

THE CONDITION OF THE AMERICAN WORKING-CLASS: HOW CAN IT BE BENEFITED?

THAT the manual laborer is to the fore in the social consciousness, may not be doubted. With the increased freedom and enlarged opportunities of an advancing civilization, his wants have multiplied, his aspirations have developed, and his demands are being projected with acuter insistence into hitherto unknown fields.

As a class, the manual laborer of to-day is much more discontented with his environment than were his progenitors. This does not imply that his condition, either actual or relative, has deteriorated. It is rather a sign of progress from the status of the mere burden-bearer to that of the thinking and responsible social unit. The leaven of education has worked through the mass,—all too imperfectly it may be,—and the ferment is still going on. As the reed, breathed upon by the great god Pan, could become no more “a simple reed by the river,” so it is no longer possible for the laborers of the world, into whose souls has come the conception of larger liberties and wider lives, to accept with dull and passive content the lot of their fathers.

A righteous discontent has ever been the dynamic force making for social uplifting,—the sign manual of progress. The smug Conservative may be a most excellent neighbor; but he is, nearly always, a social reactionary. Caesar's fancy for men who were sleek and fat and who slept well o' nights was based on the recognition of this fact. It is the men who have been discontented with wrong and oppression who have carried on the great agitations of the world, and have made history. Wilberforce and Howard, Thomas Paine and Samuel Adams, Garrison and Phillips, were all men profoundly discontented with the wrongs inflicted on their fellow-men; and from their discontent came the spark which lit the altar-fire of liberty.

There is no cause for pessimism in the Labor movement of to-day,—the organized force which gives concrete expression to the discontent of the laborer with unjust conditions. It stands for the aspiration of awakened faculties rather than for the blind impulse of class hatred. From

the outpouring of the Israelitish brickmakers to the march of the Hazelton miners, the downtrodden have looked toward the Promised Land. John Ball's scathing indictment of social inequality has lost none of its force: but the born thrall has evolved into the worker for wages; and the freeman's cottage has slowly supplanted the chattel slave's hut. From the unlettered and unthinking serf to the product of the common school and the town-meeting is a far cry; and herein is good cause for hope to those who believe that the days to come will be better than the days that have been.

Assuming, then, that the evolutionary processes of civilization have been steadily operative in improving the condition of the manual laborer, what is his contention? What can be done further to improve his condition? What is the best method through which to secure this improvement? To what element in society shall we look to inaugurate and carry on the agitation for those practical measures which shall still further reduce the handicap under which the less-favored portion of the people labor in the struggle for existence?

Much depends upon the plane of vision from which these queries are to be considered. When viewed through the windows of a Newport marble palace the objective universe takes on a different aspect to that which it assumes when seen from an East-Side tenement-house. The counting-room and the weaving-room generate two distinct philosophies of life. The sympathetic spirit may be moved by the thrilling tale of the sailor's shipwreck, the miner's entombment, or the slow starvation of the sweater's slave; but it is only to those who bear the brunt of these industrial tragedies that there comes a full sense of the horror of the black waves, the poison of the fire-damp, and the howl of the hunger-wolves outside the poor man's door.

That dilettante, speculative spirit, which approaches the study of the Labor problem in somewhat the same manner as an amateur entomologist regards the antennæ of a rare bug under the microscope, fails utterly to grasp the pith of the question at issue. Almost as much at fault is the average kindly philanthropist who slums, and sentimentalizes over the abject wretchedness of the very poor.

He was a veritable Columbus in the world of sociology who made the discovery that there was a good deal of human nature among men. The manual laborer may fairly claim to possess his modicum of human nature. With Shakespeare's usurer, he may exclaim:

"If you prick us, do we not bleed? If you tickle us, do we not laugh? If you poison us, do we not die?"

In other words, the laborer is a man, claiming a man's share of life; and the questions which most directly affect him can be best considered from the standard of manhood, rather than from that of classhood.

