

---

# Probabilities and Possibilities

by Eugene V. Debs

Published in *Locomotive Firemen's Magazine*, vol. 18, no. 8 (August 1894), pp. 765-768.

There was never a period in the history of labor, when probabilities and possibilities were so entangled in men's minds as at present. The most astute are unable to map out a pathway to any goal, near or afar, and the problems which confront the most thoughtful are becoming every day more complex and stubborn.

Men write and reason only to increase confusion. Facts are so [pliant] that probabilities degenerate to possibilities and suddenly become improbabilities, if not impossibilities, when it is found necessary to change front, choose some new road and pursue it until again confronted with obstacles which will not yield, and then things proceed while affairs grow worse by degrees, and rapidly assume conditions which are admittedly full of peril.

What are the probabilities for the future of labor? Are they of a character warranting the conclusion that its condition will improve, or that it will be less prosperous than at present — in a word, become worse? Scanning the situation as a mariner surveys the skies, what probabilities are discovered? Are not all probabilities merged into possibilities? Do men say this or that is probable, or that it is possible? Take, for instance, the question of wages. What is probable? Is it likely that present rates of wages will be maintained? Is it presumed that wages will decline? Is it to be expected that wages will advance? In discussing such propositions, if probabilities are about equal, then they are contradictory and disappear to give place to possibilities or to chance and everything is at sea — deep sea, where there are no soundings, or navigators of the labor ships are sailing amidst treacherous currents and perilous surroundings.

Discussing probabilities, we mention arbitration, sometimes thought to be a panacea for labor troubles, a desideratum, the one

thing needful to take wrong from the throne and place it upon the scaffold. Arbitration is as old as the eternal hills. It is primal, has been in vogue since prehistoric men disagreed about flints and furs. Arbitration fills the bill sometimes. To arbitrate presupposes that one of the parties demands more than simple justice requires, and that concessions must be made by one party or both. There are advocates of arbitration, who are so much in love with the theory that they would eliminate the voluntary feature and introduce compulsory, arbitrary arbitration, according to statute, which is not arbitration in fact, or as the term is generally understood, but rather a court to hear and decide arbitrarily, with penalties attached to enforce decisions. It goes for little, or for nothing at all, to contend that such arbitration settles the disputed points. To say that a settlement thus arrived at is better for labor, is to intimate that labor needs a guardian created by law to take charge of its interests and determine what is best for it. And here the question arises, is it probable that working men will submit to such an arrangement and surrender their right to determine for themselves what methods shall be adopted to protect their interests? We think the probabilities are not in the direction of compulsory arbitration, though there is a possibility of such a thing. It would doubtless happen that a corporation would cut down wages to an extent that organized labor would revolt. In such a case the compulsory arbitration law would doubtless compel the aggrieved organized workingmen to submit to the reduction of wages or appeal to the arbitration law for redress.

Suppose the rate of wages was \$1.25 per day, and the corporation cut it down to \$1.00? Organized labor would seek to show that \$1.00 a day was insufficient wages, but if the corporation would come in and show it could have all the men it wanted at that price, what would the arbitrators be likely to decide? Would they say the corporation should pay \$1.25 a day, when the proof was that they could hire men to do their work for \$1.00 a day? True, organized labor might show that the men offering to work for convict prices were *scabs*, but the corporation would insist they were men, capable to perform the labor required, in which case the arbitrators would be in a dilemma, and their decision, if it had any effect at all, would be the creation of a wage scale. Is it probable, or even possible that workingmen will, by their votes, encourage such a scheme? That non-union men may favor such an arrangement, it is both possible and probable, but it ought not to be either probable nor possible for union workmen to place in

the hands of any set of men the determination of wages, upon which their lives, their liberties and their happiness depend. The probable ought to be that workingmen will not build scaffolds for their own immolation. Why should it be possible for a body of organized workingmen to place in the hands of one man the power to annul the will of a majority of their number when authoritatively expressed? Such a thing beggars all ideas of the probable and enthrones the wrong in human affairs, and places the right on the scaffold, which makes the most hopeful doubt, begets distrust where there should be confidence and the most courageous halt in their advance. This thing of conferring autocratic power and surrendering in advance, ought to stand in the catalogue of possibilities. It ought to be classed with the impossibilities.

