

# TOPICS OF THE TIME

## LABOR-UNIONS NOT OMNIPOTENT

THE Lawrence strike, the great English coal strike, together with other demonstrations of the extent of the industrial unrest through which we are passing, seem to have gone to the heads of some people. If we are to take soberly what these persons say, an unsettled time unsettles judgment. For they have been so impressed by the power of organized labor that they are rash enough to say that all things are possible to it in our modern world. A leader in the use of wild and whirling words on this subject was, unexpectedly, a prominent New York clergyman. In a letter to a newspaper he declared, over his own signature, that the events of the day had shown laboring-men that, if they stood together, they could have everything their own way. As this religious teacher phrased it, organized labor can now get "whatever it wants."

If it were a question of stark power, irrespective of methods and regardless of consequences, there might be some truth in this. If the laboring-men of the world chose to take the position that they would work no more, there would of course be no way of compelling them to return to their tasks. They could pull down the industrial world in ruins, though in the wreck they themselves would be involved. Like Samson toppling over the pillars of the building, they would have to say, "Let me die with the Philistines." It would be one common disaster in which the labor-unions would be destroyed with the rest of the world. But it is certain that neither they nor any other body of men possessing great power will ever desire to use it with the effect of committing suicide. Their strength they must always think of as a means of gaining feasible ends; so that, after all these admiring or shuddering exclamations at the power of organized labor, we always come back to the question what it is feasible for trades-unions to attain.

Now, the moment we begin to discuss

the question so stated, we perceive at once that there are many sure and definite limits to the power of labor organizations. Their omnipotence is only theoretical, and in seeming. In actual fact they are thrown, like the rest of us, into a world of give-and-take. In it no man or association can think of getting whatever may be wanted. The possible always overrides the extreme of the desired. And there are things which labor-unions, no matter how powerful they may be on paper, cannot obtain, however vehemently they may desire them.

For example, in a democracy they cannot break down the principle of the good of the greatest number. Take the claims of organized labor at their most inflated figure, and they are not able to show that the unions represent more than a small minority of the population. They represent only a minority even of working-men. Estimates and statistics vary from year to year, with the condition of industry and the state of the labor market, but the most sanguine unionists have never pretended that more than from twenty to twenty-five per cent. of the actual labor force of this country is "organized." The vast number of manual laborers and workers on the soil, together with the multitude of artisans in small shops in towns and villages, remain outside. So that an excessive demand by organized labor is really a demand that the majority of working-men be made to shoulder the burdens for the minority. And if we also reckon in the millions who would have to help carry the loads and pay the bills imposed by the labor-unions, we see that the latter are, in effect, seeking to overturn the right of the majority to rule. But it is simply inconceivable that a great and free democracy would ever tolerate an exclusive privilege of that kind, amounting as it would to an oppressive tyranny. Say what hasty tongues may about the invincible might of labor-unions, here is a limit beyond which they may not pass.

Nor is there any conceivable way in

which working-men, organized or not, can get out of a business more than they put into it—more, that is, than the portion of goods fairly falling to labor. No one maintains in its strict form the older “wages-fund” doctrine of the political economists, that before the process of manufacture begins there is a definite sum set aside out of which alone working-men must be paid. That is perceived to-day to be an incomplete analysis of the actual process. But this admission does not alter the essential reasons why labor can get no more than its fair share. If it insists upon too high wages for its work, the consuming public will rebel, and leave no work at all and no wages for that particular industry. And there are inexorable limits in the returns which capital must have if it is to be invested at all and create a demand for labor. Let it freely be conceded that organized labor can cut its own throat if it is foolish enough or desperate enough to do so; but it has no power, and never can have, to take out of the great manufactures and producing industries of the land more dollars in wages than it puts into them in work.

In fine, the omnipotent labor-union of the clergyman’s conception is a myth. Far from being able to secure whatever it wants, it must be content, like other mortals, to put up with what it can get. It may confidently count upon having full justice done it. Its usefulness in enabling large bodies of workers to unite and to press for reasonable advantages and redress of grievances nobody any longer questions. But in the very constitution of society and in the spirit of democracy, there are fixed metes and bounds beyond which it cannot go. Whatever its rights, they cannot be made superior to the rights of freemen. Whatever its power, it must submit to the imperious limits determined by social and economic conditions. It may have a giant’s strength, but if it uses that strength tyrannously or wickedly, it will find itself broken by forces far mightier than any it can command.

#### NEWSPAPER CRUELTY

OF all the motives which enter into the business of making and circulating a “great [sensational] newspaper,” the motive involving cruelty to private

persons and families is at once the most noticeable, and the most difficult to harmonize with the ordinary rules of conduct, not to speak of justice. Some purpose of serving the public interest, more or less far-fetched, is always, and easily, woven into the fabric of the day-by-day or week-by-week exposure of private misfortune; but the real object of the exploitation is to stimulate the sale of the newspaper and thereby maintain “circulation.”

Whether the public interest is, in fact, served or thwarted, it is obvious that such cruelty results in good “business” for the newspaper. The rivalry of the press in business is such that when the most reckless newspaper succeeds in finding a motive for putting a family of any sort of prominence into the pillory of public curiosity, its competitors (and even those of less willingness to crucify private persons for newspaper gain) are drawn by the noise and conspicuousness of the outrage into the general mêlée of insinuation and scandal. Failure to participate would mark them as lacking in the sort of ruthless vigor which is the only guaranty of a rising circulation.

While thousands of citizens appreciate the ignominy of the prevailing apathy toward such invasions of private rights for commercial profit, and are aware that anybody’s turn may come next,—since the daily meal of social sensation must be served,—the mass of readers readily accept the practice as the chartered right of a “free press.”

In the past year there have been extreme instances of such newspaper cruelty, with almost no comment on them either in public or in private. Like the misfortunes which come to others as “visitations of Providence,” everybody who is not personally hit finds it easy to bear them.

A case of singular cruelty was the treatment of a family whose daughter suddenly passed out of the ken of friends and protectors. No record of the dark ages could surpass it for refinement of mental torture and spiritual suffering, sometimes inflicted with a pretense of helping the family out of its suspense.

Even a greater outrage on private feelings was the hue-and-cry started by a newspaper for the release of a confessed criminal whose chief merit as an asset of sensation was his claim of a scandalous