
Defenseless Wage Earners

by Eugene V. Debs

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Society has become accustomed to some very nice distinctions. The poor man is called a socialist if he believes that the wealth of the rich should be divided among the poor, but the rich man is called a financier if he devises a plan by which the pittance of the poor can be converted to his use.

The poor man who takes property by force is called a thief, but the creditor who can by legislation make a debtor pay a dollar twice as large as he borrowed is lauded as the friend of sound currency. The man who wants the people to destroy the government is an anarchist, but the man who wants the government to destroy the people is a patriot.

The foregoing paragraphs are taken from the speech of the Hon. W.J. Bryan, MC, delivered in the House of Representatives, August 16th [1893]. They refer to current criticisms of men, motives, and money, to schemes of legislation and to schemes protected by statutes for the purpose of the aggrandizement of the few at the expense of the many, to increase the power of the strong and to make the weak submit to their machinations.

The President called Congress together to deliberate upon finances, and in his message took occasion to say:

At times like the present, when the evils of unsound finance threaten us, the speculator may anticipate a harvest gathered from the misfortunes of others, the capitalist may protect himself by hoarding or may even find profit in the fluctuation of values, but the wage-earner — the first to be injured by a depreciated currency and the last to receive the benefit of its correction — is *practically defenseless*. He relies for work upon the ventures of confident and contented capital. This falling him, his condition is without alleviation, for he can neither prey on the misfortunes of others nor hoard his labor.

It is seen that the President, in calling an extra session of Congress, recognizes labor — “the wage-earner” — and says what is true, that labor is the first to be injured, and he could have added, that the injury continues during the whole period of business depression, always increasing in its deplorable consequences.

The President points out the difference between the “speculator” — the “capitalist” — and the “wage-earner,” and in the President’s specification the degrading point is made that the wage-earner is powerless, a creature who exists by permission, who, as against the “unsound finance,” is “practically defenseless,” not only “practically,” but absolutely “defenseless.” Hence what? Degradation, idleness, poverty, squalor, hunger, desperation, mobs, and riots.

The President of the United States tells Congress that wage-earners are “practically defenseless,” that they are compelled to accept such conditions as Congress and legislatures may inflict. The reference to wage-earners could not be made, by the use of language, more abject. To say that there are 20 million wage-earners in the United States may seem extravagant, but the estimate is, nevertheless, conservative, when women and children are included, and of the 12 to 14 million votes cast in the United States for President and members of Congress, at least 8 million are cast by wage earners. And yet the President says that against “the evils of ‘unsound finance’ they are practically defenseless” and further the President says that the “unsound finance” that affects the country is the result of “Congressional legislation.”

Accepting the declarations of the President as true, how does it happen that wage-earners, with at least eight million votes in the country are left “practically defenseless?” The answer is ready and easy. Wage-earners are “defenseless” because they cast their votes for men who betray them, who enact laws for the rich regardless of the interests of labor; as was said in Congress, in discussing “the evils of unsound finance” and the prostration of business, the cry comes —

From forges where no fires burn,
From mills where wheels no longer turn,
From looms o’er which no shuttles leap,
From merchants’ shops — which sheriffs keep—
From banks gone up, from stocks gone down,
From God-made country, man-made town,
From Wall street men, from sons of toil,
From the bronzed tillers of the soil,

From North, from South, from East, from West.¹

That wage-earners are “defenseless.” Is it true that wage-earners are defenseless? Having been juggled out of their votes, is their lot to be mendicancy and misery, silence and suffering, desolation and despair? Are wage-earners to wait until a wrangling congress extracts the fangs from gnawing hunger?

The President says “wage-earners are defenseless” — that is to say, they are unarmed, unprotected, exposed, weak — voiceless and submissive, they are like dumb driven cattle, and “unsound finance,” the result of “Congressional legislation,” is the pelting storm that is beating them down to death.

Is it not possible that the President is mistaken when he says the wage-earner is “defenseless?” Can it be possible that from 5 million to 10 million wage-earners are defenseless in this age and in this country? To say they are “defenseless” consigns them to soundless depths of degradation — reduces them to pariahs, peons, helots — slaves as in old plantation times, before Lincoln’s proclamation permitted the African slave to stand up a free man.

We doubt if wage-earners comprehend the measureless meaning of the President’s declaration that wage earners are “defenseless.” If it is true, then our flag, our starry banner “Old Glory,” is a “flaunting lie.” The wage-earner, a sovereign citizen of the great American republic, ought not to be said to be “defenseless;” he ought not to be considered the ward of the government; he ought not to be voiceless and silent when legislation strikes at his rights and interests, his work and his wages, his home and his children. In such perilous times he ought not to be regarded “defenseless.” Nor is he defenseless.

We have heard of pools and trusts and of combinations by which the rich have managed to ascertain how much bread the wage-earner should receive for a day’s toil, and when he asked for a fish, counted his gains, if he could palm off a scorpion, and the national prayer should be that in the United States wage-earners, to demonstrate that they are not defenseless, may never pool their woes, their hunger pangs, for the purpose of bettering their condition. Better far for wage-earners to pool their votes, solidify their ranks, abandon party

¹ Debs tendentiously omits the final rhyme and punchline of this poem, which originally ends: “From North, from South, from East, from West / Business is crying with a zest — / ‘Don’t monkey with the tariff.’” This protectionist poem seems to have originated in the *New York Tribune*, perhaps in August 1893, and was widely reprinted in sympathetic magazines and newspapers.

and party leaders that have betrayed them and led the President to say they are “defenseless,” and demonstrate that when they are unified and armed with the ballot, the President and the nation will find wage-earners amply able to take care of themselves.

But there is another side to the picture. Hon. J.C. Sibley, of Pennsylvania, not an anarchist nor a socialist, not a labor agitator, not a Republican or a Populist, but a Democrat, in closing a speech in the House of Representatives, said:

Prompted alone by our love for rich and poor, by our love for the welfare and peace of our common country, let us warn you that the masses of the people are aroused. All over this fair land they are on their knees in prayer. Their wails have been heard at the throne of the Almighty. My friends, hunger and cold know no philosophy and respect no laws; and when these twin devils are let loose and you force them out upon the world —

Then woe to the robbers who gather
In fields where they never have sown;
Who have stolen the jewels from labor,
And builded to Mammon a throne.

For the throne of their god shall be crumbled,
And the scepter be swept from his hand,
And the heart of the haughty be humbled,
And a servant be chief in the land.

For the Lord of the harvest hath said it,
Whose lips never uttered a lie,
And his prophets and poets have read it,
In symbols of earth and of sky;

That to him who hath reveled in plunder
'Til the angel of conscience is dumb,
The shock of the earthquake and thunder,
And tempest and torrent shall come.²

Edited with footnotes by Tim Davenport

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² Apparently original poetry by Rep. **Joseph C. Sibley** (1850-1926), delivered to Congress on Aug. 18, 1893. According to the official record, Sibley's recitation was met with “loud applause.”