But it is this very breadth of vision that is most difficult of attainment. The accretion of the class sense is rapid. Even the constant attrition going on under democratic institutions does not serve to keep it in check. Plato's saying, that "every city holds two nations, the rich and the poor," has in it all too much of truth. The Optimist, however, sees that the standards of humanity are more and more upheld by the masses, who inhabit that social stratum which lies between the dark despair of the Submerged Tenth and the gilded idleness of the Four Hundred.

Starting, then, with the primary conception that the social problem is a question of the relationship of man to man, the road for further inquiry may be outlined. What, in equity, may our fellow-man demand? If he be a manual laborer, what is there in the conditions that compass him about that works him hardship? What should the state do for him? What should the employer do for him? And, above and beyond all else, what should he do for himself?

The working-man of to-day demands more life,—a longer life, a fuller life, a higher life. In this he claims the sanction of the Fathers of the Republic, who proclaimed it, as a self-evident truth, that this was one of the inalienable rights possessed equally by all men. A certain class of superior minds seem inclined to hold that the aforesaid Fathers, when they incorporated such a proposition into a state document, were sentimental theorists. But the theory has percolated through more than a century of our national life; and it is taken seriously by so many people that it cannot now be lightly set aside.

Definitely phrased, the demand of organized labor is that those who render useful service to society shall not be compelled to shorten their natural term of existence by the conditions under which this service is performed. It demands, moreover, that the recompense for this service shall be sufficient to secure to the worker not only the "assured future," but also the wherewithal to bring "light and leisure" into the life of each manual laborer of average industry and application. The Mallocks and the Schopenhauers have few disciples of their sublimated ennui among wage-earners. The laborer is rather in search of the opportunity to test what life may be made, and what it means, to those who have the wherewithal and leisure to explore its mysterious heights and depths.

The trade-union demand for shorter hours and higher wages is broadly based on this aspiration. The entire volume of factory and sanitary legislation rests for its justification upon this demand. The case which the wage-earner here presents is both ethically and economically strong.

The "chance of life" of the average mechanical laborer under existing conditions is scaled from 10 to 25 per cent less than that of the average member of the so-called independent classes. The mortuary tables of insurance societies—scarcely to be accused of a sentimental bias—tell the story. Where war slays its thousands, the industrial battle-fields count their victims by tens of thousands. The pallid children of the factory leave there a mighty host, perishing from innutrition and lack of vital power to prevent the lodgment of ever-floating germs of disease.¹ The law of heredity perpetuates the frail physique from generation to generation; and the "factory mark," of which Mrs. Browning sang so pathetically, is in evidence for all who choose to look. It was Channing, I think, who, in a discussion upon the economic aspect of the Slavery Question, said, "The Almighty never created the black man in order that sugar and cotton might be sold for a cent a pound cheaper." May not the trade-union claim, with equal force, that cheapness of production is too dearly purchased at the cost of cheapening human life?

This count of the social indictment is, indeed, a long one. The railway service furnishes its yearly quota in numbers exceeding the casualty of many a historic battle. Statisticians inform us that for every eighty thousand tons of coal mined, one human life is sacrificed. The New York "World" recently computed that an average of five lives had been lost in the construction of each of the gigantic new skeleton buildings which modern business architecture has evolved. Workers in chemicals and in many of the decorative arts, those who are forced to inhale metallic dust or gases, those whose occupation necessitates cramped and unhealthy positions, or tense and nerve-straining application,—these supply but a few of the instances in which the manual laborer is exposed to abnormal and unjust conditions that shorten his natural term of existence.

¹ Some years ago, when appearing before a committee of the New Hampshire legislature, in advocacy of the 56-hour law, I remember hearing a Manchester undertaker testify that if he should tell the full truth, when making official returns as to the "cause of death" of the factory people, among whom his business was mostly carried on, his reports would frequently be filled out with the words, "Died of slow starvation."

Can it be denied that, even from a purely physical standpoint, the trade-union is amply justified in demanding such a reduction of the hours of labor as shall give to these workers and their kin better conditions toward promoting longevity?

