
Letter to Thomas J. Elderkin in Chicago
(October 31, 1895)

Woodstock, Ill., Oct. 31 [1895].

Thomas J. Elderkin,
President Trade and Labor Assembly,
Chicago, Ill.

Dear Sir and Brother:—

Your favor of the 20th inst. [Oct. 20, 1895] in reference to the reception to be tendered my colleagues and myself upon my release and the condition upon which the Trade and Labor Assembly of Chicago will participate therein has been received and noted.

I quote from your letter as follows:

Some say you advocate the abolishment of trade union theories, while others declare you are still a friend and strong advocate of trade unions. The question of a demonstration by the Trade and Labor Assembly upon the occasion of your release from jail November 22, rests upon your position toward trade unions, for if you still believe trade unions are adequate for the emancipation of the workingmen the Trade and Labor Assembly will cheerfully join in the demonstration.

Permit me to decline in advance any “demonstration” on the part of persons whose sentiments are represented in the foregoing proposition. If the Trade and Labor Assembly of Chicago can afford to make such a proposition, I cannot afford to consider it. For 21 years I have been defining my “position” in relation to trade unions, and on all proper occasions I have given full, free and unequivocal expression to my views, but I must respectfully decline to do so for a consideration, even though that consideration be in the form of a reception upon my release from a jail in which I have served a sentence of six months for my fealty to the principles of the very trade unions which now propose to interrogate me as to my “position” in relation to their interests.

The statement that I am or ever have been hostile to trade unions and that I am advocating or intending to advocate their "abolishment" is too palpably false and malicious to merit an instant's contention. There is, of course, a purpose in having this question raised at this time, but it is difficult for me to conceive that it emanates from a Trade and Labor Assembly. If it had its origin in the General Managers' Association or some kindred body, it would be in consonance with the fitness of things and I should readily understand it.

Permit me to say, therefore, that the proposed reception is in no sense a personal affair. I understand it to be tendered in recognition of the principles involved in the illegal and unjust imprisonment of my colleagues and myself, and as voicing abhorrence of, and protest against, judicial despotism in the United States, which constitutional rights are cloven down in the interest of corporate wealth.

I have not asked for a reception and I am sure I have no ambition to be the guest of anyone who finds it necessary to place me on the witness stand and interrogate me as to whether I am his friend or his enemy, especially after serving six months in jail for advocating his rights and defending his interests. To make myself perfectly clear, if there are those who have any doubt as to my "position," then, so far as I am concerned, I advise them to take the safe side and stay away from the intended reception.

The charge that I have "changed my views" in regard to trades unions, which, as I am informed, prompted the action and attitude of your assembly, is simply a pretext which will serve the purpose for which it was designed if it creates dissension, arouses a sentiment unfavorable to the reception and makes of that occasion a dismal failure. The reason for this is so apparent that it will readily suggest itself. I admit that my views are subject to "change," but not of the legal tender variety.

I beg to assure you that no discourtesy is intended, although if the Trade and Labor Assembly had intended a deliberate affront it could not have adopted a method better calculated to serve that purpose than by attempting to pillory me in public at this time on the question of my allegiance to organized labor.

I have the honor to subscribe myself, with best wishes.

Yours fraternally,

Eugene V. Debs.

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