a prize fight between rival corporation interests. The prize is the city government and the control thereof in their own mercenary interests. That’s all!

The corporations furnish oodles of boodle, the political cholera germs, and these germs are spread through the community by their emi-

nently respectable attorneys and their political allies and recruiting centers, the “red onion” saloons.

The corporations buy up and muzzle the press, capitalize politics, put their own judges on the bench, their own lackeys in the courthouse, in the city hall, and take absolute control of the machinery of government. When they want a street or a franchise or a crooked boundary line to escape taxation, or anything else, they command their puppets on the board of public works and elsewhere, coached by their eminently respectable attorneys, to hand it over to them, according to law, it being necessary, for obvious reasons to legalize the theft and give it official sanction.

When the employees of these corporations ask for living wages and decent working conditions and the lawful right to organize a union, they are given court injunctions, thugs and gunmen are imported for their special benefit, and the latest improved “man-killers.”

That’s law and order and we all go strong, you know, on law and order.

Not a minister dare to rebuke these modern Pharisees. Jesus tried it in his time and they nailed him to the gates of Jerusalem.

Who’s to Blame?

Our jails are full of petty thieves, but the rich and respectable robbers have the highest seats in the synagogue. They rip up our streets at will, under the protection of a court injunction, while a raft of lawyers gabble and gabble and gabble.

It would be too bad if we owned our own street railroad and ran it for the benefit of the people. that would surely unhinge society and break up our cherished “red onion” institutions.

We, the people of Terre Haute, are getting exactly what we voted for and deserve. We believe, the great majority of us, that the few ought to own our street cars, our water works, our lighting and heating plants, our telephones, our jobs, our social utilities — in short, ourselves — and as long as we believe in and vote for that, why shouldn’t we have it? And what right have we to make faces when the goods are delivered?

A handful of men cannot rule a community in their own selfish interests honestly any more than they can acquire and hold it honestly. They are forced to rule corruptly, through their “bosses”; that is the only way they can rule and rule at all. Hence, private interests versus the public welfare — the material basis of rotten politics.

The political mercenaries of corporations are opposed to women voting because they have “too much respect for them to see them engage in dirty politics.” What a pity they have not equal respect for themselves!

Do we — and by “we” I mean the small minority of eminently respectable gentlemen who rule this city — do we want to “clean up the city,” send ballot box stuffers and political corruptionists to the penitentiary instead of the city hall, have honest elections, honest public officials, and send rich as well as poor lawbreakers sent to jail? Not on your life!

Greatest of Crimes

The corruption of the franchise is the deadliest crime that can be committed against the body politic. Theft, arson, and even murder are minor offenses in comparison. Now we know that the corporations in control of our politics have for years, through their lawyers, politicians, grafters, and red light scavengers, falsified registration records, padded poll books, stuffed ballot boxes, voted repeaters, juggled election returns, and committed and grown fat upon every crime from perjury to assassination.

Under the political regime of these piratical corporations Terre Haute, with all its schools and churches, has been, in fact, governed from the red onion saloon.

We know that the owners of these corporations are the “first citizens of the republic” and the “pillars of the church.” They are indeed “all honorable men.”

We know that Special Prosecutor Joe Roach told the truth when he made his shocking disclosures about the wholesale political debauchery of the recent elections — disclosures which would make us all blush with shame and indignation if we were not so thoroughly inured to boodle rule — yet when a grand jury returns its indictments and there is at last a threat to uncover foul stew, lay bare the festering mass, and expose the eminently respectable gentlemen who have been pocketing the swag, our “first citizens,” Republicans and Democrats alike (and here we can see how much actual political difference there is between them.) fall over each other in their eager haste to protect their indicted retainers and cover up the threatened exposure, and scoff at the ridiculous idea that the common herd of nobodies have the nerve to demand investigation of the notoriously rotten conditions and prosecution and conviction of the evil-doers.

No, indeed, the “higher ups,” our eminently respectable “first citizens,” don’t want an investigation; they don’t want their political bosses and boodle-agents prosecuted and as long as they are permitted to rule all talk of “cleaning up the city” is simply piffle.

What They Tell Us.

Personally, these gentlemen are not at all to blame. They are doing about as we would do in their place. They give us what we vote for, while at the same time solemnly warning us that if we are foolish enough to vote for our public interest instead of their private interests, the goblins will surely get us, our homes will be destroyed, and our families broken up, and so we wisely stick to the good old system, in which most of us never had a home and never will have, and half the marriages that take place are annulled by divorce.

To cap it all, when the red onion affair called the election is over and corruption has once again triumphed and a new era of corporation misrule is about to set in, the daily organs of these predatory interests join with pious unction in whooping it up for the “Everybody Go to Church” movement. Now let us pr(e)y!

Yes, my brethren, we are getting exactly what is coming us. We have crooked boundary lines because we are ruled by crooked politics, and we are ruled by crooked politics because we are in the grasp of crooked “interests,” and we are in the grasp of crooked “interests” because we live under and support by our votes a crooked social system.

Change the system, socialize the means of life, establish economic freedom, and we shall have true democracy and self-government! Politics will then purify itself and corruptionists and grafters of high and low degree will become honest men and decent citizens.

Men are naturally honest and the worst of them will be straight instead of crooked, and clean instead of corrupt, when it is as easy and pays as well to be straight and clean, as it does now to be crooked and corrupt.