
The Right Sort of Talk

by Eugene V. Debs

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The Boston *Labor Leader* in a recent issue contains the following caption, "The Limit of State Duties":

In his Faneuil Hall address last week, Mr. Morrison Swift¹ used these words, "We propose to take away the property of the rich — by law."

In this proposition we have the essence of the distinction between the purposes of organized labor and of those for whom Mr. Swift speaks.

The legitimate labor movement proposes to do nothing of the kind.

It proposes to so modify, either by repeal or enactment, the law so that men shall have equality of opportunity to reap the full measure of the consequences of their own conduct.

It does not accept the communistic proposition that property shall be taken, without equivalent, to be divided among those who have none.

It recognizes that the law of equity is distinct from the theory of equality, and that the attempt to supplant the individual virtues of industry, thrift, and prudence by state action and a viva voce vote is as unjust in conception as it is impracticable in execution.

The theoretical gentlemen who are fond of implying that it is the duty of the state to make everyone rich and happy, may well remember that the famous Bill of Rights guarantees to the citizenship the power to "acquire and possess" property.

The dangers from Mr. Swift's theories and those of his school are not so much to the property holders of the state as to the working classes, upon which they will inevitably react.

¹ **Morrison Swift** (1856-1946), recipient of an 1885 PhD from Johns Hopkins University, turned his back on academia in favor of a life spent as a radical labor organizer in Boston. He was the author of the pamphlet, *Capitalists are the Cause of the Unemployed* (1894).

There is, however, an advantage to be gained from the discussion he has stirred up, that a much-needed education may be obtained by citizens in all classes upon the proper limits of the duties of the state.

It should be distinctly understood by the legislators of this commonwealth that organized labor, however much it may be in sympathy, as it needs must be from the large quota of its own members embraced by them with the unemployed, is not in accord with the extreme utterances of Mr. Swift as to what the state may properly be called upon to do.

As Herbert Spencer has pointed out, the state is not a manufacture, but a growth, its "vast and complex organization ... resulted from the voluntary co-operation of men pursuing their private ends."

Organized labor may and does demand that the individual freedom of the citizen shall not be invaded by other citizens, that the wage-earner shall not be put in a position of inequality and lack of opportunity by reason of state interference in behalf of others. Given even justice before the law, we fancy that he is willing to "assume the consequences of his own conduct."

This is as Prof. Nichols said in his testimony, an entirely different thing from the responsibility of the state to feed and shelter those who can not do this for themselves, and this responsibility is fully accepted by all humanitarians.

The foregoing from the *Labor Leader* brings to the front several questions which, with more or less directness, people are debating in the press and on the rostrum.

In every direction scenes are witnessed in which the unemployed are demanding of local governments employment, or, in the absence of employment, subsistence — food and fuel, and occasionally, with an emphasis, if demands are not heeded, which means trouble for the government. Necessarily, such demands force into prominence the question, What has municipal government, state government, or even the federal or general government, got to do with furnishing the unemployed with employment — work and wages? We answer, nothing at all; the governments to which we have referred, have one, and only one means for obtaining money, and that is by taxation. These governments operate under charters or constitutions, having no powers whatever, except such as are conferred by such organic, or fundamental laws — and here it should be remarked, because it is a fundamental fact, that no where does charter or constitution confer the right on the governments named, to tax the people to raise money to support

the unemployed. There is, in other words, no paternalism in American government — neither municipal, state, nor federal.

Take for instance the 5,000 men who invaded the state house of Massachusetts, demanding of the legislature employment. The state could only reply that it had no employment for them — and when the demand was made for subsistence, the state could only reply, that it had no money with which to purchase food for the hungry — and what was true of the government of the state of Massachusetts, was equally true of the government of the city of Boston — and these governmental conditions and restrictions apply with equal force to

To change this policy, it would be necessary for the government to levy an *employment* tax, specially designed for the benefit of the unemployed. As a matter of course, before such a tax could be levied constitutions and charters would have to be so amended as to permit cities and states to enter upon a system of improvements designed, specially, to give work and wages to the unemployed. Such amendments to organic laws could never be enacted, or if they were, and laws were passed to give them effect, cities and states would be bankrupted in five years. The Floodgates of speculation, speculation, and fraud would be swung wide open and ruin would result.

Notwithstanding all this, the demand for employment by the unemployed has repeatedly been made upon municipal and state governments during the past year, and fearing the consequences of denials, concessions have been made, and work, prospectively required, has been supplied, the benevolent purpose being, to bridge over, if possible, the fearful conditions which have confronted multiplied thousand of wage earners, and that too by no fault of their own.

To go still deeper in the analysis of the problem, the fact is developed, that unless the idle find work, and obtain wages whereby the necessaries of subsistence can be had, the scenes of the past year are likely to be reenacted upon a larger scale. The idea is abroad and it is taking on a more fully developed shape, that the government is bound, in some mysterious way, to give the unemployed work or provide for their pressing wants, and the idea is securing a deeper hold upon thousands of the people. It were folly to ignore it. The language of Mr. Swift, quoted by the *Labor Leader* — “We propose to take away the property of the rich by law,” is putting it mildly. The men who propose to *take away* property from anyone by law — which we suppose means confiscation, are ripening for taking property by the most speedy means that can be suggested. Such froth amounts to lit-

tle where normal conditions exist, but where thousands are hungry, ragged and cold, laws are ignored — because it is said that “hunger knows no law,” it does not reason, and as the pangs of hunger tear and rend the vitals, men become maniacs — and results, always the same, are appalling.

Contemplating the outlook, we are forced to the conclusion that the nation’s labor troubles are the joint product of the two great political parties which for years have controlled the destinies of the country. In this fact lies the danger. If congressional legislation has wrought the ruin which confronts the country on all sides, is there one hope left, to spring eternal in the human breast, that either of the parties which conjointly have wrecked the industries of the country, can inaugurate prosperity? The question is up for debate, and it is one in which wage earners are profoundly interested.

Edited with a footnote by Tim Davenport

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