What Can We Do For Working People?

by Eugene V. Debs

Unsigned editorial in *Locomotive Firemen'w Magazine,* vol. 14, no. 4 (April 1890), pp. 291-293

In one form or another certain persons are continually asking, "What can we do, or, What can be done for working people?" Why should such a question be asked at all in the United States? What gives rise to it? Are there circumstances and conditions warranting such an interrogatory? Who propounds it?

In old slave times there were men who counted their human chattels by the hundred, and the question was common among them, "What can we do for these people?" They said, "by virtue of the mysterious ways of Providence these descendants of Ham have been committed to our care. It is a great responsibility," and some of the more pious owners of "these people" thought that they would have to give an account at the Day of Judgment for the way they treated "these people." But the slaves were kept at work raising cotton, sugar, tobacco, peanuts, hemp, etc. They went on multiplying. The slave whip, the slave pens, and the slave bocks maintained their places, and the prices of "niggers" fluctuated little. The "nigger," male or female, was a valuable piece of property, and something had to be done for him. What? Simply clothe, feed, and shelter him. Keep him at work. If he was refractory, whip him; if funds were wanted, sell him. The question, "What can we do for 'these people'?" was easily answered. The slave owner owned his labor — owned his workingmen. The slave market was the *labor market.* The "labor market" was never overstocked. A "nigger" would always sell for something.

Negro slavery has been abolished in the United States, but according to some writers on labor questions we still have the "labor mar-

ket," and now the question is asked "up North" as well as "down South," continually, by certain persons, in a kind of slobbering, deprecatory way, "What can we do, or, What can be done for working people?" Is the question answered by building palatial church edifices, for the display of pomp and pride and fashion? Is it answered by paying "fat salaries," and to raise the funds sell the seats to the highest bidder and institute an aristocracy of piety?

Philanthropists of a certain type ask, "What can be done for working people?" and recommend soup houses, free baths, and more stringent laws against idleness and tramping, together with improved machinery in penitentiaries.

Another class devote time and investigation to diet, to show if wages decline that a man can live on ten cents a day and keep his revolting soul within his wretched body.

Another class, in answering the question, "What can we do for the working people?" reply by saying, "We will organize an Insurance Bureau which shall insure workingmen against accident, sickness, and death. We will supply them with medicine, doctors, and hospitals, taking so much from their wages to maintain the Bureau, and then, by compelling them to sign a contract which virtually reduces them to chattels, and makes them a part of our machinery, we will permit them to work for such pay as we choose to determine."

Another class answer the question, "What can we do for working people?" by telling them that unless they consent to abandon their labor organizations, absolve themselves from all obligations to such organizations, so far as they are concerned they shall have no work at all.

There are others, still, who discuss schemes for doing great and good things for working people, excepting, so far as it has come under the notice of the writer, to pay fair, honest wages.

This whole business of doing something for working people is disgusting and degrading to the last degree. It is not desirable to deny that in some quarters the question is asked honestly, but in such cases it is always in order to manifest pity for the questioner. He is not inconvenienced by a surplus of brains. The question, "What can we do for working people?" as a general proposition, finds its resemblance in a question that might be asked by the owner of a sheep ranch, "What

can I do for the sheep?" The reply would be, doubtless, "shear them." The ranch man takes care of the sheep that he may shear them, and it will be found that the men who ask with so much pharisaical solicitude, "What can we do for working men?" are the very ones who shear them the closest when the opportunity offers — strip them of everything of value that they may the more easily subjugate them by necessities of cold and hunger and nakedness, degrade and brutalize them to a degree that they become as fixed in their servitude as the wheels, cogs, cranks, and pins in the machinery they purchase and operate.

The real question to be propounded is, "What can workingmen do for themselves?" The answer is ready. They can do all things required, if they are independent, self-respecting, self-reliant men.

Workingmen can organize. Workingmen can combine, federate, unify, cooperate, harmonize, act in concert. This done, workingmen could control governmental affairs. They could elect honest men to office. They could make wise constitutions, enact just laws, and repeal vicious laws. By acting together they could overthrow monopolies and trusts. They could squeeze the water out of stocks, and decree that dividends shall be declared only upon cash investments. They could make the cornering of food products of the country a crime, and send the scoundrels guilty of the crime to the penitentiary. Such things are not vagaries. They are not Utopian dreams. They are practical. They are honest, they are things of good report.

Workingmen are in the majority. They have the most votes. In this God favored land, where the ballot is all powerful, peaceful revolutions can be achieved. Wrongs can be crushed — sent to their native hell, and the right can be enthroned by workingmen acting together, pulling together.

What can workingmen do for themselves? They can teach capitalists that they do not want and will not accept their guardianship; that they are capable of self-management, and that they simply want fair pay for an honest day's work, and this done, "honors are easy." Fidelity to obligation is not a one-sided affair. Mutual respect is not the offspring of arrogance. There may have been a time when it was proper for the Southern slave owner to ask himself, "What can I do to better the condition of my slaves?" He owned them, they were his

property; he controlled their destiny. He made them work as he did his cattle, mules, and horses, and appropriated all their earnings. Their children were his property as were the calves and colts of his cows and mares. But there never was a time beyond the dark boundary line of slavery when an employer of American workingmen could ask himself such a question without offering a degrading insult to every self-respecting workingman, and when a workingman hears it or anything like it and his cheek does not burn with righteous indignation he may know that he is on the road to subjugation, and if there exists a more humiliating spectacle within the boundaries of all the zones that belt the earth, what is it?

At every turn the question recurs, "What can workingmen do for themselves?" The question demands an answer, and unbidden a thousand are ready. We have not space for them. Let each workingman answer for himself. For one, we say the workingman can educate himself. He can read, study, and vote. He can improve his time and perfect his skill. He can see as clearly as others coming events, and prepare for their advent.

Edited by Tim Davenport
1000 Flowers Publishing, Corvallis, OR · January 2017 · Non-commercial reproduction permitted.
Second Edition. First Edition was 2006.