

THE SOCIAL UNREST

PERSONAL AND INTRODUCTORY

THE nature of a good deal of the evidence in this volume is such as to require an explanation that is more personal than I could wish. This evidence may, perhaps, be less sharply criticised if a frank statement about it is made. I began, as do most students of social and economic questions, with a too exclusive study of books. It was several years before I learned that for one branch of economic and social study, the "live questions," like strikes, trade unions, the influence of machinery, etc., very few books existed that had more than slight value. Their treatment of the subject was too general. Much of the literature is scarcely in print, before it is out of date because of the extraordinary mobility and change of our commercial order. The reaction of this swiftly changing mechanism upon our entire life gives us a series of problems but partially expressed in books and differing in important ways from anything that Europe offers.

For instance, we are always perplexed by the question, why distributive coöperation should be so successful in England but so dreary a failure here. There are many reasons, but the main one is found in the conditions that have been brought about by

our material prosperity, accompanied by carelessly extravagant habits, together with our system of rapid transportation. We have not yet been forced to the pettier economies. Our working classes are contemptuous of saving one cent or two cents. The excursion train from a distance and the marvellous development of the city and suburban trolley take the crowd to the great stores where the customer is served better, more cheaply, and more quickly than any co-operative store has any present hope of doing. The great store touches the imagination, especially of the poorer people. I was for several years member of a coöperative store. It failed, partly because the wives of labor men among whom it originated would not continue to patronize it. One of them told me: "Oh, but it's no fun to go to that stuffy place. When I go to R. H. White's, it's like going to a theatre, and my fare in and out of the city costs me nothing, for I can get things cheaper there." Here are cheapness, a satisfied imagination, and an exhilarating ride all for the same money. American invention has made it possible, and not until an entirely new set of conditions has been thrust upon us is there a breath of hope for the English coöperation.

In *la grande industrie* the same forces are producing a form of coöperation that is beyond anything that Europe has reached. The democratization of industry is slowly coming from the top into a forced coöperation with organized labor. The "joint agreement" between employer and employed has begun. It compels a kind of partnership between capital and labor. Every step in its development will destroy the old individualistic and arbitrary doctrine of the

employer that is expressed in such terms as "This is *my* business," "I will not arbitrate," "I will deal only with individuals," etc. Every extension of the joint agreement will bring the great business into closer unity with the best ideals of our political life. Yet no book begins to describe the mechanism that makes these great changes possible. Only in trade and technical journals does one find even a partial account of them.

Again, of our trade unions, there is almost no literature. The close and exhaustive study of Mr. and Mrs. Webb is admirable for the English trade-union tradition. It but partially describes the organization of labor in the United States. The mobility that applied invention has brought about has given us a unionism distinct in important particulars from that which any foreign country can show.

The effect of foreign leadership (especially of the Irish) in our unions is one real difference, but the mobility and the chances this offers to leave one's position for a better, modifies our trade union in many ways. No sooner is the labor leader trained for his duties than he is likely to leave his union and "go into business." I can count from memory thirteen men in Massachusetts, who were in their time and place leaders, who now occupy positions in politics or in business. A friend who always defends the trade union tells me that in Chicago he knows of more than thirty men, formerly at the front in their respective unions, who now hold political office in that city. "They are always on the watch," he adds, "for better positions in other occupations, after they have struggled some years with the external, and more especially with the

internal, difficulties of the unions." I asked one of the prominent leaders how he stood the strain which I knew was brought to bear upon him. "I can't stand it long," he said; "I shall keep my eye out for a business position, and when I can leave my present place honorably, I shall do it."

In Pittsburg, during the steel strike, I tried to find some of the ex-presidents of that strong trade union. The most important of the former officials had gone into other occupations. That more solidified group consciousness that constitutes a class feeling of which radical socialism makes so much, is thus difficult to maintain in this country. Such dangers as there are in this fighting class-spirit in the unions is kept more keenly alive by those employers who think it the part of wisdom to defeat the real ends of organized labor.

