
Reformations

by Eugene V. Debs

Published in *Locomotive Firemen's Magazine*, vol. 10, no. 4 (April 1886), pp. 201-202.

In individual reformation, a change for the better in thought, life, habits, and practices, is sometimes thought to be sudden, without premeditation, the result of impulse, of immediate rather than remote influences. There may be such well authenticated instances. There may be those who have witnessed them. We do not recall them in our experience or in our readings. We regard them altogether mythical. At best, if the world has witnessed such reformations we do not believe they were permanent. They did not last long, and the persons so reformed were doubtless like the Scriptural female swine, which speedily returned to her wallowings in the mire. Any reformation worthy of the name is the result of causes, which, whether recognized or not, were remote, rather than immediate. At any rate such is the history of all great and permanent reformations. Take for instance the cause of slavery. It would be interesting to know when it did not in some form, more or less aggravating and revolting, "blacken the page of history." There are even now slave-catchers plying their vocation, and in many lands, where all men are nominally free, there exists a vassalage, the contemplation of which by freemen arouses deep indignation, and indicates conclusively that the task which emancipating philanthropists have undertaken is not yet accomplished. But the world is hopeful and work proceeds.

It would be interesting to inquire when all the rulers of European countries, by whatever title known, exercised despotic sway. It would be found that the time is not vastly remote, and now but two of such despots remain. Full emancipation has not come, but it is coming. It is destiny, and if men are permitted to have any rational conception of God it is safe to say He is pledged to break the scepters of Tsars and Sultans, and place the governments of the earth in the hands of the people.

It will be conceded that reformations, if permanent, move forward slowly, but it should be remembered that they never move backward; halting there may be, at least apparently to the superficial investigator, but retrogression never occurs. Despotism is on the wane, bigotry is almost universally condemned. Ignorance is disappearing. Truth and right are coming into closer alliance. The wrong is vigorously intrenching, always on the defensive, but its citadels are crumbling while the armies of the right are ceaselessly moving on his works. The conflict is to last not only all summer, but all the centuries until victory is won.

Who does not know that the world has always been wrong on the labor question? Who dare aver that labor has ever had even justice awarded it in all the march of civilization, let the starting point be where it may? Who is so blind as not to see that the work of reformation has begun and is making headway? Who is so imbecile as not to know that the wage-men of the world are not in the minority. We know that it will require time to accomplish this great labor reformation. We know that it will require the great masculine virtues of courage, endurance, fortitude and patience. We know that the young men of today will grow old and die before the day of labor's jubilee, but we know that as one dies ten will stand ready to take his place and that the reformation will move on, and we know that it will gather power, force and momentum, and will yearly become more formidable.

Is it asked what we mean by labor reformation? We answer, a change for the better. We mean the ushering in of an era when thought and law and custom shall be in accord to deal justly by labor. We mean the coming of the long delayed period when the badge of labor shall dignify rather than degrade labor in the eyes of the pampered few, who live by exacting tribute from labor.

Those who believe that this reformation is destined to reach full-orbed meridian glory are not Utopians, they are not dreamers, they are not crackbrained visionaries. They are not anticipating miracles. The men who champion the labor reformation are preeminently practical. They believe in educating men up to the full appreciation of their unalienable rights. They believe in mental manliness. They believe in union and federation. They know that labor has suffered through all the centuries since God said that by the sweat of his face man should eat bread. They know that time is required to place labor on its feet and give it an erect and a defiant attitude and demand justice. They know that when one great emancipating word a century

ago was spoken for justice ten thousand are uttered now. They know that men are learning the lesson of their rights and are getting ready to act their parts. They know that drill, not charging, makes soldiers. They know that struggle, not shouting, builds character and advances the army of progress and reform. They know that to make oaks of acorns time is required, and they are willing to bide their time, but they know the sturdy oaks do come from acorns and they know the seed they are planting will, in due time, furnish an abundant crop of success. Here, in America, they are preparing to demonstrate the majesty of the ballot. If laws are vicious they will see that they are repealed. The days of wheedling demagogism are numbered. Land stealing will cease and land thieves will be made to disgorge. Hours of labor will be regulated, and in the presence of “overproduction” the lamentations of the hungry will not be heard. This millennium may be some distance away, but it is coming, and when it comes “the morning and the evening” will record the first day of the reign of justice in the earth, and then the righteous may tune their harps and throats and sing:

Sound the loud timbrel o'er every dark sea,
Labor has triumphed, her people are free.¹

Edited with a footnote by Tim Davenport

1000 Flowers Publishing, Corvallis, OR · March 2017 · Non-commercial reproduction permitted.
First Edition.

¹ Adapted from the refrain of the Biblically-inspired “Miriam’s Song” by **Thomas Moore** (1779-1852). The original reads:

*Sound the loud timbrel o'er Egypt's dark sea:
Jehovah has triumphed — her people are free!*