
Cooperation not Competition:

An Interview with Eugene V. Debs, Woodstock Jail — June 26, 1895

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Woodstock, Ill., June 26 [1895].— Sitting in his cell, with malefactors on every side, serving a sentence for contempt of law, Eugene V. Debs cheerfully prophesies that the labor movement is not dead, but that its reverses are strengthening it, and that finally the cause for which he contended must prevail.

The Enquirer correspondent visited Mr. Debs in the Woodstock jail today. His tenure in jail has not affected him apparently, for he yet has the firm, flushing eye which distinguished him, and was busy writing to his followers.

Hope for the Future.

I never took a more hopeful view of labor's future than now. The deadline of wretchedness and degradation has almost been reached. Avarice and cupidity are as they have ever been, totally blind. As insatiate and remorseless as a conflagration, they pursue and devour. They make no concession. Their sway must be absolute. The slave power had it a third of a century ago. The money power has it today. History will repeat itself.

There is an invisible yet a mighty mustering of the forces of labor going forward. They are doing some powerful thinking. When the supreme hour is struck they will instinctively and spontaneously unite their tremendous forces and hew out their pathway to emancipation. The time is not quite ripe yet. A few more federal troops, a few more injunctions, a few more jail sentences, perhaps another Supreme

Court stab-hole in the constitution, and the reign of might will end and that of right begin.

Effect on Politics.

“What effect will it have upon the coming Presidential election?” Mr. Debs was asked:

It will, in my opinion, have the effect of tremendously increasing the vote of the People’s Party, and if that party’s convention is composed of wise, liberal, and patriotic representatives, and they formulate a platform upon which the great mass of reformers, — be they socialists, single taxers, trade unionists, or what not — can unite and harmonize, they will, in 1896, take at least second place, and in 1900 at the latest, sweep the country. The Democratic Party as a national organization is dead beyond resurrection, and will never see power again in this generation. The Republican Party is the party of the money power, and will make a desperate fight to maintain supremacy. The future contests will be between this party and the People’s Party, the one the party of the rich — the classes — the other the party of the poor — the masses. In this fight the people will win. There is to-day an overwhelming majority against both the old parties. It is only required to unify this opposition, and the good work is going bravely forward.

The Silver Question.

“Will silver benefit the question of labor?”

To a limited extent and this only for an inconsequential period. I am for free silver as a means to an end. The free coinage of silver would, in my opinion, relieve somewhat the present stringency and stimulate to activity our industrial enterprises, but the great world of labor, which involves all there is of worth to the world, will not be regenerated by the free coinage of silver or any other metal. The money sharks will manipulate silver just as they do gold and with the same results to labor.

Cooperation.

Cooperation is the *ultima thule* of social agitation. The philosophy of cooperation is rational, humane, and all-embracing, and I subscribe to it without reservation. The trend is toward the cooperative commonwealth. It is the hope of the world. Vested iniquity will contest every inch of its progress, but it will come as certain as the dawn. The competitive system has had its day; it has blotted out all the stars of hope, filled the world with groans, and reduced humanity to slavery. The strong have devoured the weak. All the highways of the centuries are strewn with the bones of the hapless victims. Competition is the mother of selfishness and greed. Competition develops the fangs, not the souls of men. Competition is fit only for the social degeneracy of savages and beasts. Competition has spawned a brood of vices which have filled our highways with tramps, our asylums with insanity, our prisons with crime, and the whole land with unspeakable woe; and the verdict of an awakened public conscience will relegate it to the relic chamber of the barbarous past. Mutualism, cooperation, which contemplate the "brotherhood of man," will come as certain as the earth revolves upon its axis, soon after the sun of the 20th Century lights the world.

Strikes.

"Do you still believe in strikes as a means to success?"

No, sir! But I would not totally abolish the provision for them. The dread of a strike has a powerful restraining effect upon that class of employers who regard their employees as so many chattels or cattle. Abolish the strike, and workingmen are totally helpless. Forced to choose between a strike and degradation I would strike if I stood alone. I would not disrobe myself of my manhood; I would scorn to strip myself naked of my independence. I don't like strikes any more than I like war. Are the American people ready to abolish war?

I don't take much stock in arbitration. If it is "compulsory" it is vicious in principle, and if it is voluntary it can't be enforced. I have a notion that under any kind of an arrangement the rich employer would get the turkey and the poor employee the buzzard, just as it is in many of our courts. Still, while the competitive system lasts, I am willing to give it a fair trial. I am willing to admit that boards of arbitration have done some good, and I shall not discourage any effort

made to extend to its utmost limit the scope of its usefulness as a factor in preventing or adjusting labor difficulties.

Concerning Governor Altgeld, Mr. Debs says the Illinois executive is the staunchest, ablest, and most courageous friend of labor in the United States, and he would make him President.

Mr. Debs says he doesn't want a pardon:

Jail life may have a demoralizing effect upon its victims, but we shall not degenerate to an extent that we would accept our liberty on any such condition. We are content to serve our full time. Some of these days the sentence of the assassins of constitutional liberty will be pronounced, and there will be no appeal from it.

The injunction law is utterly infamous. It stabs to death the "Goddess of Liberty," and crowns and scepters the harlot of despotism. It is the last resort of tyranny.

Duty of the Church?

"What should be the stand of the church with regard to the labor question?"

Squarely on the side of labor. That was the doctrine of Christ. But the church has never been for labor and never will be until labor triumphs, and then the church will be its staunchest supporter. Wendell Phillips declared the church was the foe of the abolitionists and the strongest supporter of slavery. It has always been so. The church is on the side of power, right or wrong, and every honest minister will admit it. It is supported by and is the main support of the money power, and the minister who is great enough and self-sacrificing enough to preach Christ soon preaches himself out of the pulpit.

Edited by Tim Davenport

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