
Agitation and Agitators.

by Eugene V. Debs

Unsigned article attributed to Debs, published in *Locomotive Firemen's Magazine* (Terre Haute, IN), v. 14, no. 8 (August 1890), pp. 712-713.

Agitation is the order of nature. Nature abhors quiet as it does a vacuum.

Someone may object and point to the “everlasting hills” in proof of their theory, forgetful of the fact that the hills are the product of agitation.

The sea is never still. The tides forever ebb and flow. The “dead calm” presages the storm. Air in motion is the demand.

The peacefully disposed, the quiet, inert, lethargic souls, those who glory in stagnation, have never had their way. Nature prefers agitation, hence the hurricane, the tornado, the cyclone, the lightning, and the thunderbolt; hence the volcano and the earthquake. Call them evils, it matters not, they are a ceaseless protest against stagnation.

Men cry “peace,” but there is no peace. The elemental war goes on. Indeed, those who clamor for peace are agitators.

The pulpit is an agitator. The wranglers over creeds and dogmas are perhaps the most persistent of all agitators; the bedrock idea being that a wrong exists which must be found and exterminated.

All explorers, pathfinders, in religion, morals, science, government, geography, in any and every department of human affairs, are agitators. They are seldom or never popular in the beginning of their labors. Their fate, as a rule, is to suffer derision, contumely, neglect, and poverty, often penalties still more severe; the exception only vindicates the rule.

Those who are inclined to investigate facts will be satisfied that our conclusions are warranted. We could easily exhaust the space at our command by giving illustrations of the rugged road agitators have traveled, and in pointing to the ultimate triumphs they have achieved for the good of mankind.

We are not unmindful of the fact that to the army of agitators there are utopians, vagarists, men of wild fancies, impracticable people, but achievements have been of such a startling character that men who claim to be exceptionally *hotheaded* will exercise great caution in rendering their verdicts in classing men as “cranks” who are the *avant couriers* in proclaiming coming triumphs of mind over matter and of right over wrong.

So much as prefatory to the declaration that just now there is manifested a purpose to treat with contempt persons known as “Labor Agitators.”

The employer wants quiet, stagnation; wants to be let severely alone. The agitator won't have it so. At the bottom of the labor question there exists a wrong of incalculable enormity. The labor agitator seeks to unearth it — to lay it bare, to expose it to the gaze of the world and exterminate it.

The labor agitator does not disguise his purpose. He could not if he would, and would not if he could. He is compelled to be outspoken. He must be bold. Possibly someone objects and asserts that all labor agitators are neither honest nor earnest; that they are wolves in sheep's clothing, traitors in disguise, unworthy of confidence, and do incalculable harm. We do not hesitate to admit to some extent the impeachment. Of Christ's twelve apostles, one was a traitor. Such objections have weight, but it is as a feather compared with a mountain. The fact remains that the great body of labor agitators are honest men, working for the accomplishment of noble purposes, fraught with the highest good to men, women, and children, who are the victims of wrongs as flagrant and cruel as can be inflicted under conditions which ought not to exist in any land, and which in the United States of America

are infamous to an extent which defy exaggeration.

The mission of the labor agitator in the United States is first to persuade workingmen to organize — to get together for the purpose of the interchange of ideas relating to their pecuniary warfare. Organization is the practical recognition of the maxim “in all union there is strength,” and without which labor has no strength. Without organization working men are at the mercy of their enemies; without organization “labor,” as was said by an Indiana member of Congress, is a “commodity, as much so as the raw materials to be worked up.” Without organization the so-called “labor market” is established as it was in the days of chattel slavery, when there were slave auction blocks and slave pens, and labor was a “commodity.” With organization the “market,” the “block,” and the pen “disappear,” and labor commands wages which enable the laborer to live as becomes an American citizen.

The labor agitator wars against oppression in every form, and it is this fact that calls down upon his head the maledictions of those who have grown rich by continuous robberies.

The monopolistic, subsidized press launches its anathemas against the labor agitator; they seek to inoculate the public mind with the views of such asps as Austin Corbin and his tribe of venomous reptiles, creatures who inaugurate famine and live in luxury upon the boodle secured by their piracies.

Every labor organization that exists on the Continent today is a monument to the triumphs of the labor agitator. Organization is the result of agitation, not of silence and submission — not of acquiescence

in the rules of wrong, but a ceaseless protest against existing evils that must be eradicated if justice is to prevail and peace be maintained.

There is now widespread agitation to secure federation of labor organizations, because federation is the culmination of strength sought to be secured by organization.

The agitation in this direction is logical — it is natural — practicable. There is nothing associated with the agitation that has the semblance of vagary. It is not a “crank” idea. It is not visionary. No man, no set of men, no paper or periodical of character or without character assails the proposition. It stands secure in its symmetrical strength. All that is required is to continue the agitation, keep up the bombardment. It is a winning card. The enemies of labor are afraid of it. Already they stand apart as they see labor organizations coming into line under federated banners.

The scepter is falling from the hands of labor autocrats. From the untold millions of wealth which labor creates the time is coming when a just distribution will be ordered. There is to be more agitation, more education, a profounder recognition of great truths relating to the brotherhood of man, a more intense desire to lift up the lowly and the weak; but the trend is in that direction — watch and agitate, fight and go forward. The strong forts and citadels of the enemy are being taken, and the last will eventually fall, as did Ticonderoga when the grand old veteran took possession of it, as he said, by the “authority of the Great Jehovah and the Continental Congress.”

Edited by Tim Davenport.

Second Edition, June 2006 — reformatted.

Published by 1000 Flowers Publishing, Corvallis, OR, 2006. • Non-commercial reproduction permitted.