But the physical element is, after all, but a part of the basis of the demand for shorter hours. Charles Lamb said: "I have lived fifty years; but, if I take from that period the time I have lived for others' benefit, I am yet but a boy." Life without liberty is not life in the full sense of the word. That man who is forced to give practically all his waking hours to the service of the one who buys his labor, in order that he may secure daily bread, can hardly be called a free man. It is no answer to say that the laborer has control of his labor, and may change his employer when he will. Legally, this is the case; but the economic penalty coerces him to continue under irksome conditions, as truly as the whip of the Southern slave-driver served to coerce the negro. The aggregation of capital in corporations has largely destroyed the mobility of labor, and dwarfed the economic influence of the individual laborer. It is only by associative effort that the laborer can make his voice heard in the counting-room; and it is only by associative effort that he is enabled to secure consideration from an economic standpoint.

The Trade-Union movement the world over dwells with emphasis upon the demand for a reduction of the hours of labor as a prime essential to the betterment of the condition of the laborer. The American Federation of Labor, which has much to do with the shaping of the general policy of the American organizations, has always placed this demand in the list "of first things first." The gigantic struggle, during the past few months, of the Amalgamated Society of Engineers in Great Britain for the eight-hour day bears witness to the importance of this issue in the minds of the workers across the sea. There is a reason for the prominence of this plank in the practical programme of the laborer. It is based upon a philosophy which appeals to his judgment and experience. Briefly put, this philosophy is as follows:

The standard of civilization rests upon the standard of wages. No low wage-rate people has ever proved capable of self-government. In the very nature of things, the dollar-a-day man cannot be a "sovereign citizen."

The standard of wages, in a large degree, depends in turn upon the volition of the working-class. With this unawakened or crushed down by environment, the wage-rate is low. The everyday ambition of the average laborer is to live as well as his fellows. If they are content

with black bread and wooden shoes, meagre homes and barren lives, the custom which surrounds him is taken as a matter of course. It is only in exceptional cases that the standard of revolt is raised; for these conditions produce few men who are able to supplement "the bitter murmurs of the poor" with the constructive policy which alone can improve the condition of an entire class.

Thus, the standard of living rests upon the customary wants and desires of the laborer. The merely animal wants and desires may be satisfied under a system of long hours and low wages; but social and intellectual wants and desires demand both leisure and opportunity for their gratification. The general effect of art, science, and literature—to the knowledge of which the common school has opened the door—has developed in a measure the higher faculties of the working-class. In obedience to the law of evolution, these faculties develop still further by use and exercise. The possession of education awakens in the mind of the worker a desire for leisure, to become familiar with the thought of the age in which he lives, and with the history of the ages which have passed. Hence, the Short-Hour movement—and indeed the entire Labor movement—is the logical outcome of the broader education of the masses, and is stimulated by every influence which aids the wider dissemination of knowledge.

There is here an emulative competition for a higher standard of living which must be relied upon to resist the depressing tendency of Lassalle's famous "iron law of wages," under which the compensation for the laborer drifts toward that point where he obtains only sufficient for a bare subsistence for himself, and the power to continue his species on the same level. And it is in this same quality that labor differs from all other commodities in its relation to the law of supply and demand. The commodity known as labor-force has linked to it a sentient consciousness. It is animate; and its possessor may increase the demand by limiting the supply. A million bales of cotton is a fixed quantity; but a million men with a day's labor to sell may adjust the length of that day so that the labor-force to be disposed of shall not create a surplus on the market.

The relation between the economic and the ethical aspect of the Short-Hour movement is intimate. The one coöperates with the other. The intelligent and educated workman is, therefore, the most strenuous in his demand for the short-hour day, both for its ultimate effect upon the wage-rate and because of its direct effect in improving his physical and intellectual opportunities. The more general the diffusion of

knowledge among the working-class, as in Germany, England, and America, the more general is the organization of the trade-union.

In emphasizing the importance of the Short-Hour movement, as a means to the betterment of the condition of the laborer, there is no intention of submitting it as a panacea for all industrial ills. The entire Trade-Union movement is a practical movement. It deals with society as it is, not as it may become under some hypothetical scheme of social regeneration. From Plato's "Republic" to the latest colonization plan of the Social Democracy, the world has not wanted for dreamers—and some of their dreams have come to pass. But since the Israelites passed dry-shod through the Red Sea, few other short cuts to the Promised Land have been opened for public travel. The suspicion is fairly well confirmed that the age of miracles has passed; and, without a miracle, plans for social betterment must take into full account the limitations of human nature, in order to avoid speedy wreckage.