During six years of weekly economic lectures before a trade-union audience, I learned that any trade-union literature accessible was upon the whole misleading. An academic student, who has read never so faithfully all the books, has to learn his entire lesson over again by contact with the actual concrete struggles of unions among themselves and with their employers. I had been taught to believe, for example, that the limitation of the number of apprentices by the unions was an inexcusable tyranny over American liberty. In spite of the abuses of this limitation, one finds that it is an integral part of a common effort characterizing our entire business system. It is in its nature in no way peculiar to the trade union. I once saw the establishment of a new union in a Massachusetts shoe town. At first there was no thought of opposing any

number of young men who cared to come in, but in a slackened period of work, it was found that eight and nine per cent of their own trade-union members were without work. At that time the rule was made limiting the number of those learning the trade. "Why," I was asked, "should we let a lot of young fellows come in to compete against our old members who can't get work?" There is often a steady average of two, three, and four per cent of older members thus out of work in half our unions. This explanation does not meet all the difficulties in the limitation of those permitted to learn the trade at a given time. It does enable us to see the reasons why the attempt is made and to see further that it is as natural as any of those checks to lessen competition which fill our commercial life. I have heard this reply from an indignant agent of the union: "They ask us to put in more apprentices when there is no shortage of workmen; when we can furnish first-rate men who are now out of work. That would mean that we were to help train new men to compete with our own members out of work." This action of the union to meet the competing forces that endanger its common life is at least as intelligent as the tariff, or the limitation of output by a great corporation. This check upon competition in the trade union is a superior morality as compared with that large part of business which uses the tariff to sell our products to foreign competitors twenty per cent cheaper than to our own people.

This limitation of apprentices is, however, a very elementary difficulty. The attitude of the trade union toward the new inventions presents a problem

as delicate as it is fundamental in character. In the chapter on machinery it is considered at length. It is mentioned here solely for the purpose of showing how helpless a student is who trusts to the current economic books for light. The hackneyed charge that trade unions "oppose new machinery" carries an unhappy fact in it, but unless carefully explained, it holds far more error than truth. If exception be made of the more ignorant members, the better unions in the United States do not fight the machine as such. Their opposition is against the way in which the machine may be made to readjust the wage scale within the labor group whose interests are immediately affected. In the conflict between employer and employed, the "storm centre" is largely at this point where science and invention are applied to industry.

The hard lesson which the employer has to learn is that he cannot alone and arbitrarily decide this question of machinery. The instinct of the trade union to have some "say" about this is a perfectly sound instinct. Yet the union has also to learn its lesson, that the new inventions must be put to their tasks without any of the stupid hindrances which discredit many of the English unions and which are far too prevalent in certain American unions.

It seems again on its face very senseless for a union to oppose piece-work. But when one sees that piece-work may be used like a new invention, to change the wage scale, keep down wages, and increase the stint of work, the reason for this opposition appears. There are shops in which piece-work results in changing the wage scale three times in a year. It so fre-

quently happens that the readjustment lowers the wage that piece-work becomes an object of suspicion. I have had the plainest admissions from employers that the trade-union resistance to piece-work was wholly justified if the resistance could be guarded from abuses.

So also the "un-American way" of restricting the ability of exceptional men, the "levelling down to inferiority," and other confident charges made against the unions are seen to have so much justification in actual experience as to leave the student far more tolerant even of the abuses connected with them.

These illustrations may make clear why I have been led in the following chapters to use with so much freedom purely personal opinions that have been expressed to me during twenty years of investigation and lecturing upon the topics here considered. It has not, in most instances, seemed to me fair to give names. The opinions were in many instances given on the express condition that the name be not used. That this is open to censure and may be thought to constitute a weakness in the book, I readily admit. The responsibilities for the weakness I must accept. I trust that some corresponding advantages may appear in the result, as I report from responsible men on the labor side, from socialists, business managers, engineers, and capitalists alike.

It was another inexcusably slow discovery that most men do not put their deepest opinions into print, or state them before the public. My first clear conception of this was in listening during a semester to a German professor. From these lectures and from

a stiff volume that he had already published, I believed myself in possession of his most important opinions. In later and more personal conversations with him, I found another and very different man, of whom no printed utterance would have given me a glimpse. He was far more radical, far bolder in his critical restrictions about the institutional life about him, and far more willing to welcome great changes in our social organization.

I do not impeach this man's sincerity. He was giving to me the freer and more extemporaneous opinions that are habitual in private intercourse. In those moments he was unconcerned about the maturity or coördination of his views. I yet believe there was more of the real man in his conversations, more even of his real thought, than in the elaborated and guarded utterances as publicly expressed. In the whole class of socially disturbing topics the freest and deepest opinions are not usually printed in a book, and, so far as this is true, one has to go elsewhere for full evidence.¹

Many of the socialists who make the best literature for the propaganda, do not, any more than the professor, put all their real opinions into their publications. Like the respectabilities among the bourgeois, they have opinions for dress parade—opinions that are safe and orthodox for the cause they represent. They may publicly maintain with great vehemence the essential integrity of Karl Marx's

¹ Professor J. W. Jenks tells me that in his long and exhaustive investigation of the "trust," by far the most important facts about the purposes and methods of these combinations were only secured in private conversation.

