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# Interview with the *Atlanta Constitution*,

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by Eugene V. Debs

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"The day for strikes on a large scale to settle labor troubles has about passed."

The speaker was Eugene V. Debs.

There is in this country today no more widely known name among labor leaders than the head of the American Railway Union. He is a remarkable character, this man who less than two years ago led the greatest conflict that labor and capital have ever had. That Mr. Debs is an unusual man goes without further saying when it is told of him that after traveling 700 miles, and being pulled from his bed at a late hour by *The Constitution's* representative, he met his visitor with a smile and perfect urbanity of manner.

"I got in ahead of my schedule and retired early," he remarked. Mr. Debs has an appointment to speak at the Columbia Theater tonight at 8 o'clock, on questions of special interest to organized labor, and to capital. He was not looked for until today and there was no one to meet him when he came. But that cut no figure with him. He registered at the Kimball.

The labor leader is smooth-shaven and smooth-talking, tall, erect, keen-eyed, and has character written all over his face. He might be mistaken for a relative of Bill Nye's. He said that he had been on an extended trip through the East prior to starting south. Before going East, he was out in the Northwest. Before that he was in jail — for abetting the great strike of 1894. Imprisonment does not appear to have gone hard with him. He says that he read and wrote during his term. He studied then, too, and thought more than he had ever done before in the same length of time. It is an individual opinion that Mr.

Debs experienced a change of views during his retirement from society.

### **Four Million Are Idle.**

He fell to chatting at once about the condition of labor throughout the world and the methods of improving that condition.

“There are four million idle men in this country. Perhaps they are not idle all the time, but that number are without regular employment. In some places the idle are so numerous that they are a menace to the rest of society. Work is the natural lot of mankind, but when cannot get work, what is he to do? A man who would be a good citizen if he could get employment may become vicious when out of work and starving. The transition is a natural one.

“What is the cause of so many being without employment? They want to work, but they cannot get it. We cannot blame them for not having something to do. They are simply victims of circumstances and if they were all at work there would be another 4 million without any, and you and I might be among them. The different parts of society are not properly adjusted. Improved machinery throws thousands of men out of work all the time. As the machinery is improved, and as it is constantly being improved, the number of idle is increased. The tendency always is to decrease the cost of production.

“The competitive system of business is a weight constantly pressing labor down. Then labor competes with itself. So you see, it has to fight itself, improved machinery, and the cunning shrewdness and avarice of corporations and trusts. It is human nature to want great wealth and power. Legislation is unable to check the injustice of corporations to labor and even to their own small investors.”

“What is your remedy for the existing conditions?” Mr. Debs was asked.

“That is a great problem. The situation is getting worse. Business failures grow more numerous. Some say the tariff is the cause, others say that it is due to the financial policy of the country, and others have still different explanations. I do not think that legislation on the tariff or finances can bring about a permanent improvement. It is my opinion that justice and morality must be at the bottom of the new condition of things. Nothing that disregards

justice can stand permanently. I am not a socialist, but I do not see lasting improvement until there is a radical change somewhere. I am reading a book here which says that the world must be regenerated. I have just finished that Italian work there which is much on the same line. The heart of mankind must be reached and touched. Man must begin by being just to his fellow. I do not see much hope in legislation. That does not go on to the seat of the trouble, though it can aid.

“Shorter hours of employment would give work to more men. Complete organization will better enable the laboring men to protect themselves against the encroachments of employers. The stronger the labor organizations are, the less prospect of a strike. It is the history of labor organizations that as they grow in strength and years, they become more conservative. Large aggregations of men are more conservative than small groups. There is less impulse proportionally in the larger number than in the few. A wrong idea has gone out about our organization, the American Railway Union. We are not anarchists. We want to secure and retain the sympathy of the masses and we are confident that when they hear our views and policies they will give us an even chance with the other fellow.

“Haven’t the corporations consolidated? Haven’t the railroads a General Managers’ Association? Then why [do] not all the employees of the railroad organize? There has never been much serious trouble in the South between labor and its employers. That is good and makes me think that it is a fine field for organization. There is that much less danger of strikes and these conflicts are dreadful. The employee stands a chance of losing what little he has, for as I said a while ago, there are millions of men right now clamoring for work and the corporations are in close touch with each other.

“No, I do not look for anything more in the way of strikes except some spasmodic outbreak. My dream is to get the working men of all classes on the railroads banded together into a harmonious whole, each class, so to speak, preserving its identity and autonomy for all purposes pertaining to its own affairs. The mere existence of a great organization will be a weighty factor in the settlement of grievances. The plan is perfectly feasible and the order is growing. There is an opposition to be lived down. I recognize that. Whenever a strike occurs, some of the public are inconvenienced. A shipper or a traveler finds himself inconvenienced. He at once blames the striker, not going back to the first cause and seeing that the railroad company was at fault. In that way we get the worst of it. But that situation will change, too.

“This should be a country of happy, prosperous, contented people. There is room enough for hundreds of millions. Everybody ought to have work at remunerative wages. The great problem is how to reach the highest possible state of prosperity for all people, eliminating the vast fortunes and the terrible poverty and starvation, which we see everywhere.”

Mr. Debs will see something of Atlanta tonight and tonight will have in his audience many prominent citizens. He is a fluent speaker, is intense in the work in which he is engaged, and impresses one very strongly with his energy and force.

*Edited by Tim Davenport*

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