Social empiricists are wont to sneer at the trade-union and its methods as reactionary. But the fact is that, in the domain of actual achievement, the trade-union has accomplished more for the betterment of the wage-earners' condition than all other agencies together. There is no particular secret as to the cause of its success. It has simply moved upon the lines of least resistance; taking into account the material with which it has had to deal, and appealing to the enlightened self-interest of its membership.

Economically speaking, the trade-union is a class organization, but scarcely so in a greater degree than the ordinary business associations of the commercial world. The man who has labor to sell has, in that capacity, a relationship to the rest of the community—especially to the labor-buyer—peculiarly his own. His interest and that of his employer may be reciprocal, as Commissioner of Labor Carroll D. Wright well puts it; but the interests are not identical. He may attend the same lodge, vote the same ticket in politics, and kneel at the same altar, with his employer; but when he brings his labor into the market, his interest demands that he obtain for it the highest possible price up to the limit of the absorption of the "margin of profit"; while, under competition with other employers, the labor-buyer endeavors to obtain it at the lowest possible price. What the laborer is contending for is an equality of bargaining power. The entire trend of development in the industrial world, from status to contract, has been toward this equality. The factory system, with its massing of capital, has injected a new element into the problem; and the countless industrial wars, called

"strikes" and "lockouts," are but phenomena in the process of adjustment now going on.

While the strike has received ample measure of condemnation by some political economists, its utility is now quite generally recognized. The strike is industrial war. It is the court of last appeal. As both armies and courts are sometimes used in the cause of the oppressor, so the strike may be lacking in justice. Of itself, it is neither good nor bad, but depends upon its inspiration for its justification. Workmen may fairly claim, however, that if the civilized and Christian nations of the world find it necessary to maintain great armies and powerful navies in order to maintain peace, it is inconsistent to expect the wage-earner to rely entirely upon the power of moral suasion for the protection of his interests. As the principle of arbitration is the more readily resorted to between nations equally capable of defending their claims by force, if need be, so the labor-seller finds that his claims are the more likely to receive fair consideration, when, back of those claims, there is an agency capable of resorting to industrial war, if the exigencies of the case so demand. The strength of this principle is still further made manifest by the fact that the trade organizations most capable of making a stubborn resistance—those with the largest treasuries and most thorough organization—are least often called upon to resort to strikes.

In the contention between the employer and the employee as to the division of the margin of profits, what may be fairly expected of the former? Merely that he shall deal with the labor-seller as a man, rather than as a "hand," as is too often the case. When both factors in the industrial partnership can be brought to take this view of the matter, a prevailing irritant will be removed from their relationship, and much wasteful friction will be averted. The least hopeful feature of our modern system of industry is the removal of the employer from direct contact with the employee. It is the tyranny of foremen—the overbearing of understrappers—that is responsible for a large proportion of the collisions between labor-buyers and labor-sellers. The splendid work of the Nottingham Boards of Conciliation could never have been accomplished under the *Gradgrind* doctrine, that workmen are only "hands"; for hands do not reason and may not be reasoned with. But when the representatives of capital use both heads and hearts in their dealing with laborers, the presumption is justified that they will find both heads and hearts among those with whom they have to deal.

The further betterment of the condition of the laborer, then, depends in degree upon the sense of personal responsibility and fairness which

employers are willing to exercise toward their employees. The workman who gives years of faithful service to the building up of an industry feels that he deserves something better than to have his modest request greeted with the familiar arbitrary phrase, "This is my business. I intend to run it as best suits me. If you do not like it, go elsewhere." He feels that he has a claim in equity upon his situation which no "cash nexus" can cancel.

