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**Questions and Answers:**  
**Speech to Striking Miners in Leadville, Colorado**  
**[excerpt]**  
**(January 14, 1897)**

Ladies and Gentlemen:—

Preliminary to the discussion of the subject of the evening I desire to notice some interrogatories that were propounded by the Herald Democrat, and which also appear in the Chronicle.

*Mr. Debs then asked his hearers to bear with him while he read the questions referred to and proceeded to read the editorial in yesterday's Herald Democrat entitled, "Some Questions for Mr. Debs." When he came to the questions proper, Mr. Debs said:*

I propose to answer these questions reasonably, dispassionately, fairly, and candidly as I can. It is in order for me at the very beginning to correct a wrong impression of this article, that I do not presume to come here to Leadville to advise the miners. The miners extended an invitation for me to come here. I was busy with other affairs, and was obliged to decline it. The invitation was repeated and urged, and I finally consented to come and see if I could do anything to end the unfortunate controversy. I had read of 3,000 men involved in this trouble and I said to myself if it is possible for me to do anything to bring about harmony and a better understanding between the contending factions, it is my bounden duty to do it, and it was in that spirit I came to Leadville. I wish to confess in all frankness that I am an agitator. However, I did not come to Leadville to agitate, but to pacify.

*The speaker then begged his hearers to remember that every man who ever moved this world was an agitator, and not only that, but he was a striker.*

George Washington saved his money and bought a gun.<sup>1</sup> Washington had a conviction, and the sublime courage to defend it. He gave us our

independence; and but for that we would be British subjects today instead of American sovereigns. Put that into the *Herald Democrat*, please. (*Cheering and laughing.*)

*The orator then proceeded to read and answer the questions mentioned above, reading the questions as numbered in the morning paper, and answering each one after reading it. \* \* \**

*[Do you believe a strike should be declared by an executive committee of a labor union without full and free discussion by the members?]*

I have never favored a strike, under the extremest circumstances, without full and free discussion, or without the expressed consent of at least a majority of the men involved. The strike in Leadville was so ordered. Two committees called upon the employers, presented certain statements embodying requests in behalf of the miners, which requests were declined. The committees reported, and at a meeting of the miners a vote was taken and a strike ordered by a unanimous vote. If this is not a fact the information I have is at fault. If it is not a fact, I beg of you miners to answer to the contrary. (*Cries of "It is a fact!" Cheering.*)

There are many miners here tonight, and I want to ask them if the strike was ordered against their will. (*Cries of "No!"*) I want to ask if they had a voice in determining the strike. (*Cries of "Yes!"*) Is the audience satisfied with my answer to this first question? (*Loud cries of "Yes!" from all parts of the house.*)

*[Do you believe force, intimidation, or threats of any kind should be used to compel men to join a labor union?]*

I do not. A man has as good a right to remain out of a labor union as he has to join one. I believe it is the duty of a man to join a union that's kept up his wages; enabled him to provide for his family as becomes a good American citizen. If there is another who does not take that view he is entitled to act upon his opinion. Now, the intimation is that there has been some intimidation, force used to compel men to join the Miners' union. I am not prepared to say that it is not true in some individual instances — I know of no such instances. But I am prepared to say that it is not true of the Miners' union as an organization. If there has been such intimidation on the part of the union, I call upon this paper to produce the

witnesses. I am not unmindful of the fact that in every organization, whether of workingmen or employers, there are some overzealous men who bring odium upon their organization. But it is not fair to condemn the organization on that account. By the same process of reasoning you would be obliged to condemn the Christian church and all human organizations.

*[Do you believe a distinction should be made in the wages paid skilled and unskilled labor in a mine? Is there a difference in the value of the service of a man who pushes a car and the skilled miner who understands the use of the drill, and who properly belongs to the category of skilled workmen?]*

I am not a miner and I confess that under existing conditions I have no ambition to be one. (*Laughter and applause.*) Under ordinary circumstances I would not be in favor of paying a common laborer as much as I would a skilled workman. I do not think, however, that this applies to miners. What is a difference of 50 cents between men who work in a mine? I think that the danger itself ought to level that distinction. I undertake to say that if the writer of this article was obliged to work in a mine, he would not think that \$3 a day for tramping would be too much wages.

*[Can a strike in a silver-lead mining district which was ill-advised and impolitic in its inception, by reason of the fact that 70 percent of the workmen in the mines were receiving the scale asked for and 10 percent more would have received the scale in 30 days, while the wages of the rest largely depended on a rise in the price of silver, can such a strike become justifiable after dragging along for seven months?]*

I am not here to inquire as to whether this strike is justifiable as I am here to try to settle it. If, however, the strike was justifiable seven months ago, it is justifiable now and will be justifiable seven years from now. (*Great applause.*)

*[Seeing as you did yesterday (Jan. 13, 1897) at least 1,200 miners, many well dressed, all comfortably clothed, strong, sturdy, and well nurtured after seven months of idleness, many having been compelled to live on a union allowance of from \$6 to \$10 per week, how does their*

*condition compare with the miners of Alabama, whom you say receive 90 cents a day?]*

Very favorably, I admit; but that is saying very little. An American citizen may compare very favorably with a Hottentot, and yet not amount to very much. A Colorado miner may be better off than an Alabama miner and yet not be in a very prosperous condition. And it is to this very Alabama condition that these mine owners are trying to reduce the men of Leadville. It seems to me for the *Herald Democrat* this is a very unfortunate question. I hope the esteemed editor is not ambitious to have Alabama conditions transferred to Colorado. I will say a few words in regard to the conditions of the Alabama miners, and how they were brought about.

