
Foreign Pauper Immigration

by Eugene V. Debs

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There is a ceaseless clamor against “foreign pauper immigration” to the United States. Every poor person is not a pauper, though every pauper is a poor person. A pauper is so poor that he or she must be supported by charity or starve. A pauper, as a general proposition, is unable to work. Old, infirm, or feeble minded, the law exempts them from labor — the state cares for them. There are no able bodied, sound minded paupers. If such persons refuse to work the law compels them to work. They are vagrants, vagabonds, tramps, idlers by choice, and generally criminals by profession. They are not paupers, and have no just claim upon charity.

That such characters are all too often found among the immigrants from foreign countries is not denied. The point we make is that the clamor of the times includes the great mass of immigrants who seek our shores for the purpose of bettering their condition.

Associated with this outcry against “foreign pauper immigration” is the noise made about the “pauper labor” of Europe. Do those who create the hubbub desire to be understood as denouncing poor men who work in European countries — and because they are poor, class them with paupers? If so, do they not see if poverty and work in Europe degrades workingmen to paupers, it does the same thing in America?

It should be understood that paupers do not work, and that workingmen are not paupers in any land. In this matter let us be distinctly understood. We write to correct errors of expression. Words are signs of ideas, and often of exceedingly vicious ideas. As for instance, when a member of Congress calls labor “a commodity, as much so as any *raw material*, worked up,” and the talk about “pauper labor” and “pauper laborers” is equally ridiculous.

Let us take for illustration two extremes of conditions. Jay Gould, with an income of \$10 million a year, and a trackman on one of his railroads whose income is 90 cents a day — or \$270 a year — a difference in incomes of \$9,999,730. Both of these *gentlemen* live within their incomes, neither of them are objects of charity. The trackman is no more a pauper than Mr. Gould. He wears coarse clothes, he eats coarse fare, he lives in a humbler house — but he works, he supports himself and his family. He is independent. Let him be still further oppressed and robbed, and he will wear still coarser clothes and eat still coarser food and find a still humbler dwelling. But he is not a pauper laborer. Europe is full of men who for centuries have been oppressed, robbed, and degraded, who have struggled against conditions which agonize the brain to contemplate, and yet have saved enough to get out of their bondage — to find some other land, where, under God's blessings, conditions are more favorable for the poor.

At an early day, we are to have a celebration of the anniversary of the discovery of America by Christopher Columbus. Why celebrate the anniversary? What good came of the discovery, if it did not afford an asylum to men who would escape from tyranny, and especially, those who were workers? But it is held that those who came first secured a preemption right to the land, not only where they "squatted" but to acres without limit, and now, while making no objection to the immigration of the rich, lift their hands in "holy horror" because the poor manage to land on American shores.

The time has arrived to stop the chatter about "pauper labor" and "pauper laborers." Trust barons and great corporations may be pleased with such terms, because they have the significance of slaves, or serfs, and do not suggest citizenship. If it can be once established that the term "workingman" is synonymous with "pauper laborer," the work of degradation speeds on more rapidly, and the Corbins of the period will be able to accomplish their purpose more perfectly.

The laws as they now stand exclude criminals and paupers from our shores, as also "contract laborers." That is enough. We have room for 400 million population. There are yet empires of waste places. Cities are in a congested condition, but it is not the fault of workingmen. men at the head of industrial enterprises seek the towns and the cities, and the workingmen follow. There are ten thousand industries in the united States that would succeed quite as well in the country as in the city, if located on any of our railroads — the railroad, the telegraph, and the telephone have completely upset the old theory

that the city was best suited for industrial enterprises — and that it still holds sway is due to the vicious ambition of cities to show the largest population, regardless of the vice and poverty which are entailed upon those who must work or starve.

When the Columbus Exposition, in 1893, is thrown open to the world, what will be seen? Not a thing that does not glorify labor — labor, from the humblest toiler to the most skilled artisan, and it is hoped that Europe will contribute, as well as all the civilized nations of the earth; and who, we ask, will write of these exhibits as the product of “pauper labor” or who will voice the sentiment that the men whose skill challenges the admiration of all beholders are forbidden the privilege of coming to America? Let us be done with such gabble. When from the mast-head of one of the little vessels in the squadron of Columbus the cry was heard, “Land! Land!” it meant land for the world; not for those who first robbed the Indians, but for man through all time who might seek homes in the New World. At any rate, whatever else may be said in regard to a Chinese wall policy of exclusiveness, let us be done with the “pauper labor” folly — something that never existed since Jehovah finished the world and “rested from all the work which he had made.”

Edited by Tim Davenport

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