

CHAPTER XX

THE LABOR QUESTION

INEFFECTIVE AGITATION

No matter how employers in general have striven to make conditions better for the workers, the old animus of the 'eighties and 'nineties is still maintained. There must be something seriously wrong with labor agitation when these old allegations are revived in labor disputes. If it be true that large industrial concerns consider that they are forced, owing to agitation, to call in guards, and to take unusual precautionary measures against certain militant elements, within and without their factories, at a time of strike, it may be inferred that the work of arbitration boards has been singularly ineffective. Of course, the labor agitator blames the employers for this state of affairs, but it is seldom one finds the employers blaming any but a small section of their employees. In the recent strikes, it was difficult to maintain order between two factions of workers. While making charges against the employers for employing guards to protect the men who wished to work, agitators and the militant strikers did not hesitate to use any and every means that they imagined were used by employers to maltreat their fellow-workers.

TRIBUTE GATHERERS

There is in this matter an important point that has been overlooked among the numbers that have been

buried by temporary settlements, and it is one that concerns the power of a minority, when it is backed by government, to override a majority. It is generally accepted that the sit-down strikers represented a minority of the workers in the plants, but that the majority had no political or trade union standing. There was no department at Washington that had the slightest interest in its existence and, presumably, it was entirely without lobbyists who could browbeat members of Congress. No doubt, numbers of the majority had listened to speeches over the radio, delivered by the Executive and his supporters, on the virtues of democratic government. Perhaps they had heard, when the poll of the Presidential election was declared, that the voice of democracy had spoken. During the strike they must have had time to consider the practical value of the lip service that was given to that term. Whether they came to the conclusion that they were victims of a spoof game, in which cant and hypocrisy were the chief aids in playing it, cannot be told yet, but it is possible that the dullest worker in the plants will wake up before long to find, not only how he has been tricked in this game, but how he has also been the victim of a dodge to place him in the toils of another tribute gatherer, for it is tribute they are after—these humane democrats. Poor labor! It will never learn how to detect the political bunco steerer. It is just as ignorant of the con game as it was fifty years ago. Such terms as humanity, democracy, high standard of living, and so on, are like hashish, which labor inhales at the behest of a despoiler.

SHAREHOLDERS

There was, however, another section of democracy entirely overlooked by the supporters of the minority,

and these were the shareholders. But then, of course, it must be understood by this time that shareholders are the rejected and the despised of the government, save for the purpose of paying taxes which fill the bag for politicians, and assist them in collecting votes. But, even in that case, it is doubtful whether they are ever included in the government's idea of democracy, or the heads of departments' notions of humanity. They have no political standing. They are merely the sieves through which the taxes filter, and some day they may be dispensed with altogether.

It is bad enough, in all conscience, for labor to be spoofed by the heads of departments, but what is to be said of its swallowing the nonsense that is chattered by its great leaders who are single-minded in the work of converting them into tribute-payers. Imagine, at this time of day, sensible laboring men accepting statements of the following order. One said the endeavor of the union was "to shorten the hours to a working day which would enable the automobile worker to enjoy his wife, his children and his leisure time." Another said, "We are going to demand equal wages for both men and women with no discrimination because of sex." These hoary promises have been put before working men in many countries for nearly three generations, and nobody seems to pause for a moment after he hears them, to wonder why they have not been carried out long before this. It ought to be plain to a man who will take the time to look back, and to study some history of trade union movements, that the reason why they have not been carried out is because the recurring slumps have put the persuasive leader out of action, and his eloquent voice is stilled. He does not appear upon the scene again until the slump is over, and industry is struggling to get on its feet once more; then he

pops up and demands the same old El Dorado, because he wants the coffers of the union replenished. It is neither here nor there to protest that he is sincere. Undoubtedly he would like better conditions for labor but, unfortunately, he does nothing to stop the slumps.

Furthermore, there is the question of the rights of shareholders to be considered in this matter—the great stumbling block of trade unionism. One young man is reported to have said in connection with the possibility of strife in an eastern State, “The real reason for the governor’s statement regarding sit-down strikes is not a question of legality but the question of priority of vested property rights over human rights.” One rubs one’s eyes after reading such a statement, and wonders how at this time of day it can pass muster, even in the mind of a very young man. He does not realize that property rights are “human” rights and that labor as labor has no “human” right at all, for the State itself confers no “human” right upon it. The State has taken labor’s “human” right away. Therefore, the quarrel is not with a body of capitalists and shareholders who object to sit-down strikes; it is a quarrel between labor and the government, if it be a question of restoring “human” rights. “Human” rights are fundamental, for they are *natural* rights; property rights are fundamental, and adhere to the producer. It is argued, of course without effect, that there is no such thing as property right. This notion is basic in the creeds of Socialism and Communism and, as certain judges of the Supreme Court and many of the Executive’s legal supporters, are in doubt as to whether it would be wise to accept the findings of Marx and Lenin regarding property rights, it can be easily understood how young labor agitators are preposterously confused concerning this issue.