theory of socialism. In private they may admit to you, as the best-trained French and German socialists have admitted to me, that Marx's fundamental doctrine of surplus value is unsound. Another may have philosophic training enough to challenge Marx's fatalistic theory of history. I asked a cultivated Belgian socialist why he did not openly proclaim these doubts about the "master." "We can't yet afford," he said, "to embarrass our cause by displaying doubts about the theories on which it is believed to rest." The value of these private opinions is priceless because they point the way along which the less enlightened mass of socialist thought will follow. A collectivist editor in Paris gave this reason why he should not expose these doubts about the sacred traditions: "You must have," he said, "a certain unity and completeness of form in your exposition, or it loses literary effectiveness. I must have this, or I could get no scholars to read what I write." It is precisely this vanity for what will excite academic or conventional approval that devitalizes so many books. To appear "scientific," "to display unity of treatment," to have showy classifications in which new technical names are given to very well-known and commonplace facts, is the subtlest form which temptation puts on for these ambitions. This is not harmful among subjects where a "synthesis" is possible, where "form and completeness" are in any way attainable; but in those studies that have to do with the vastness and complexity of human society and its reorganization, the craving for these literary and scientific graces has left a great deal of our printed sociology chillingly empty of result.

For this very reason our need is the greater for genuine opinions and simple facts, even if the time is not yet come for their more systematized exposition.

Not only socialists but many of our most influential trade-union leaders have grown into larger opinions than they can yet enforce upon their followers. They are as a unit upon the importance of keeping every contract their unions sign with employers. They are as a unit against all violence against non-union men. They are often helpless before the impulsive action of some local union, but their unquestioned policy is to strengthen their organization at these weaker points. There are other issues upon which they are forced to be as politic as a "dynamic clergyman with a static congregation." Too many of the workmen are not yet enlightened enough to take the larger view. There are unions, for example, in which the amount of work done is deliberately restricted as a matter of principle. I have talked at length recently with the head of such an organization. He said to me, "I know perfectly well that the policy is suicidal. I know that a smaller output means, upon the whole, less comfort all round. The men are under the illusion that there is only about so much work to be done and they want to 'stretch it out,' or 'not use it up too quick.' I have several times got a lot of men together and explained to them why the policy is a bad one. But if I were to be too strict I should lose my place, and a man would be put in who wouldn't try to educate them into better sense. In time we can teach them better. When the employers lecture them about this they all think he is simply trying to get more work for the

same money. When I lecture them they at least begin to talk it over and think about it."

Another source of penetrating criticism comes from a certain contemplative type of successful business man who can rarely be induced to put his strictures in print. I have, for instance, never heard an abler defence of Henry George's theory of the single tax than from a man who had made a fortune in city land speculation. He did not like to apply the theory to the country at large, because he thought that the practical difficulties would be too great; but for municipal areas he came to believe that we are simply stupid not to turn the enormous land values created by an increasing population into the public treasury.

In gathering evidence for a report on German workmen's insurance, I found that the published opinions of many business men in that country had upon the whole a very different and certainly a far lower value than opinions one could get from them in conversation. One of our own trust organizers has published valuable opinions on the subject of the trust. In private, I heard him analyze the actual dangers of the trust with a searching skill that I have not seen equalled. I asked him why he put none of these views into print. He replied: "Those are things a wise man doesn't say in public. I am not advertising the weakness of the trust."

Now it is the very things "the wise man does not say in public" that I wish to get in as evidence. I would not exclude the soberer and more cautious public or printed view, but the further emphasis which I venture to give to the open and unreserved opin-

ions which men express when free from the shadow of an audience, or when they are not expected to stand by the temporary stock interests of their class, may at least supplement other forms of testimony. More than this I will not claim for it.

If this evidence seems like a too irresponsible sort of gossip, I can only answer that the volume contains no reference that is not the honest expression of opinion by men whom the investigator would naturally seek as most likely to throw light on his subject.

It is true that these critics are exceptions. The prevailing commercial opinion is that which justifies the methods under which one's wealth is gathered. It is doubtful if any bias exists at the present day that acts with more blinding power upon men than the bias associated with their money income. There is scarcely any rich source of pecuniary profit for which the average citizen will not find ethical justification. During my first visit to the anthracite coal fields, I found a coal operator who was making large profits from a private bar to which his miners were expected to come for their drink, as they were expected to patronize his company store. He had no difficulty in defending this retailing of liquor on what he insisted were moral grounds. The miners could be more easily guarded against excesses. They would spend less money than in the low grogeries of the town. Certain miners' wives had expressed their gratitude to him for these benefits. There was perhaps no conscious humbuggery in this, but the profits on his gin and whiskey were so alluring as to bias his judgment. The proof of this came in abundance from his fellow-employers who did not or would not keep

a bar. Free from the bias, they were unqualified in their condemnation of this source of income for one in this employer's position. In the same way practically every business abuse against the miners is condemned by those employers who have got rid of the abuse. The "company store" began as a necessity for the miners, but when the town grew and private stores everywhere sprang up, the miners naturally preferred to buy, as the rest of us do, where they liked. The company store from this time on was a reproach to the best business management. Yet I never knew an operator, still maintaining one, who did not argue with unction and fervor that they were very beneficial to the miner and his family.

