

---

# The Fourth of July

by Eugene V. Debs

Published in *Locomotive Firemen's Magazine*, vol. 18, no. 9 (Sept. 1894), pp. 872-874.

Mr. Samuel J. Niccolls, in the [St. Louis] *Globe-Democrat* of July 4th, has a paper captioned, "Thoughts for the Fourth," and starts out as follows:

The Fourth of July, by unquestioned right, stands first among our national holidays. The great event which it commemorates must ever make it dear to all true Americans and lovers of liberty. Usually it has been celebrated with not a little boasting over our manifest destiny and our favored condition as a free people. But whatever we may think of our future as a nation, it would be idle to attempt to disguise the fact that the return of Independence Day this year finds us in a condition that excites distress and alarm among all serious-minded men. Our industries are prostrated, trade is paralyzed, capital is unemployed, labor is full of unrest and discontent, and hope for better times through long delays is sick and weak. There is a serious apprehension felt on all sides with reference to greater evils to come; nor can there be any relief until this apprehension is removed. Some urgent questions must be settled, and settled promptly and finally, before there can be a return to prosperity. It is indeed a most serious time with a people when they begin to distrust themselves and their institutions. Two things are specially manifest to all, and they are signs of evil import. One is the prevailing lawlessness of the times. In this respect our present condition furnishes a sad contrast with earlier periods in our national life. One of the distinguishing characteristics of the American people in the past has been their respect for law. Intelligent visitors from the Old World, where force plays such an important part in the preservation of public order, have observed this characteristic, and writers like De Tocqueville and Prof. Bryce have mentioned it to our praise.

The 4th day of July, as a national holiday, commemorates an event which ought to be very dear to American workingmen opposed

to oppression, robbery, and degradation, because it was a day on which the people — at least a large majority of them — decided to strike against the laws, the authority, the government of England.

Prior to July 4th, 1776, the colonies were full of agitators. They defied courts and their injunctions. They flung defiance into the very teeth of the British king, his generals, and his soldiers. There was riot and bloodshed, battles, defeats, and victories. Washington and his compatriots were denounced as anarchists, nihilists, rebels, and traitors. Upon the heads of Hancock, Adams, Washington, and others a price was set, and if they had been caught they would have been unceremoniously shot to death or hanged. The Declaration of Independence recited the cause of the great strike for liberty. The authors of the strike *knew* there would be great *inconvenience* to the people of the colonies, that trade and commerce would be crippled; that untold sacrifices and sufferings would result, but the *leaders* did not heed such ravings. There was a principle involved, and they *struck for a principle*, and, moreover, these patriotic strikers started out early to enlist sympathy for their righteous cause. They wanted money, they wanted troops, they wanted ships of war, and France sympathized with the heroic, patriotic strikers, gave money, men, fleets, munitions of war, and by virtue of such sympathy and aid Washington eventually won the strike. At that time there were thousands of Tories in the colonies, despicable creatures who denounced the strike for liberty and independence, they denounced France for her sympathy and aid, and the colonists, who fought and suffered and bled and died were denounced as anarchists, traitors, enemies of their country and their countrymen. It was the greatest strike on record, and as a result of the strike conditions were greatly improved, a new nation was born, and England learned and the world learned that the strikers were not anarchists; that they were simply opposed to bad laws but were in favor of good laws, of good government, of being sovereign citizens instead of subjects and slaves, that they were opposed to degradation, and that their shibboleth was, "Give me liberty or give me death."

The strike of which we write began 118 years ago and continued about eight years, or until 1784, and from that day to the present, the American people have kept alive and vital the spirit of independence. They love liberty and hate tyrants. It does not matter to them who the tyrants are or what methods are employed to crush them, they will not yield their rights, their liberties, their independence and go

down to degradation without a struggle. It is as Grant said, "The American way."