LABOR'S "VICTORIES"

The formula of announcement by the strike leader after gaining a concession from employers is: "Labor has today gained a great victory." Perhaps it is too much to expect strike leaders to have a sense of humor. If they had, and knew anything about the history of trade unionism, they would realize that with every concession, the victory has been so short-lived that more strikes have been necessary. It is neither here nor there to argue whether trade unionism has been beneficial to labor because, although one realizes employers took every advantage of the labor market, it will not further the cause of the worker one iota to say that he must persist in supporting his leaders in the work of gaining concessions by strike. Results are what workers value, and if they are satisfied to remain in the vicious circle of higher nominal wage falling behind higher costs, then it is a matter for them to settle with the unions. After all, this is a question of tactics, and if these are the only ones that trade union leaders can think of, then it is a poor lookout for all.

THE WAGE QUESTION

One question that is never dealt with, in the speeches of agitators, is that of what wage could buy during the strike period of the 'nineties, and what it can buy now. Strikes have been settled recently by conceding ten cents an hour to the men. An extra four dollars a week, on a forty-hour scale, does not go very far now when the wife takes the market basket to make her purchases on the Saturday night. It is reckoned that government today is taking, in indirect taxes, something like thirty percent out of the working man's dollar, but these

figures from the Bureau of Labor, refer only to eatables. There is not included in the estimate all the other indirect taxes spent on clothing, shoes and hats. There is, besides, rent to be considered. Anyway, men of sixty, who were at work forty years ago, know that a careful young man could put something by on twelve dollars a week, and not stint himself unduly on food and clothing. If one is satisfied to purchase the necessities of life with passing more bills, and receiving no more for them than he would for fewer bills, who is to complain but labor? Now that the alliance is made between the unions and Congress, to say nothing of the White House, it is not to be expected that we shall hear very much from union leaders about the enormous cost of government, and the reduction in purchasing power, which has been caused largely by the expenditure on the bureaucracy.

Once the wage question gained the attention of labor leaders and men, but that was when they talked in terms of real wage, not nominal wage. I can remember the day when the hours question was not only a wage question but a time-to-study question.

LEISURE TIME

There is little or no desire on the part of young labor today to take advantage of technical schools. Now the hours are shorter, the time gained for leisure is spent in such recreation as town life can proffer. The motor car, the movie, the dance hall, and the radio, have stifled the desire in most young men to improve their minds. The more abundant life we hear so much about is abundant only in the most superficial things.

A keen observer of conditions, in his list of time-wasting pleasures, mentions the automobile, movies,

gambling of all descriptions, dance halls, and radios. He says all these things are good in moderation, and with discretion they may be enjoyed, but youth has used them as antidotes to serious thinking. In my own experience, I find that labor generally today does not know half as much about the serious things of life as labor did when I was in the labor market. The more abundant life is another catch-vote phrase and will not bear analysis for a single moment. One of the original meanings of the phrase was religious and, in our time and generation, it has been used by philosophers as having reference to study. The politician, of course, can only think of it in terms of the ballot. It is with that phrase as it is with another which is so popular, "the high standard of living"; higher only in a comparative sense, in providing high-priced labor-saving devices for the household; devices without which the people years ago got along all right, were all the healthier for not having them, and were enabled to save money, buy lots, and provide their own old-age pensions. These were the thrifty people who are today looked upon by politicians as enemies of society.

What then is the labor question? It is nothing more nor less than a dollars and cents matter. But man does not live by bread alone. History tells us that we should be on the *qui vive* when the majority of the community considers that life is only a bread and circus affair. Things are indeed serious when the most important things of life are reduced to the question of dollars and cents. It was a sad day for labor when its aims and aspirations were transmuted into these terms for, from that time, labor had to be regarded from a charitable standpoint. The question of what was a just wage, whether the laborer was worthy of his hire, whether

he should enjoy the full value of his produce—all these former considerations were shelved. Of course, the reason for this was that he had let himself become a mere tribute-bearer to his leaders. When he lost touch with the ambition to give his best so that he might rise out of the ruck, and find a successful place for himself in legitimate industry, he assisted, whether he knew it or not, in stabilizing mediocrity.

THE DIGNITY OF LABOR

When the dignity of labor is estimated nominally at five dollars a day, there is not much to be said for labor's regard for itself. And when one considers that a strike is necessary to win for him that low wage, and that he loses during the strike a good deal of what he stands to gain if trade keeps up, it seems a great deal of effort is expended on a trifling return. The dignity of labor during a strike usually calls for sympathy; never for admiration. When it is considered that coercion, intimidation, and ridicule are often the weapons which agitators use to force a sufficient number to down tools, for the effective purposes of the strike, dignity somehow or another loses some of its tail feathers and, as a rule, presents a rather bedraggled appearance before terms are settled between the union and employers.

