
Labor Day is Near at Hand (August 28, 1897)

Terre Haute, Ind., August 28, 1897.

Error is as old as Truth, and since “Adam’s fall,”¹ with here and there an interval, ha been in the ascendancy. It was so in the “beginning,” and if we are to credit the Bible history of events, we find error so overwhelmingly powerful, as compared with the achievements of truth, that God himself “repented” that he had created man and decreed to exterminate the whole race. Then, unlike the kings of the Medes and Persians, who would not change their decrees, the Creator concluded to modify his edict, to the extent of saving Noah and his family.²

This data supplies the basis of the opening declaration, that Error is as old as Truth, and has been, thus far, the most potential in shaping human events. As upon this point affirmations will not be challenged, any elaboration of the idea need not be introduced. But, nevertheless, a remark regarding what is called the “Christian Era” will not be out of place, because in many ways its coming was heralded as an epoch, or period of time when Truth would conquer Error, when humanity should take on a new and more glorious meaning, and when human nature, redeemed from its grossness and animalism, would flood the world with righteousness. True it is that we have the record that the dead were raised to life; that the lame were made to walk; that the blind were made to see; that the dumb were made to talk, and that lepers were healed and made clean; and besides all this,³ a multitude of “five thousand men, beside women and children were bountifully fed on “five loaves and two fishes.”⁴ But all this and more in the same line did not permanently change conditions, nor emancipate human nature from its inherent animalism.

The struggle of the poor continued and is still on, and the victims of artificial or natural calamities have multiplied a thousand fold. Churches increase and a million robed priests keep alive Moloch fires of contending creeds; chiming bells call the people to worship, and seated in luxurious surroundings, where art mellows he light to suit the eyes of the goddess of Fashion, the rich float heavenward on “flowery beds of ease,”⁵ while the

poor, beneath the shade of sanctuaries as beautiful as palaces built of stars, live and toil and suffer, not only for the “bread of life,”⁶ but for cornbread and bacon, food to keep their protesting souls in their bodies.

I make no complaint against churches and those who conduct them. I recognized in modern religion one of the great industries of the times in which we live, and I know of not that pays, on an average, higher salaries from “circuit rider”⁷ to cardinal. Nevertheless, from some cause not necessary to inquire into here, the poor are about the same as when Dives drove Lazarus from his door and vagabond dogs licked his sores.⁸

The truth, some sort of truth, has made headway since Christ was born, but it is not that sort of truth which unifies the mind-forces of labor to create, as it might create, better conditions for the toiling masses; create them by what William H. Seward⁹ defined as a “higher law” than was ever written in constitutions or statute books — that law which spurns injunctions which are based upon no law, human or divine, but on simply a despotic will.

Labor Day is near at hand. It is a modern holiday, and in its celebration there ought to be found some achievement of labor in the discussion of which the fires of genius should blaze with an effulgence as inspiring as when an aurora, with her flaming torches, ushers in a new born day. And I shall hope that orators and writers will discover on Labor Day 1897 some grand victory of Truth over Error relating to labor upon which to dilate for the delectation of those who hear and those who read.

I do not belong to the family of “croakers.” I wail out no dirge over lost opportunities. I select no words from the vocabulary of despair to be woven into messages of gloom to my fellow toilers. I care little for the dead past, except for the wisdom of its warnings and its inspirations to do and dare all things necessary to lift humanity out of bondage into the glorious light and liberty of independence. I adopt literally Longfellow’s inspiring battle cry:

Let us, then, be up and doing,
With a heart for any fate;
Still achieving, still pursuing,
Learn to labor and to wait. ¹⁰

I take no pessimistic view of human affairs. I am in sympathy with the poetic declaration of Avon’s immortal bard that there are “tongues in trees,

books in running brooks, sermons in stones,"¹¹ and even a "jewel in a toad's head."¹²

If it be affirmed that some things are not good, I would meet the avowal with Shakespeare's averment that there is "good in everything," and proceed with the tenacity of purpose which distinguished the ancient alchemists, to find it. I would not abandon the quest, though along the track of the centuries are found the skeletons of explorers who wrought in hope and died in the grasp of despair.

Men of today are dealing with present conditions, with human nature as it is, and in which there are germ principles which, if nursed into vigorous life by those who have faith in the ultimate triumph of truth and righteousness in the world, will make human nature bear testimony that man, however debased, was created with divine attributes and for the fulfillment of a glorious destiny.

In this supreme moment when men of thought are surveying all the fields of endeavor, where no prospect pleases, and the culmination of depravity is found among those who have piled up colossal wealth by the spoliation of the poor, when corporations and courts, in conjunction, devise policies of despair and death for those who keep the wheels of progress revolving, when tongues which plead for human rights are silenced, and highways, where cattle and swine are permitted to roam, are denied to workingmen by injunctions issued by judicial despots, I say in this supreme hour of travail, the Social Democracy purposes to mitigate human woes, and build on solid foundations better conditions for those who, abandoning old trails worn deep by their ceaseless tramp, choose to make an effort to own themselves, and by cooperative effort to secure for themselves and families the undivided sum of their earnings; where, owning their own homes, they may realize the fruitions of contentment and bask in the satisfactions of independence.

The Social Democracy starts out upon bedrock facts and builds upon them. Those who care to investigate will find every proposition axiomatic. It seeks to form an alliance of all the elements of success — land, capital, labor, skill. Working together, the result of necessity must be wealth, learning, independence, leisure, home, and home comforts and enjoyments secured not by magic or miracle, not by wand-waving, not by the arts of legerdemain, but by work, by cooperative labor wisely directed and patiently pursued.

The idea has its ideal. The idea is better conditions for those who are willing to “labor and to wait.” The ideal is humanity free and happy. The Social Democracy is for beens, not for drones. It deals with actual conditions and applies rational remedies to the diseases which afflict the body politic, the body social, and the body industrial.

It is a great economic and political class-conscious movement designed to conquer industrial slavery. It has no banners inscribed with taunts and jeers. Its shibboleth is “Humanity,” and its motto “Peace on earth, good will toward men.”

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¹ Reference to *Genesis*, chapters 2 and 3.

² Reference to *Genesis*, chapter 6.

³ So-called miracles of Christ from the gospels, *passim*.

⁴ From *Matthew*, chapter 14, verses 19-21.

⁵ From the hymn “Am I a Soldier of the Cross?” (1707) by Isaac Watts (1674-1748).

⁶ Allusion to *John*, chapter 6, verse 35.

⁷ Traveling clergy in the early rural United States, particularly those of the Methodist Episcopal church.

⁸ Allusion to *Luke*, chapter 16, verses 20-21.

⁹ William H. Seward (1801-1872), an anti-slavery Republican, was Secretary of State during the presidencies of Abraham Lincoln and Andrew Johnson.

¹⁰ Final stanza from “A Psalm of Life” (1838), by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (1807-1882).

¹¹ From *As You Like It* (1599), Act II, Scene 1, by William Shakespeare.

¹² Adapted from *As You Like It*, Act II, Scene 3.