
Joining Labor Organizations

by Eugene V. Debs

Published in *Locomotive Firemen's Magazine*, vol. 12, no. 3 (March 1888), pp. 164-165.

The population of the United States and the Dominion of Canada may be set down at 65 million. Of this vast number we will suppose 10 million are wage men, men dependent upon their muscle and skill for support. In this estimate we make no pretensions to accuracy: we state a round number for convenience, though possibly, not far from the fact. The present is prominently distinguished for labor organizations. There are brotherhoods and unions, guilds, associations, etc., indefinitely.

The *Locomotive Firemen's Magazine* is an advocate of labor organizations. It is the official organ of one of the great and prosperous labor organizations of the times. The Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen has demonstrated, beyond cavil, that it has a mission, and that it comprehends fully its sphere and its duties. During all the years of its existence it has been a student of events. It has learned in the school of experience, and with miserly care has garnered and guarded the treasures of wisdom which experience always secures, and the conclusion we have arrived at is that locomotive firemen act wisely by becoming members of the Brotherhood and remaining true to the obligations they voluntarily and solemnly entered into. Were the task required and had we time and space, we could easily show in many hundreds of instances the benefits that have accrued to firemen and their families, by virtue of faithful membership to the Brotherhood. And we assume, indeed, we know that in labor organizations, when wisdom and prudence hold sway in their government, benefits of incalculable value are the certain and legitimate fruits of the association.

But it must be remembered that all the working men of the United States and Canada are not members of labor organizations;

not a majority of them are on the rolls of Brotherhoods or organizations of any name. Why? Simply because they do not so choose, so elect. They prefer to remain outside. In referring to this fact, we have neither the right nor the inclination to be censorious. In fact, that they so choose is nobody's business but their own. The right to choose is our individual right, as sacred as the right to think or speak. It is a right, every man exercises when he joins a labor organization or any other organization. To seek to impose any penalty, whatsoever, upon men who choose to become members of such organizations, or who decide not to join them is an outrage of monstrous proportions, which cannot be, will not be, and ought not to be tolerated. And yet, such penalties are imposed and are creating denunciatory comment, far and wide. The subject is well worthy of the most careful consideration — indeed, it is up for debate, and will not down at any man's bidding, nor ought it to be tabooed. It is one of the important questions of the age. It should be subjected to the severest analysis.

The question is, has a man the right to choose for himself whether he will or will not join a labor organization? With one voice, then, comes the answer, "Yes." No man, no set of men, no government has a right to say "no." The right is inherent and unalienable. It is a primal right, and can be cloven down only by despots, and only despots will impose any penalty whatever for the full, free exercise of that right. If a man desires to join a labor organization, who shall say "nay?" Who has a right to say "nay?" Who shall impose a penalty for this exercise of free will, his unalienable right to choose? What is the penalty, too often imposed? Not prisons and stripes. No, but loss of work, all too often. On the other hand, what has been the penalties imposed, when a man, exercising his unalienable right to choose, to decide for himself declines to become a member of a labor organization? Again, the penalty has been the loss of work. Ostracized and exiled, he has found himself an idler and a tramp. Manifestly, there is no right side of such things. There is nothing to be said in their justification. There is no element of justice or fair dealing in such a condition of things, and hence there is but one course left for those who would deal justly with men, and that is to expose such wrongs and seek to do away with them.

We would keep no honest man from obtaining a day's work, such an act is a crime against life and health. It is a crime that breeds idleness, hunger pangs, starvation — a crime that denies a man shelter and a bed. It may not be a crime known to the statutes, but it, never-

theless, is a crime. It touches the most sacred of individual rights and is a crime against society, peace, and order. When a man wants work, when he offers his strength and skill for the necessities of life, in the name of all that is sacred in life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, let him have it without hindrance and without penalty.

If working men who join unions and brotherhoods can persuade others to join, well and good, but there should be no coercion, enmity, or penalty if men choose to remain independent of such organizations; it is a matter of choice and no penalty should attach. And, on the other hand, if men choose to join labor organizations, seek to improve their condition and advance their interests, they should be encouraged, rather than have obstacles placed in their way or be made to pay any penalty, whatever. In all such matters there is a common sense view to be taken of them, but above all things, let it be the universal sentiment that no penalty shall attach for the exercise of an unquestioned right.

Edited by Tim Davenport

1000 Flowers Publishing, Corvallis, OR · April 2017 · Non-commercial reproduction permitted.
First Edition.