
Employees the Wards of Employers

by Eugene V. Debs

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Before the Sumpter gun sounded the death knell of chattel slavery in the United States there were a great many owners of slaves who were anxious to provide well for the comfort of their human chattels. In such cases, the slaves were provided with comfortable shelter, wholesome food in abundance, and with clothing suitable to their degraded condition. In numerous instances the best medical talent was employed when the slaves were sick, and in matters of religion the poor creatures could go as they pleased, and it often pleased them to be exceedingly devout. The masters were in the habit of saying, "I must do what I can for these people, whom Divine Providence has committed to my care. It is a great responsibility, but I must bear it and be resigned."

Workingmen, who are inclined to listen to the sayings of a certain class of employers, and to certain writers of the day, will hear remarks not specially different to those which in slavery times were made by owners who felt the weight of their obligations to be merciful to their slaves. As we write, we have before us a clipping from a newspaper published in Indiana. The writer is hopeful that workingmen will be successful in the formation of societies for their protection from "improper treatment and inadequate compensation which they claim to be subjected to by capitalists." The writer concludes that the employer "should be taught that there is something due those who are employed besides the prompt payment of wages, and the latter should learn that his whole duty is not performed when the shriek of the whistle or the tolling of a bell informs him that he may at that instant drop his tools or promptly resume them by the same signal." As a matter of fact, aside from gentlemanly deportment, the employer owes his employee his wages, and when the employee has performed

his day's work, obligation ceases then and there. The obligation of neighborly kindness exists independent of employment and need not be discussed. The employee owns himself, is a man, a citizen, independent. He is not the ward of the employer. The employer is not his guardian, and that sort of stuff is out of place when discussing the relations of employer and employee. But the writer proceeds to say that "in the old country many a large employer provides his laborers with good comfortable homes at moderate rentals, with his food and clothing at a small advance above cost, with his medicines, books, papers and almost everything he needs at prices far below those of cooperative stores." In this, we have a fair sample of the old slave times literature. Employers, as the guardians of their laborers, provide them with homes, etc. In America laboring men are citizens and when properly recognized will provide themselves with homes, food and clothing, without the oversight of employers, and it should be understood, and will be eventually, that laboring men provide their employers with homes, clothing, food, and all their luxuries. But again, the writer says, "I am informed that an iron company in the state of Delaware largely carry out this mode of procedure. A large number of snug, comfortable dwellings for their operatives were erected by them at the incipiency of their works, to which additions are made as circumstances require. These houses are rendered attractive by yards and gardens attached, which are enclosed by neat picket fences. They are sufficiently commodious and present an inviting appearance." The time is at hand when workingmen, whatever has been true in the past, and whatever is true in the present, will see to it themselves, that they and their families are properly sheltered, fed and clothed, not because their employers provide for their necessities, but because it is incumbent upon them to attend to such things, quite independent of their employers.

The patronizing talk of a certain class of employers and writers upon labor topics, is degrading to workingmen. It robs them of their independence and sinks them to the humiliating level of dependence. It is virtually saying they require an overseer, props and supports, that they are incapable of taking care of themselves, and need a warden, a keeper, protector and defender; and it must be said, however mortifying may be the confession, that thousands of workingmen have consented to the degrading bondage.

That there should exist mutual respect between employee and employer, goes without saying, but there can be no such sentiment

while the employer assumes to be the guardian of the employee, or while the employee consents to any personal oversight by his employer. Such a condition, on the one hand, is certain to beget arrogance, and on the other hand, servility as debasing as it is vile. What is wanted now is a leveling up policy, and everywhere the indications are that the good work is progressing. Working-men are not only looking up, but they are standing up with their hats on. They do not cower in the presence of millionaires. They know

A prince can mak a belted knight,
A marquis, duke and a' that.
But an honest man's abon his might,
Guid faith, he maunna fa' that.¹

Workingmen are growing in thought, education, intellectual power, and influence. They are learning their rights, comprehending their duties, and are preparing to assert their claims to recognition in public affairs. Employers are to be relieved of their self-imposed guardianship, and workingmen, emancipated from even the appearance of bondage, will receive the long-delayed recognition which the majesty of their triumph will secure.

Edited by Tim Davenport

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¹ From "A Man's a Man for A' That" (1795) by **Robert Burns** (1759-1796).
Checked to the original.