
Lesson of the Great Leadville Strike (May 31, 1897)

Terre Haute, Ind., May 31, 1897.

It was a year ago this month that the Leadville strike was declared. A world of history has been made since that time. The experience of the Leadville miners in encountering defeat after a long and weary struggle has been shared by hundreds of thousands of other workingmen, representing nearly all the trades known to modern industry. A few years ago, before the days of great combines, labor organizations were frequently able to not only prevent reductions but to secure increases in wages. They had a powerful restraining effect upon those who sought to reduce labor, for an organized strike was at best disastrous and a thing to be avoided. It is different now. the strike is now courted on the least provocation. It gives the corporation little or no inconvenience, for all it has to do is lay back until the government — municipal, state, or federal, as the case may be — suppresses the strike and starves or jails the strikers. *Capital has profited by the lessons taught by strikes, just as we want the miners at Leadville and elsewhere to do.*

The Leadville strike cost the miners in wages lost and in cash contributions about \$1.5 million. Think of this vast sum taken from the earnings of a comparatively small body of workingmen for the purchase of idleness and all the woes that follow in its train. I write in no spirit of lamentation or regret. In writing of labor's adversities, croaking is never in order. I simply call attention to certain facts as a basis to certain conclusions. The Leadville strike, if we are stupid and unreasoning, will be a total loss, but if we are wise, it will be worth every dollar it cost many times over.

The Leadville miners were as thoroughly organized as it was possible for them to be. They had the solid support of the Western Federation of Miners, the most aggressive and powerful labor organization in the West. They were able to hold their men together, practically without a break, for more than eight months., and yet they were defeated. Could they have won by holding out longer? No. Why? For several reasons.

First, the mine owners and managers' association was composed in the main of very rich men and they could afford to wait indefinitely. They had vast holdings elsewhere and whether the mines at Leadville were in operation for a year or two or not did not prevent them from eating three square meals a day. Theirs was simply to *wait*, and as long as they were enduring no privations, they could afford to do that. The temporary loss thus entailed, whatever that might amount to, is always made good by reductions of wages after the strikers are starved back into submission.

Second, at the back (or in front) of the mine owners stood the state militia, the judicial guard, and all the resources of the state, and if this did not suffice, the President of the United States, the regular army, the navy, and all the organized forces of the national government. See? Organized capital is not only supported by the government, right or wrong, *it is* the government. They are synonymous terms.

Third, the country is swarming with idle men, miners as well as others, many of whom are verging on starvation. These are the product of the capitalistic system of production and they constitute a factor in labor strikes which decrees inevitably the defeat of labor.

No labored argument is required to demonstrate that to strike under such conditions is wasteful if not criminal folly. The contest is fearfully uneven. Labor is certain to be beaten and to have to foot the bill besides. What then? Let us reason together.

Suppose the miners now had the million and a half dollars the strike cost them, and suppose further that they concluded to go into the mining business themselves. Why not? Who dare say the proposition is not practicable? But it is not required to have so large a sum to begin with. A few thousand dollars would answer. The union could select three good members to supervise affairs and by judicious management, cooperative mining could soon be established and instead of miners working out their lives to enrich a few individuals they would be doing something for themselves. This would not be all there is in cooperative industry, for this, to have the proper results, must be general, but it would end wage-slavery among the miners and at the same time be a long stride in the right direction.

The wage system is at the foundation of labor's wrongs and these will not be righted until the system is abolished. As long as thousands of workmen depend for employment upon the assent of an individual, they are in fetters, and the Declaration of Independence is a falsehood and a mockery. There is no equality of men in such a situation. One is master in all

the term implies and the other are slaves. One commands and the others obey and in these latter days even the opportunity to yield abject obedience has become a precious privilege.

This cruel, unnatural system cannot always prevail. Indeed, there are ten thousand evidences that it is even now in the grasp of dissolution. All that is required to send it tottering to its fall, never to rise again, is a little common sense among the common people.

That the Leadville miners and the western miners in general will profit by the lessons taught by the Leadville strike, I do not doubt. Already the voices of the leaders are ringing out clearly in advocacy of more advanced ideas and more progressive policies, and when 12 months more have elapsed, the rank and file, remembering that a few mine owners had sufficient power to defy the Governor, the legislature, and the entire commonwealth of Colorado, will take an inventory of their own resources of intelligence, courage, and independence and resolve to be free men, and thus the Leadville strike will have contributed its full share toward the emancipation of labor.

Published as "Lesson of the Great Strike" in *The Western Miner*, vol. 1, no. 34 (June 5, 1897), pg. 1. This is the concluding installment of a series of seven weekly articles written by Debs on the Leadville, Colorado mining strike for the official organ of the Cloud City Miners' Union No. 33, WF of M.