We have no eulogies for old King George, but it is doubtless true, and easily demonstrated, that the American people now are confronted with enemies indefinitely more infamous than was King George and his advisers. Mr. Niccolls says:

But the outlook today reveals something widely different. Within the last ten years there have come among us those who are professedly anarchists. They are the avowed foes of all government, and are earnestly laboring to bring society into that disorganized and debased condition in which there shall be no law save that which seems best to each man. The murderous spirit which recently, through the hand of an assassin, struck down the chief magistrate of France,<sup>1</sup> animates the bosoms of thousands in our own land. Nor is this spirit of lawlessness confined to those who openly declare that they seek the destruction of society. It is to be seen among those who would be indignant if classed with anarchists, but who, nevertheless, upon one pretext or another, combine to defeat law, in order to carry out their own selfish purposes. They organize to carry out their own ends, irrespective of the legal and social rights of others. It is simply anarchy in organized form, paradoxical as the statement may seem. Sometimes we see it among capitalists, who cloak their oppression and robbery under the disguise of law. Again, it is in the world of labor, where the laws that secure the rights of all are defied in the interests of an organized society.

We do not doubt that there are anarchists in the United States, and that some of them have been imported, the most of them by a class of capitalistic employers who, disregarding justice and the welfare of the state, raked the ranks of the most degraded localities of Europe for men who would work for less wages than were demanded by Americans, preferring to employ anarchists rather than patriotic workingmen, and yet, all of these imported Huns, Dagoes, Slavs, and Poles are not anarchists, and if they have been transformed into enemies of law and order, the employees who sought to degrade them more than when they landed upon our shores, are responsible. But the writer is unfortunate when he refers to the assassination of Carnot as indicating the spirit of imported workingmen. Booth, who assassi-

---

<sup>1</sup> Reference to the assassination of French President **Marie François Sadi Carnot** by an anarchist on June 25, 1894.

nated Lincoln;<sup>2</sup> Guiteau, who assassinated Garfield;<sup>3</sup> Prendergast, who assassinated Mayor Harrison,<sup>4</sup> were not importations, but native assassins — anarchists, if the term better expresses the infamy of their acts.

Anarchists, wherever found are the outgrowth of conditions; necessarily so. They are the effect of a cause, as, for instance, President Cleveland said the widespread demoralization in finances and industries which began in 1893 was chiefly owing to congressional legislation. In this we have the cause. Multiplied thousands of idle, hungry, ragged, desperate men is the effect, not the only effect, because such conditions produce or are likely to produce, anarchists. It does not matter in what country or under what form of government the conditions exist, the effect, while human nature remains as it is, will be practically the same. As, for instance, if the republic of the United States of America was Russianized, the mere fact of calling it a republic will not prevent nihilism. Arbitrary, despotic tyranny will produce anarchists. Bad laws enacted, under cover of which, courts, governors, and presidents issue despotic decrees which crush the masses and protect plutocrats, trusts, and corporations, will now, as certainly as in 1774-84 produce rebellion. There is always a limit beyond which, if arbitrary power is exerted, the consequences will necessitate martial law, which being no law at all, will be anarchism. True, the military power may restore order, but liberty will have taken to itself wings and will have flown away.

The grand old 4th of July, as a national holiday is a thing of the past. That men are “created equal” is denounced as a vagary, the hallucination of a diseased brain, and the “inalienable rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” have been relegated to the limbo of shams. Court injunctions spread out over the land like shrouds. The club of the deputy marshals and the rattling discharge of guns proclaim that the sacred institutions of the country are in peril; only plu-

---

<sup>2</sup> **John Wilkes Booth** (1838-1865), a supporter of the Confederate States of America, was the assassin of President **Abraham Lincoln** (1809-1865) in April 1865.

<sup>3</sup> **Charles Julius Guiteau** (1841-1882), a disgruntled aspirant for political patronage, was the assassin of President **James A. Garfield** (1831-1881) in September 1881.

<sup>4</sup> **Patrick Eugene Joseph Prendergast** (1868-1894), a disgruntled aspirant for political patronage, was the assassin of Chicago mayor **Carter Henry Harrison, Sr.** (1825-1893).

tocrats are happy as they behold the power of the government exerted to protect them in their piracies and spoliations.