But both the employer and the employee are affected by considerations and influences outside their particular relationship as buyers and sellers of labor. The power of the state, working through taxation, or finance, or monopoly, may destroy the enterprise. This same power may intervene to protect the labor-seller's life and limb, to secure the education of his children, to open up new opportunities for his effort, or to hamper his attempt to resist injustice. It is possibly the most perplexing of all problems in social science, to determine just where the sovereignty of the individual ends and that of the state begins, to decide just where the state is justified in interfering in the relationship of its units.

It is not the purpose of this article to enter upon the broad arena of this discussion, nor to speculate as to the outcome of the conflict continually going on between the centralizing and decentralizing forces of society. Science teaches us that the entire universe is regulated by a complex and all-embracing system of checks and balances. Solar systems and the social unit equally come under its sway. Centripetal and centrifugal forces influence Aldebaran in its orbit, and *John Smith*, the ditch-digger, in his daily life.

Environment and natural endowment are the two great factors in the existence of the average man. Epictetus, the slave, may become the philosopher; Burritt, the blacksmith, a savant; Lincoln, the rail-splitter, the president of a republic; but the iron bands of circumstance all too often hold fast the man of average faculty and energy.

It is impossible, however, to resist the conviction that the highest social order is the direct outcome of the greater freedom of the individual from outside direction. In the domain of theology and of politics, this is preëminently demonstrated. It is, consequently, a nice problem, to determine just how far it is wise to rely upon this outside interference in the industrial sphere, even when its ostensible purpose is to better the condition of the laborer. Enlightened opportunism must perhaps confine itself to the search for that happy medium between a flaccid and sentimental altruism, which emasculates its subject by sheltering

him from the consequences of his own conduct, and that *laissez-faire* policy which ever echoes the query of Cain, "Am I my brother's keeper?"

The practical programme of trade-unionism recognizes this limitation, and appeals for state interference only where the power of voluntary association has proved to be inoperative. The compulsory education of children, the restriction of the hours of labor for factory minors and women, the abolition of conspiracy laws and of the use of private armed forces against legitimate combinations of laborers, improved safety-appliances upon railroads and where machinery is employed, the inspection of construction and of sanitation,—these are various forms of state interference asked for by the trade-union and sanctioned by broad considerations of public policy.

But much of the inequality of opportunity, of which the laborer complains, has its source in the action of the state itself in granting special privileges to a portion of the community. This is particularly true as to those enterprises which are sometimes called natural monopolies, where, by reason of the advantage possessed by those holding franchises from the state, the application of the principle of free competition is rendered impossible. As a general proposition, the laborer holds that the benefit now derived from these monopolies by a few individuals should revert to the community, and reckons the increase of the administrative machinery caused by state or municipal ownership as a lesser evil than the exploitation which he commonly suffers under private ownership. For these reasons, it will be found that most working-men believe that their conditions would be bettered by public ownership and control of telegraph and telephone services, steam- and street-railways, gas- and electric-lighting, water-supplies, and other functions of a quasi-public character.

It appears probable that it is in the domain of municipal government that the collective spirit may be relied upon to produce the most effective results. The wage-earner is largely a city dweller, and, with his family, is more dependent upon the public service for healthful conditions of life and for opportunities for the exercise of his higher faculties than are those possessed of larger means. The cities of the great civilizations of the past aided the development of the civic spirit by placing masterpieces of art in the everyday environment of the masses. The progressive municipalities of the present are beginning to learn not only of the utility of clean streets, pure water, good sanitation, and ample breathing-spaces, but also that lyceums and libraries and art galleries

have somewhat to do with the making of good citizens, and that the expense incurred in their establishment is the best kind of sinking fund.

But questions of detail and of method constitute, after all, but a comparatively unimportant part of our problem. The great thing is, that the mass of the community shall be capable of self-government. Theologies and governments alike are but the replica of the human minds back of them. Michael Angelo, the architect, may conceive heaven-reaching lines of grace; but to erect the stately edifice there must be suitable material.

So, the question of the industrial welfare of the American laborer merges into the broader question of the triumph or failure of the democratic idea upon which the American Republic has its foundation. Political equality and industrial inequality may not long continue. In the crucible of our republic works the ferment of the ages and the leaven of all the nations.