Federation of labor organizations has been for years the battle cry, and a federation that would proclaim labor invincible when contending against its foes is a possibility, just as it is possible for a time to come when the lion and the ox will eat straw together from the same stack, when the ox will forget that it has horns and the lion will cease using its paws, but to class such things as probabilities, or even possibilities smacks of hallucination. Why? Because in the present condition of what is called "human nature," the class rises superior to the cause, and each for all and all for each, does not exercise sufficient sway to create a probability, nor even a possibility that any sort of a federation is at hand which will make an iron worker, for instance, the champion of the rights of a cigar maker, and thus on through the entire list of trades. These are glowing theories *ad infinitum* and *ad nauseum*, but when an emergency arises, men survey a desert where not even a cactus, nor a sprig of sage grass of the practical appears. Worse, still, perhaps, federation is used just as the devil quotes scripture, to beguile its votaries and make conditions worse. Federation is possible. We have it now, and have had it for years past and gone, and men who are at all thoughtful, in surveying the field and contemplating results are reminded of the "barren fig tree" with an abundance of foliage and no fruit. Is it probable that this sort of federation is to go on forever? Certainly, it is possible. Men now, as in the past are wedded to idols, and the difference between worshipping a stock or a stone, and a form of federation that is inefficient, is scarcely apparent.

Is it probable that something better will come? Is it possible for workingmen to suggest an improvement upon federation? We do not doubt it. We suggest consolidation of trades and callings. We mean

one government, one constitution, one supreme law, one flag, one shibboleth — “*labor omnia vincet.*”<sup>1</sup> With this consolidation labor organizations become invincible. Are there any precedents calculated to encourage and inspire confidence? Assuredly. On every page of authentic history there are examples of the conquering power of the consolidation of forces, and a government becomes contemptible in the eyes of all nations, where it is either incapable or neglects to protect its humblest citizen against outrages perpetrated by any other sovereignty. Is it probable that labor will consolidate its forces, and thus make it possible to protect, even one of its members against outrage?

The verdict of the world, long since rendered, is that a nation never expands to greater or sublimer proportions than when with its consolidated power it redresses the wrongs inflicted upon *one* of its citizens, and an example or two furnished by the United States of America illustrates our idea. Some years ago a subject of the emperor of Austria came to the United States and simply declared his intention to become an American citizen. Soon after he visited his native land, and was arrested, his American citizenship was ignored, and he was required to do military duty for a government he had renounced. An American battleship was in an Austrian port, and its commander having learned that Martin Costa, the American citizen referred to, was in that city, demanded his release and that he should promptly be sent on board of his ship and be placed under the protection of the American flag. The authorities hesitating to obey the order, the battleship was brought broadside to the city and her decks cleared for action. Her guns were shotted, and then came the order, “Send Martin Costa, the American citizen, on board my ship or I’ll bombard your city.” It was enough. The American citizen was rescued. The name of an obscure man was given to history. The right was vindicated. American citizenship was made to mean something, and American power and prestige was something more than sounding brass.

Again, an utterly unknown American citizen was wrongfully imprisoned by the authorities of Mexico. His liberation was demanded by the American government. Mexico hesitated. Then came an exhibition of power on the Mexican border, and the peremptory order to release the American citizen. It sufficed, and the prison doors swung open, and the prisoner was free. The incidents related were premoni-

---

<sup>1</sup> *Work conquers all.* A phrase from *Georgics*, book 1 (29 BC), by **Virgil** (70-19 BC).

tions of war in the event the humble and obscure American citizens had not been surrendered. These were exhibitions of consolidated power to resist wrong and oppression, and the world applauded. In labor affairs, consolidated power on the part of organizations would achieve the same results, by different methods. There would be no military display, no bugle calls to sanguinary strife, but the power exerted would not be less potential in securing beneficent results. When a corporation oppressed a wiper, a trackman, or a shopman, his case would at once concentrate upon it the consolidated power of the organizations. If it were a railroad the demand would be made to remove the burden from the humble worker, and a refusal would hush to Pompeiian silence the industry. True, there would be inconvenience, but justice would demand the sacrifice, the wrong would be taken from the throne and placed upon the scaffold, and he would be a degenerate American who would not rejoice over such a victory.

It is possible to consolidate. It is possible to enthrone the right. It is possible to be true and brave and honest. What are the probabilities? We think they are cheering. We believe the outlook is hopeful. We fancy we see the dawning of a better day for labor in every field of toil. Men are learning to analyze errors and to eliminate them, and possibilities are becoming probabilities. Entrenched errors are hard to dislodge, but with consolidation of the forces of labor such notable victories would be won for the right, that men would wonder as they contemplate the dreary road labor has traveled to reach, at last, the goal of success.

*Edited by Tim Davenport*

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