Mr. Niccolls puts in a plea for labor; indeed it has become fashionable for writers and speakers to express a great deal of sympathy for labor. They deplore the degradation of the masses — shed tears at the wails of the idle, the starving, the ragged, homeless victims of oppression are wafted on every wind that blows over the country — in fact, endorse strikes and declare them good things to have, but when the strike inconveniences the public and the plutocratic pirates who are responsible for the strike, then, in that supreme hour, *presto!* the strikers become anarchists and to shoot them down as if they were coyotes is applauded to the echo.

No fair-minded man can help sympathizing with the wage-earners, who constitute the large bulk of society, in their efforts to secure themselves from the oppression of capital, and to obtain a fair share in the goods of this world. Undoubtedly many disabilities rest upon this class, and there are limitations which make their lot, at times, no enviable one. Those who are more fortunate in the possession of material wealth would be most selfish indeed, and untrue to what is best in our common humanity, if they failed to show to the great mass of the wage-earners their sympathy; or to aid them in their struggles to ameliorate their condition. But while this is true, it does not follow that we should permit our sympathies to blind us to the dangers and wrongs of many well meant, but misguided, movements in the world of labor. Within the last few months a civil war has been existing in some seven or eight states of our Union, and is now being carried on. There is a widespread and formidable insurrection against law now existing and actively propagated. This state of affairs has been plausibly disguised under the name of "strikes" A strike in one aspect of it is a perfectly proper and lawful affair. No one can question the right of one man or ten thousand to quit work, provided they have filled their contracts to their employers; and, furthermore, I do not hesitate to say, that there is something sublime and worthy of admiration, when thousands of men quit and choose to suffer hunger and privation in order that wrongs done to some of their number may be righted, or that those who have wronged them may be compelled to do them justice. If strikes were confined to this limit, no one could find fault, and no one need dread them, save selfish oppressors of the poor. But, unfortunately, strikes as they now exist, are very different things from this ideal one. They are movements that destroy the peace and subvert the social order of communities.

Municipal, county, and even state authorities are helpless in the presence of the violence they inspire. They have no hesitancy in arraying themselves against national authority, and only submit in the presence of superior force.

In 1776 when the 4th of July became a national holiday the supreme idea was liberty, liberty as the patriotic colonists, not the Tories and traitors, understood the term. In 1894 the battle cry, not of Tories and traitors, but of patriotic wage-earners, is wages — for without honest wages comes poverty, degradation, and slavery; hence the strike, “something” the writer extols as sublime and worthy of admiration, until someone is inconvenienced, then troops are called out, not to protect but to overwhelm the men fighting for breath and bread, for wives, children, and homes. Surely, the 4th of July, 1894, was not a day for rejoicing. Millions of men’s hearts, like muffled drums, were beating funeral marches to the graves plutocrats were digging to bury the hopes, aspirations, and liberties of workingmen — and the plutocrats won the victory. What then? A nation of helots, of peons, pariahs, proletariasts — debased below the level of Russian serfs. What is the remedy? Some say the ballot — but under the sway of the ballot for more than a hundred years, we have achieved present conditions. But, says one, “vote for honest men.” That is what we have been doing for a hundred years — that is to say — voting for men said to be honest, and who were probably honest up to the time that the High Priests of Bullion tempted them with “thirty pieces of silver” or a railroad pass, and accepting the bribe they would, in obedience to their masters, have betrayed Jesus Christ, as they have betrayed those who had confidence in them.

But it is doubtless wise to try the ballot method of preserving something of the old glory of the 4th of July. There is little hope that anything very creditable can be accomplished, because the more men are debased, the more ready are they to sell their votes to the monsters who oppress them. Still, if the tyrannies of the present have sufficiently aroused the populace it is possible that honest men may be elected and the 4th of July rescued from eternal odium.

*Edited with footnotes by Tim Davenport*

1000 Flowers Publishing, Corvallis, OR · June 2017 · Non-commercial reproduction permitted.  
First Edition