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# Labor and Law

by Eugene V. Debs

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The records show that statisticians, statesmen, political economists and politicians are forever heralding to the world the triumphs of labor. From year to year, and from decade to decade, the capacity of figures is taxed to demonstrate the wealth-producing power of labor, until sum totals bewilder the imagination. It is a self-evident fact, which needs only to be stated to find universal acceptance, that the men who produce this wealth, the wage men, the bread winners, outnumber all other classes combined, but whoever heard of a labor party that controlled legislation in any land?

Why is it so? The inquiry at once opens to laboring men a vast field for thought and investigation. It may be said in explanation that laboring men have never perfected an organization, in power and influence, in any sense, commensurate with the vast and vital interests at stake. Local organizations there are, and national organizations are spoken of, but, as factors and forces in shaping political affairs, they have exerted little influence, if any at all.

Tersely stated, politics is the science of government. Government relates to the enactment and to the administration of laws. Laws are enacted to protect the rights and promote the welfare of the people. The people are not required to consider any questions bearing upon their well-being more important than those which relate to property. These propositions bring to the front the question of the relationship existing between property and labor. And here we have it stated, by eminent authorities, that "all value is born of labor, and is composed essentially of wages; in other words, that *no* wealth has its origin in privi-

lege or acquires any value except through *work*; and that consequently labor alone is the source of revenue among men.”<sup>1</sup>

The proposition is irrefutable and, therefore, forms an indestructible foundation upon which to build labor organizations having for their supreme purpose a direct influence upon legislation and government

It would be natural to suppose that since labor is alone the source of revenue among men, since all value is born of labor, and that wealth has its origin in work, that political economists, social scientists, statesmen and philanthropists would urge, in their writings and public addresses, the importance of advancing the interests of laboring men in every way practicable and consistent with good government. But, unfortunately, such is not the record. Nowhere on God’s green earth have the men, whose work creates the revenues of nations, been permitted to enjoy more than a pittance of the values they have created.

The serious question that such facts force upon the attention of thinking men, is to what extent law in the past, or laws as they exist at present, are responsible for the situation? There is no law inherent in human nature which decrees one man poor and another man rich — one man a servant and another man master. There is no natural law, like that which moves the stars in their orbits, which distributes the wealth which labor creates inequitably.

We assume, therefore, that the laws that have been enacted from time immemorial, relating to the distribution of the wealth which labor creates, have been unjust laws, administered by unjust judges. If we appeal to the records, the testimony is overwhelming. But we care little for the unjust laws of the past. Our inquiries relate to the present and to the future. How stands the case now? Are the laws enacted designed to lift the burdens which former laws imposed from the bowed form of labor? In the United States of America laboring men have the ballot. If the laws are unjust, they can command their modification or repeal. We are not advocating now the enactment of laws spe-

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<sup>1</sup> Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, *System of Economical Contradictions; or, The Philosophy of Poverty* (1846).

cially, or rather directly, designed to promote labor interests, that is to say laws which shall fix the price of labor or the price of the products of labor, but we do mean that laws shall not be enacted designed to make the rich richer and laboring men poorer, laws which permit the inequitable distribution of wealth, laws which take care of the palace and neglect the cottage, laws which permit money capital and water capital to exact dividends from labor capital and leave it to starve in sight of the wealth it creates.

We are by no means forgetful of the fact that it has been the purpose of writers to mystify rather than elucidate questions relating to the honest adjustment of profit and loss in matters where capital and labor combine, for the purpose of solving the problems of progress. We are aware that it has been said that “machinery causes not only cheapness, but obstruction of the market and stoppage of business;” that “competition ends in oppression;” that “taxation, the material bond of society, is generally a scourge, dreaded equally with fire and hail;” that “credit is necessarily accompanied by bankruptcy;” that “property is a swarm of abuses;” that “commerce degenerates into a game of chance,” and, in short, that disorder exists everywhere; but, true or false, such things do not now enter into our argument.<sup>2</sup> What labor wants to ascertain is whether laws, as they stand on the statute books, operate to its disadvantage or are promotive of its interests? The investigation so far leads to the conclusion that the wealth that labor creates is unjustly distributed and that the laws are not only not in the interest of labor, but prejudicial to its welfare.

In this connection, we hazard the prediction that a new era is to dawn, at no distant day, upon the country. Labor is organizing for its protection and will not long tolerate the wrongs under which it has labored, in so far as the enactment of just laws can apply a remedy. The ballot is the weapon of labor in the United States, and when thorough organization is secured, re-

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<sup>2</sup> All of these quotations are from Proudhon's 1846 book, *The Philosophy of Poverty*, which was famously polemicized against by Karl Marx with his 1847 work, *The Poverty of Philosophy*. Debs seems to have read Proudhon's book in the original French since the first English-language translation, by Benjamin R. Tucker, did not appear in print until 1888.

sults will give it a power and a dignity which, while it will secure for labor simple justice, will confer lasting blessings upon society at large.

*Edited with footnotes by Tim Davenport*

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