If one to-day go through those regions, asking right and left among those who have discontinued the company stores, he will hear the frankest admission that it had long since come to be a nuisance and without any justification. In 1900, when operators were indignantly defending their method of selling powder to their miners greatly above the market price, I found that the operators who did not do this, had only sarcasm for the ingenious reasons which the other employers were giving. The president of a company told me: "The miners are perfectly right in their contention. It is true that the higher price entered into an older agreement, but this clumsy method of paying wages is one that any first-rate business man ought to be ashamed of."

The miners in the recent strike (1902) asked among other things, to have the coal weighed as it comes from the mine, and to be paid by weight rather than by car-load. They honestly believe that they are

cheated out of a portion of their earnings. The employers, who still pay by this rough and elastic car measurement, would make the inquirer believe that the miners' demand is as ignorant as it is absurd. Fortunately a small proportion of the coal now mined is paid by weight. Among employers who have adopted this method, I found the strongest convictions that the miners were in the main right about this issue.

Again, when one sees the conditions under which the "pumpmen" work for twelve hours daily in the mines, he is curious to hear what defence can be made for such slavish toil. The first employer I asked, said: "The pumpmen are not overworked. They would be perfectly contented if the trade-union bullies would let them alone." The mine boss and the superintendent know what the pumpman's life means. When they were convinced that their names would not be used, I got from them the most pronounced opinions that eight hours a day is long enough for pumpmen to work. The superintendent said, "The man who denies the grievance of the pumpman either does not know or does not care how men are used."

There is no great business that does not thus open to the investigator, from its own inner circles, the most trustworthy evidence concerning abuses. From evidence of this character, we may get invaluable hints as to general industrial tendencies and to possible improvements. There is invariably a small minority of men who in speculative discussion will freely take the larger social point of view, even if against their interests. A far larger class must first have thrown off

the abuse before unbiassed judgment becomes easy. In most business communities may be found a type of business man who has retired long enough from active work to look with a certain largeness upon these labor questions. They are among the best of witnesses. A retired shoe manufacturer in Massachusetts, who now ranks among the rich men in his community, has told me that the whole problem had entirely changed to him as he looked back upon the thirty years of chronic struggle with the trade union. "They make a good many stupid mistakes," he said, "but an organization strong enough to fight the employer is a necessity to labor. Competition so forces many of the best employers to copy the sharp tricks of the worst employers in lowering wages, that the trade union must be equipped to fight against these reductions, or for a rise in wages when business is more prosperous. I have fought the union in more than twenty strikes, but I can now see that they were at least as right and as reasonable as I was." It is this kind of evidence of which I make very free use in this volume. It has the competence wrought out of long experience. It is dispassionate and disinterested. This man had been separated from the tug and warfare of practical affairs long enough to see them in their larger social relations. Any one who had gone to him in earlier days, when he was in the heat and turmoil of his occupation, would have got simply a snap-shot judgment based upon the supposed business interests of that moment. It would have its value even then, but not the value of the later and calmer mood.

There is in this volume very frequent reference to

problems arising in the coal industry. This is done partly because of many visits to the soft- and hard-coal regions. It is further due to the fact that no business presents a better point of view for study, either of practice or of theory, in the labor question. I have excluded the soft-coal interest from the present discussion because the very immensity of area covered leaves it still open to general competitive influence. With the exception of the remarkable common organization at this moment existing between the federated trade union and the employers, it throws far less light on the subjects herein treated. The hard or anthracite coal is lodged by nature in so compact a pocket; it has so much the character of a monopoly, in spite of soft-coal rivalry, that it stands out in admirable relief for investigation. During the last eighteen years I have visited every important strike in these regions. Nowhere can one see quite so clearly the relation between business proper and the various harassing problems that are more and more to challenge our corporate good sense. This business is on the competitive outskirts where the merits or demerits of further state interference and regulative legislation are likely to be forced upon us at no distant day. The last strike marks an epoch in the development of socialistic thought in this country.