
Strikes

by Eugene V. Debs

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The report of Mr. Charles F. Peck, Commissioner of the Bureau of Labor Statistics of the state of New York, submitted to the Legislature April 2, 1888, treats of strikes in that state, their causes and consequences. On page 42 of the report we find the following summing up of the Commissioner's investigations.

The strikes for 1887 include 144 trades and callings against 137 in 1886; the number of shops on strike amounted to 1,604, against 2,061 shops in 1886. This, however, does not give an exact idea of the work performed by the Bureau in this direction, as 2,212 labor troubles were investigated. Many of these, upon inquiry and investigation, were found to come under the head of threatened strikes. Others never got beyond a simple demand for an advance or a mild protest against a reduction of wages. As a consequence, no figures could be obtained regarding them and the facts are only stated to show the under current of dissatisfaction which is always running, but owing to the lack of organization on the part of the workers in the unskilled trades in which most of these troubles occur, it lacks direction. These cases, however, require as much work, and are often more troublesome and expensive than real strikes, as they require the presence of a special agent. The returns for the past year show 694 strikes successful, 190 compromised or partly successful, 696 unsuccessful, and 24 pending. The returns for 2,061 shops reported on strike during the year 1886, show 751 successful, 426 compromised or partly successful, 212 doubtful, 524 unsuccessful, and 147 pending. The number of workers engaged in strikes was 51,731; from this number, however, must be subtracted 1,005 workers, who were engaged in what are termed "threatened strikes," where there is very slight, if any suspension of work. This would make the actual number of strikers 50,726. Eight thousand, one hundred and seventy-six strikers were refused work after strike. The loss of wages incident to strikes was

\$2,013,229.45. The amount expended by labor organizations in relief and conduct of strikes, was \$217,069.78. Estimated gain in wages for one year to 11,472 persons, \$944,632.55. Loss to employers, \$1,102,576.70.

For the year 1886 the result was as follows: Number of workers engaged in strikes, 127,392, of whom 6,391 were refused work after strikes; the loss of wages was \$2,552,554. Amount expended for relief and conduct of strikes by labor organizations was \$329,080. Estimated gain in wages in 771 shops, \$1,420,885 per annum, benefitting 34,832 persons. Loss to employers from all causes, \$1,644,812.

The question that naturally arises just here is, are strikes failures? The figures given by the New York Commissioner show that in the two years, 1880-87 there were 1,445 strikes successful against 1,432 unsuccessful — a difference of thirteen in favor of the successful strikes. The “doubtful” strikes are included in the unsuccessful. The compromised strikes manifestly had an element of success to the strikers, at least, it may be assumed that they did not make matters worse for them. The aggregate loss to the strikers in the way of wages was \$4,565,783; to this may be added the amount contributed by labor organizations, \$546,149, making a total loss of \$4,911,932. Deduct from this the gain in wages, \$2,364,517, and the loss is reduced to \$2,547,415. The average annual gain to the strikers is \$1,182,258. If this gain in wages to the strikers should continue five years, it would amount to the sum of \$5,911,290, which would be a gain over and above the loss in wages and the sum contributed by labor organizations, of \$3,363,875. In view of such official figures it must be admitted that the strikes in the state of New York for the years 1886-87 were not failures; but that grouping all the facts, they were a positive benefit to labor. Manifestly, in dealing with such figures as the New York Commissioner furnishes, we must deal with aggregates. There were 1,432 strikes unsuccessful. The strikers gained nothing, they went back to work, we will suppose, at old prices — submitted to former conditions — except the 14,567 strikers who, when the strikes were past, were ostracized, refused work.

And just here comes in a feature of strikes deserving of special consideration. Who are the men refused work when the strike is successful or unsuccessful? Are they not the men who have the courage to step to the front and demand justice for themselves and their co-workers? Are they not the men, who, more than others, contribute to

the agitation by virtue of which workingmen are emancipated from oppression and degradation, by virtue of which the wrong is cloven down and the right exalted? The answer is always in the affirmative. They plant that others may reap, they build that others may find shelter. They are the pathfinders, the men who blaze out new highways for the army of toilers, and all too often their reward is martyrdom. Labor organizations owe an eternal debt of gratitude to the men who do and dare for their fellow workingmen anything and all things calculated to relieve them of unjust burdens, and who, in the state of New York, for the years 1886-87, made it possible for 1,445 strikes to prove successful over all opposition, and who, when victory perched upon the banners of labor, were thrust aside by employers and made to pay the penalty of idleness for their unflinching loyalty to the cause they had espoused.

Says Mr. Peck, the New York Commissioner:

Had the laborer been quiet and suffered in silence, as he had done through the centuries, with only occasional outbreaks, we should have gone on as our fathers did. But the persistent strikes, the labor organizations, and the repeated interruptions of money-making and quiet capitalistic investment, have compelled attention to the laborers' wants and claims.

Here we have the declaration of a labor statistician, who has specially investigated strikes in the great state of New York, that but for the zealous agitation of questions relating to the rights and wrongs of labor, by workingmen themselves, there would have been no advance whatever; old conditions would have remained unchanged.

Speaking of the results of strikes, Mr. Peck says:

They have helped to raise wages, to shorten hours, to improve the condition, not only of the particular workmen who have risen up in protest, but also the masses. A strike in a particular shop for reasonable cause often ends in general improvement. Bakers have reduced their hours from 18 to 12. The nine-hour day is due to the strike system. Wages in whole trades have gone up from 10 percent to 30 percent because the men in particular shops have asserted themselves and made good their claims to consideration.

In saying this, Mr. Peck shows himself to be something more than a statistician. His conclusions are eminently logical. The strike has

been always in the line of emancipation, and says the New York Commissioner:

Even a “lost” strike is not always a dead loss. It may carry with it the promise and potency of betterment in some other way.
* * * Even if a strike be unsuccessful it brings to mind that what has happened may happen again, and may be repeated with worse effect; with the fear of another strike before his eyes, the taskmaster may be compelled to do tardy justice.

Here we have the declaration officially made that strikes are not wrong, they are not vicious, but on the contrary are to be classed with those movements and forces which better the condition of workingmen. Such is the rule. That there are exceptions is true. But we are not dealing with exceptions. Men may deplore strikes as they deplore war. It is the dream of some people that the time will come when nations will “learn war no more,”¹ and there are those who look forward to the time when strikes will disappear forever. Such anticipations are highly commendable. They mean that some time justice will reign supreme. In the meantime, nations will prepare for war, and workingmen will prepare to resist oppression and secure their rights. Men may cry “peace” and deprecate war, but there will be no peace while workingmen create the wealth of the world and are denied so much of this wealth as will suffice to feed, clothe, and shelter them as becomes sovereign citizens of the great American republic. It will do no good to tell American workingmen how European workingmen live. It will do no good to tell workingmen of the present how their fathers lived in the far away dead past. The workingmen of the present are profoundly interested in the present, and are determined to correct existing wrongs, and if strikes, which are said to be “war” and “mighty arguments,” are required, strikes will come. Arbitration and compromise will be tried, but if these fail, then the strike will come as certain as that water will flow down a mountain side, and it will come regardless of consequences.

Edited with a footnote by Tim Davenport

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¹ From *Isaiah*, chapter 2, verse 4: “And he shall judge among the nations, and shall rebuke many people: and they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruninghooks: nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.”