
The Common Laborer

by Eugene V. Debs

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We notice that a writer is of the opinion that one of the serious embarrassments of the times, is owing to the fact that there are too many "common laborers." He says, "in every industry the common laborers are the frequent applicants." The "common laborers" are men without trades, "unskilled" laborers, the idea, being, if all laborers were" skilled mechanics, all capable of taking *first* positions, instead of being "helpers," the labor question would at once assume a more cheering and cheerful aspect. Such views are seen to be vagaries at a glance. The trouble is, that there has grown up in the United States, an aristocracy in the ranks of labor. The "common laborer" has occupied the position of *plebeian*, while his skilled fellow citizen, has assumed the airs of *patrician*. The importance of the "common laborer" can be made to appear, about as conspicuously as that of his skilled co-worker. In the great business of architecture the hod carrier, has occupied the lowest level. No special skill is required to be a hod carrier. He needs be strong and sure-footed, able to climb a ladder with a hod on his shoulder. He need not be educated. It matters to employer very little, how he lives or where he lives. He occupies, ordinarily, the bottom strata of social life.

Well, recently, the hod carriers in several cities concluded to demand an advance in wages. In some instances, no more attention was paid to their demand than if they had been so many blind paupers. But, hod carriers, however humble their calling, however common their labor, had learned that hod carriers are as necessary as bricklayers, and they concluded to quit work, unless wages were advanced. This done, work *stopped*. Not a brick could be laid. Then bosses ascertained that "common labor" is as essential as skilled labor — and common laborers, being American citizens, are coming to the conclusion that they ought to live in a way in some measure becoming their prerogatives.

We view the situation as eminently cheering. It betokens more than an advance in wages. It voices a spirit of independence which society should value above price. It is a move upward. It is indicative of dissatisfaction with squalor, poverty and degradation. It is significant of better homes, happier wives and children, more education for the children, a larger attendance upon church and Sunday schools, and a higher appreciation of the inestimable blessings of free government.

Why this ceaseless depreciation of the common laborer? All cannot be skilled mechanics, or if such a thing were possible, then skilled mechanics would be required to perform what is called "common labor." Common labor must be done by some one. As well might the head complain of the feet, or the heart make degrading reference to the kidney. A man who would grind the common laborer, who would rob him of just compensation for his toil, becomes a detestable monster, a highway robber. What is common labor? It digs the canals, it makes the bed of railroads, it hews down forests, it prepares the clay for brick making; in a word it performs the beginning work of all enterprises requiring labor. It is essential, a supreme necessity, and was never properly recognized nor half paid. In the United States the common laborer holds the ballot, and it will never be surrendered, and if the "common laborer" is beginning to realize his responsibilities, and is anxious to qualify himself for their intelligent performance, the fact, instead of creating alarm, should be hailed as a glowing tribute to the vitalizing influence of our institutions, which level up, elevate and dignify all who come within the boundaries of their operations.

Edited by Tim Davenport

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