
The Tramp

by Eugene V. Debs

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We clip the following pen picture of the “tramp” from the Chicago *Herald*:

The time of the year for violets, and also for tramps, is drawing near. Did you ever stop and think just what it means to be a tramp? It means no work, no money, no home, no shelter, no friends. Nobody in all the world to care whether you live, or die like a dog by the roadside. It means no heaven for such rags to crawl into, no grave to hide them out of sight, and no hand stretched out in all the world to feel any interest in you and no spot in all the world to call your own, not even the mud wherein your vagrant footprint falls; no prospect ahead, and no link unbroken to bind you to the past. I tell you, when we sit down and figure out just what the term means, it will not be quite so easy next time the wretched tramp calls at our door to set the dog upon him or turn him empty-handed away. Let them work, you say. Look here, my good friend, do you know how absolutely impossible a thing it is getting to be in this overcrowded country for even a willing man to work? It used to be that “every dog had his day,” but the dogs far outnumber the days in free America. I know well-educated, competent men who have been out of employment for months and years. I know brave and earnest women, with little children to support, who have worn beaten paths from place to place seeking, no charity, but honest employment, and failed to find it. What chance is there for a ragged tramp when such as these fail? Remember, once in a while, if you can, that the most grizzled and wretched tramp that ever plodded his way to a pauper's grave was once a child and cradled in arms perhaps as fond as those that enfolded you and me. Remember that your mother and his were made sisters by the pangs of maternal pain, and perhaps in the heaven from which the saintly eyes of your mother are watching for you his mother is looking out for

him. Perhaps — who knows? — the footfall of the ragged and despised tramp shall gain upon yours and find the gate of deliverance first, in spite of your money and your pride. Stranger things have happened.

In the foregoing there is abundant food for reflection. From the center to the circumference of the country, on all the highways and byways, the tramp may be seen. He is always ragged, always hungry — often filthy, often vicious — always the victim of misfortune.

The advent of the tramp is of recent date. He is the product of the war of the rebellion. He came, strange to say, when peace was declared. When the armies were disbanded and the soldiers came marching home, with waving banner, shouts of victory, and bands playing national anthems in honor of a Union “one and indivisible,” the tramp made his appearance. Families were broken up, children scattered, and employment almost impossible. Men started out to find work. Then the tramp was an honest, courageous man. His purpose was to find work; but all over the broad land the same conditions prevailed.

The war created intense activity in every department of industry. When peace came, the reaction was universal. The demand for army supplies ceased; shops were closed, and the army of idlers increased at a fearful rate. To add to the grimness of the situation, there came a financial, mercantile, and industrial panic, brought about by bankers, gold speculators — the men who had grown rich upon the misfortunes of others. Before the fierceness of the storm the strong and the weak went down together. Failures were piled upon failures; bankruptcy was universal. Factory, forge, and shop were silent. Gloom enshrouded the land. The cry was gold! gold! gold! Confidence was wrecked and the workingmen of the nation were the victims of untold calamities, and tramps multiplied.

The haggard truth that “idleness is the prolific parent of crime” was brought into fearful prominence. The cry was “work!” but there was not work for all. Multiplied thousands were idle, and were steadily drifting into criminal habits. The result was inevitable — a crime committed by one tramp was charged to all the unfortunate class. Suspicion was everywhere aroused. The tramp, without home, friends, money, or work, became an outcast — a vagabond. The hand of society was against him, and his hand was against society, and now the country is confronted with the fact that it has an established vagabond class known as the “tramp.” These outcasts are everywhere,

and their number is steadily increasing. They are found by the way-side, in barns, under haystacks; they beg, they steal, and are incendiaries or murderers, as suits their necessities to live. They are on all the railway trains, stealing transportation at the risk of their lives. During the inclement season they herd together in cities, and when summer comes they tramp throughout all the rural districts, and everywhere are regarded as the enemies of society.

The picture is not overdrawn. It is needless to say there are honest tramps seeking for employment, ready and willing to do an honest day's work for such wages as they can obtain, but they seldom, if ever, get credit for their good intentions, and are classed with the vicious.

It is well, just here, to inquire if the industrial system now in vogue in the United States is favorable for the increase of the tramp army.

It will not be denied that now, as never before, industries are being controlled by the few. Necessarily so, because the few have secured vastly the largest percentage of the wealth of the country. The few, so to speak, are the generals of industry, and hence the commanders of workingmen. Their authority is supreme — absolute. There is no appeal from their decision. Courts cannot interfere, as for instance, when the papers announce that certain corporations have dismissed from employment *certain hundreds* of employees, or have, for their convenience, "locked" them out. There is no appeal. Work and wages cease. Wages down to a point that barely sufficed to keep soul and body together have all been expended. Henceforth what? What of the future? Does the corporation care? Does the general commanding enquire? Does society interest itself in the matter? Do Christians contemplate the grim situation of the unfortunates with prayerful solicitude? Not a bit of it. The discharged employees are required to face the storm as best they can. There are always some heroes in such calamities who survive, strong men who can battle against adversity and live, but there are a far greater number who go down; who, disheartened and despairing, give up the struggle and join the army of tramps.

Here we ask, what force or forces are employed to counteract such disasters? We know of but one — **organization**. It is the one force that antagonizes the tramp policy of the Generals of Industry — the commanders of workingmen. It is the one thing needful in times like the present, when industries are consolidating into great trusts, and one man, by the exercise of the power born of consolidated wealth,

remands men, at his will, to idleness and to all the woes which idleness inflicts.

We do not content that organization, as it now exists, is equal to the emergency, for, stately as it may appear to some, it still lacks the essentials of invincibility. But the movement is in the right direction. Hopes brighten as we contemplate the trend of workingmen's thought and aspiration.. The one thing wanting is the unification of workingmen's organizations; not "amalgamation" — the term conveys no proper idea of requirements. To illustrate our idea: Take the carpenters' movement. Their demand is an eight-hour day, certain stipulated wages, etc. Carpenters form one class of the "building trades." There are others: the stone masons, the brick masons, the plasterers, the plumbers, the hod carriers. These all belong to the building trades. If there is a lockout of the one, let it by, by the commanding power of unification, the lockout of all. Let the hush of Pompeii come upon the city when the Generals of Industry pursue a policy that remands any one of these trades into idleness, relying upon *scabs* to do their work. This would prove availing; this would make organization invincible; this is federation — it is organized victory.

Take a textile factory, where there are pickers, carders, spinners, and weavers, and other distinct departments. If each is organized, and all are federated, the General of Industry — the arrogant commander of wage workers — will consider long and well before he attacks the united body — before he issues his commands to replenish and multiply the army of tramps.

It is not required to proceed further with the illustration. To use a phrase, the reader will readily "catch on."

We do not hesitate to admit that the outlook sometimes is gloomy. The resources of the Generals of Industry are so vast and so quickly applied that resistance seems, sometimes, almost vain. But the fact remains, hopes center in organization and unification — in federation. Without it, tramps will multiply as the sands of the desert. Workingmen, if they hope for security from the corporation, will not emulate the confiding lamb in the presence of the wolf, the fool fly, when listening to the flattering siren song of the spider. When too late, they will say farewell to independence and join the ranks of idlers and fall into line with the army of tramps.

Edited by Tim Davenport

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