FENDING FOR ONESELF

There is another point of some importance to be considered, regarding the future of labor, and it is that of its disinclination to seek means of working for itself. A great labor leader in Scotland over thirty years ago said that there was no real economic reason why there should be a congested labor market. At that time the

land question was a burning one, and was discussed every day for many years. It was the chief topic of the political platform. It is true, even now, labor is not bereft of economic means of working for itself. During the former slump there were many instances of two or three men agreeing to cooperate, going into the country, and finding derelict farms. I heard about several of these cases, and I had the opportunity one day in a market town of the northwest to speak to two men who had taken their products to the market. Life was hard, but they were making a bare living. These men told me that they could have found jobs here and there in town to keep body and soul together but, as members of the union, they could not take the wage that was offered because it was lower than union rates. Their dignity was maintained but their stomachs were empty, and they soon got tired of that and, having a little more intelligence than a great many of their fellows, they thought it was time to make a move. But I doubt very much if they continued with their work in the country when trade revived; in all probability, they pulled up stakes and returned to the town. Now the reason for this disinclination to fend for oneself on a few acres is not economic but social. It is said the country is too dull for the town-bred man and, when winter comes and snow keeps him penned up during the long nights, he does not know what to do with himself. As for living with books, and complaining that the night is not long enough, such a thing would be unheard of now.

It was different when I was a young man. In England, Scotland, and here the vast majority of working men were proud of the tasks that would improve their minds. They were not satisfied with a round of superficial pleasure. When education was hard to get, it was

prized; when it became anybody's toy, it was scorned. So it must be that there is no inclination with the vast majority of labor today to undertake the initial hardships of finding how the individual can work for himself. And so long as that inclination is missing, there will always be a congested labor market. The labor question, as Richard Cobden put it, "Two men for one job, low wage; two jobs for one man, high wage," goes to the very heart of the matter. If labor really desired to clothe itself with dignity, it would apply itself to the understanding of its economic problems and, in so doing, would find the solutions which in practice would make labor scarce. But this takes time and study, hard study, and nothing scares the average business man and workers in the office, and in the mill, so much as the phrase "fundamental economics." It was a joke during the depression when business men asked what was wrong, and how to get out of the mess, to tell them to study "fundamental economics." The expression on their faces was enough to tell one that they preferred the depression.

CHARITY

The reason why labor should think that the elementary stages of manhood should be made easy is not far to seek. It is quite a modern conception of industrial life and, like so many other new notions, is projected from a type of sentimentalism that is nauseous; for this is a sentimentalism that thrives on the spending of other people's money for charitable purposes. The section of society that indulges in these whims is not the one that believes "charity begins at home." Of all the men and women I have known in my long experience, who have indulged in this sickening business, there is not one that I can remember, who ever gave a dollar

of his or her own to alleviate the sufferings of the needy. It was always someone else's money that they were ready to dispense, and these are the people who today are shedding tears over the woes of laboring men. Think of the inspiring addresses we have had from legislators recently on what should be done for the poor and needy! Now legislators get quite enough to enable them to figure largely in the lists of charitable institutions as generous subscribers. I see many of these lists, but I have never yet seen the name of one of our legislators on one of them. Certainly, charity does not begin at home with Congress! Well, what are charitable ideas worth if they do not touch the pockets of the idealists? To be charitable with the taxpayers' money is now the easiest and simplest thing that can be done by a legislator, and the electoral and political advantages that it brings to him are of great value. It is so, too, with many authors who write long screeds about the woes of labor, and the sad state of the poor and needy. Some years ago one came to me and asked for money for a charitable purpose. I knew my man, who made a fairly good income for a writer, so I told him that I would give five dollars for every one that he had given. He left me a sadder and wiser man. Why taxpayers should be charitable when the government sets up in the business, heaven only knows!

GOING SOFT

So long as labor is satisfied with these conditions, so long as it puts itself in the position of an object of pity, its woes will be capitalized by politicians and well-paid charity workers. The expression of this sentimentalism, and the enactments it has been responsible for, have resulted in making man soft. In recent years there have been numbers of articles from the pens of phy-

sicians, educationists, and scientists, telling us of the extraordinary changes that have taken place in the calibre and morale of children and youths. The fond parental notion of making things easy and pleasant for the youngsters is playing sad havoc in the home and in the school. Hendrik Willem Van Loon, speaking before the National Education Association, referred to this grave matter, and one reason he gave for the younger generation going soft, was that "we deprived them of all trouble, and made learning as easy and pleasant and painless as going fishing." How serious this change is, can only be fully appreciated by one who like myself has had the double experience of educating himself in England and in America.

The youth of today would have been considered an ignoramus when I was working my way in this country fifty years ago, and the youth of our time here, contrasted with the English youth, is deficient in the most elementary knowledge which should enable him to become a responsible citizen. There is no doubt about our going soft, and the worst of it is, an epidemic of infantile neuroses is spreading fast among the men of thirty and forty. Numbers of them are suffering from attacks of child-like gaiety, and frequently indulge in the tricks of naughty little boys. A doctor told me that he quite expected some of his patients to indulge in soaping doorsteps, ringing bells, and chalking naughty words upon the footpaths. This has been referred to several times by pathologists, but no one seems to take much notice of it, although it does remind one forcibly of conditions in Rome recorded by Petronius. We have taken the real tasks of youth away and, no matter how much he indulges in strenuous athletics, he has lost the knack of sharpening his intelligence upon the hard brain-stone of his mind!