Kings may prop up their thrones with bayonets; but democracy must rest upon intelligence. So evidently thought the Pilgrim Fathers, when, two hundred and thirty years ago, they established grammar schools in every township by the enactment:

"Whereas, as the maintenance of good literature doth much tend to the advancement of the weal and flourishing state of societies and republics, be it directed . . ."

"Learning, joined with true knowledge," said the wise Montaigne, "is an especial and graceful ornament and an implement of wonderful use and consequence."

Here, then, is the ideal for which those who seek the betterment of the condition of their fellow-men may well strive,—that true knowledge which has a sense of judgment and proportion, which appeals not to class hatreds and prejudices, but to the desire for equity that animates the most of men. "Correct judgment in regard to surrounding things, events, and consequences," says Spencer, "becomes possible only through the knowledge of the way in which surrounding phenomena depend on each other." Thus, the welfare of a class depends in the ultimate upon the welfare of the entire community. The state is organic. Its constituent parts may not be harmed without detriment to the entire organism.

The greatest danger which confronts our republic is that of the growing antagonism of classes. The poor will never again be the passive sufferers of bygone ages. Their indictment of social injustice is drawn

and presented. "Bitter voices say it," writes Ruskin,—“voices of battle and famine through all the world, which must be heard, whoever keeps silence.” The test is at hand which is to prove whether the sneers of Macaulay and Carlyle against the republic were false or founded in truth. It is easier by far to teach the gospel of rights than that of duty ; for the latter demands the well-rounded and full-orbed intellect to grasp its significance.

The Labor problem has its subjective as well as its objective aspect. Important, as it undoubtedly is, that the laborer shall not be hampered, cramped, and stunted physically by the conditions of his daily existence, it is of even greater moment that he shall be given the opportunity to broaden himself intellectually and ethically. Inequality of material possessions among men is certain to continue as long as some are prudent and others foolish, some grasping and others generous ; but nature's law of compensation must not be restricted by artificial conditions.

The dead level of the ideal of Bellamy has little to commend it to the average American. Freedom of opportunity is the heritage he seeks to maintain,—that essence of the spirit of democracy, which, in Toynbee's golden words, “is sudden, like the sea, and grows dark with storms and sweeps away many precious things ; but, like the sea, it reflects the light of the wide heavens and cleanses the shores of human life.”

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SIDE-LIGHTS ON POSTAL REFORM.

"If the Government would once accustom itself to do business in a business-like way," says Hon. E. F. Loud, Chairman of the House Committee on Post Offices and Post Roads, in his article "A Step toward Economy in the Postal Service," in the December FORUM, "the savings all along the line would be enormous."

For instance, if, in the transmission of mails, it owned its cars, and simply paid the railways for haulage and expedition,—as all the great express companies and a vast number of shippers have done for years,—the saving all along all the lines would, assuredly, be enormous.

If, in paying the railways for transportation of mails, no more were rendered for the service than would be paid by the express companies for a like service, the saving, in this single item, would go far toward wiping out the annual deficiency in the Post-Office revenues.

The compensation to ocean mail-steamships being vastly greater in amount than postages accruing from such mails, if that compensation were restricted to fair and reasonable terms, this saving would add measurably to the Post-Office exchequer. One representative example: The Cuban and Mexican mail contract is let to one company. Says a recent Report of the Post-Office authorities:—

"This service entails a heavy loss on the Government. The mileage paid that company in the fiscal year 1896, for 203,580 statute miles travelled, was \$203,580; while the income from the postage thereon was only \$3,590."

If all the matter carried in the mail-bags were made to pay; if the ninety-eight and one-half million pounds of franked and free matter, and thousands of newspapers, now accorded free use of the post in their respective counties (which papers, be it noted, constitute 15 per cent of all second-class matter conveyed in the mails),—if all these "dead-heads" were made to pay, what an accession to postal receipts would result!

These items, and the inference drawn, the Chairman will not dispute. Indeed, in his report accompanying his bill, slain in the House during the first session of the Fifty-fourth Congress by the emphatic majority of 182 to 27, he makes this astonishing admission:—