*The speaker then contrasted the former circumstances of the Alabama miners with those of the present time, and said they were not always paupers, but were brought to their present destitute condition by the exactions and oppressions of mine owners of that region, who said, "If we can only reduce their pay and break up their unions we will finally get them down to the condition of the Mexican peon." And, he added, if they are removed much above that it is not visible to the naked eye. He continued, he had marked the means by which the miners have been reduced in both Alabama and Pennsylvania. He told how the Pennsylvania miners had been ground down until they are getting 65 cents a day, and that at such low wages they could not educate their children or live as human beings. The miners of Leadville wish to prevent such conditions overtaking them here.*

*[In 1893 when silver dropped from 85 cents to 73-1/2 cents [per ounce], the mines opened up on a \$2.50 [daily wage] scale, with the written understanding that when silver should reach 83-1/2 cents the \$3 scale would be restored. Silver has fallen to 65 cents, yet 70 percent of the miners had their wages voluntarily [raised] to \$3, and since the strike the managers agreed to raise the wages of the balance of the men to \$3 when silver should have reached 75 cents. Is a strike of the 30 percent wise or politic under the circumstances?]*

I leave that question to the miners themselves, who, according to the *Herald Democrat*, are the best qualified to decide these questions for themselves. If the 30 percent felt they were justified in going on a strike

— and by their own admission they felt so justified — then I do not see what my particular opinion has to do with the matter. I am of those who believe that the rights of 30 percent are just as sacred as those of the 70 percent. If one of the 70 percent men, prompted by feelings of fraternal sympathy, desires to help the 30 percent man, that is in the highest degree commendable. I like to see something in the nature of sympathy exert itself, and those who are fortunate extend a helping hand to their less fortunate brothers.

*In answer to several questions Mr. Debs said:*

I am not in favor, as I have said many, many times, I am not in favor of violence in connection with these matters. I am not in favor of vilifying, abusing, or maltreating in any manner a man who sees fit to go to work. Nor has the Miners' union of Leadville been guilty of any such conduct, and if it has been guilty, then it is in order for the man who makes the accusation to bring the proof.

*Mr. Debs went on to say that when a strike is in progress some few overzealous individuals sometimes too the law into their own hands and committed acts which were neither wise nor strictly moral. But he reiterated the fact that the union as a whole should not be held responsible for these individual acts.*

*[Should a union man who is out of work by reason of a strike, who has a family to support, obtain employment if he can, in the face of the opposition of the union? If not, why? Does he owe a duty to his family first or the union?]*

In the first place a union man does not take employment in a strike. His duty to his union embraces his duty to his family, (*applause*) and when he is loyal to his union, he is in the largest sense loyal to his family; because the union wages enable him to provide for them. I presume there is not a reputable miner in Colorado who would neglect his duty to his family.

*Mr. Debs went on to say that it was because of his family that he joins the union, and loyalty to the union embraces both. \* \* \**

*On the question of arbitration he showed that the question of the hour was not so much who had or had not refused to arbitrate, but who is now ready to arbitrate. The miners are, and the operators are not.*

*In the matter of the union buying rifles, Mr. Debs believed that the men had a right to defend themselves and said the constitution gave them this right. Capital first began the shooting business. Carnegie put his electric wires around his steel plant, and hot water appliances, to kill workingmen. For years the Pinkerton men were hired to shoot down workingmen for capitalists. the Leadville miners knew all this, and they certainly had a right to be in a position to defend themselves.*

*It was right, the speaker thought, for a union to put up candidates and go into politics. Capital had been doing it for a long time. He denied that the officers of the union are trying to prolong the strike and declared they were doing all honorable men could for a fair settlement. The assertion that members of the union surrendered their manhood by having a committee act for them, the speaker thought as absurd as to say a citizen does so when he delegates his authority to a Congressman. Union men are too numerous to act individually and must have others represent them, as all organized bodies do.*

*Mr. Debs said that as a general proposition he was opposed to the boycott:*

*But workingmen, lie others, naturally patronize their friends, and I am greatly mistaken if the Herald Democrat doesn't do business in the same way. (Great applause.)*

*Mr. Debs, answering the las question, gave the corporation press a hot roasting. He quoted Wendell Phillips as saying that the metropolitan press was a "pack of bloodhounds," and charged that its lying had helped to hang men whom the people had worshiped. Public opinion, when made by the capitalistic press, was apt to be wrong. He thought the American people would always do the right thing if they knew the facts, but it was impossible for them to get the truth from the metropolitan pres. This assertion was backed up with many historical incidents abundantly proving the point made.*

*Mr. Debs closed his speech at 10:30, having spoken two hours, with his audience calling, "go on." Most of his time was devoted to his answering of the questions he had been challenged to take up and the remainder in thoughts suggested by them. A large number of people*

*thronged the stage, congratulating the orator and urging him to speak again in Leadville.*

Published in *The Leadville Miner*, vol. 1 (Jan. 15, 1897), pp. 1, 4, to which has been integrated questions from the Evening Chronicle, Jan. 14, 1897, pg. 2. The speech was delivered at the Leadville Opera House.

<sup>1</sup> Allusion is to the controversial "Save your money and buy a guy" telegram sent out from ARU headquarters by secretarial worker L.P. Benedict over Debs's signature — a document which opponents of the 1894 Pullman strike attempted to use to prove the union was behind widespread rioting that marred the strike during the first week of July.