

CHAPTER VI.

THE MODERN WAY OF CONDUCTING A STRIKE.

To watch a great strike, such as during the summer and fall of 1901 took place in Detroit, is an interesting study to every student of the science of the production and distribution of wealth. Six hundred men, representing not less than 2,400 years of apprenticeship at the trade of machinists, were trying to induce the employers to pay a little more wages and cut four or five hours or less off the week's work. And to accomplish this they peacefully decided that they were willing to sacrifice \$1,500 a day in wages until such time as those owning the tools of trade agreed to their conditions.

That they were clearly within their rights, no one with common sense attempts to deny. Their time being their own, they had a perfect right to do with it as they liked so long as they did not interfere with the right of other people to do likewise.

The machinists have a very effective way of handling strikes. Years of experience in settling disputes have disclosed where the weak points will be found, and so the men are kept busy and hopeful, and not allowed to brood over a few days' idleness, or to become anxious about the family supplies. All the qualities of which Americans are proud, are appealed to, and the result is that few if any care to incur the contempt of their fellow-workmen by showing an absence of backbone. A rebuff is treated as of no consequence, while a victory anywhere, big or little, is made the most of.

Pride is a great factor in winning strikes. "Haven't we, who have spent years in learning a trade, got more backbone than a sewer digger or a dock wolloper?" is

one way in which it is put. And as the sewer diggers last spring won their demand after a six weeks' strike, and the longshoremen didn't have to strike at all to win, it stands to reason that a skilled trade must also come out on top. At least they think it does.

As a rule the officers of a union are the most conservative of the membership, and naturally dread a strike; but when once entered into they bend all their energies to its winning, and play their cards as carefully as does any devotee of whist or poker. All of this is interesting. It is the pitting of bone and sinew against wealth—the attempt to bring about an equitable division of the joint products of labor and capital.

What is strange about all this is that **the men should be content with so little. They are the producers of all the wealth with which they are surrounded**, yet the niggardly bestowal of a fraction of it will quell all tumult and restore peace. Marmontel, in an address in 1757 in favor of the peasants of the north, put into the mouth of an imaginary orator these words:

The land which saw you born has repudiated you; the laws have excluded you from this common inheritance; you have cleared it, but others possess it; you and the ox yoked to the plow are put on the same level. Nature called you to a share in its domain, but tyranny has pushed you aside and says: "You are not men; live like the beasts, to serve and obey me."

Marmontel was trying to arouse the peasants to a realization of their rights in the soil, equally the gift of the Creator to all. Others see, if the machinists do not, that back of this refusal to give a shorter workday stands a powerful class that, no matter how it goes, will reap the fruits of the industry of both employer and employed. Suppose that coveted 12½ per cent raise is granted, what then? Already we see the landlord reaching out for it. Rents will absorb it all, or nearly all, and increase in other directions will take the rest. Indeed, the demand is based on the increased cost of living in part, coupled with a glimmer of the truth that men as a rule work too many hours a day.

Detroit is growing, and as population increases the value of land rises. Those who use it must pay more for it, either in the original purchase price, or in the monthly, quarterly or yearly rent demanded. There is no more land. Improved or unimproved, it makes no difference. The holder of the land is after that extra 12½ per cent, and he will get the greatest proportion of it.

Many a manufacturer in Detroit who held out against the demands of the machinists, would have gladly paid the increase if he had not feared the effect on his future earnings. He is not the one making enormous profits. Unless he has a monopoly of some kind, given him by a patent or bestowed by the government in the shape of tariff laws that reduces the competition, he can make no greater profits than the average in other businesses requiring capital, and the United States census shows that the average wealth of the country increases each year less than 5 per cent.

But the manufacturer is the head that is plainest in sight, and so it is natural that the wage-worker should strike at what he can see. Still the employer is not wholly blameless. Too many have forgotten their own humble origin, or have not taken sufficient notice of the fact that accident, combined with opportunity, has made them what they are in the world of wealth. They think ten hours a day little enough for the mechanic to toil, but themselves start in later and leave earlier. Of course they occasionally work nights, and maybe the day does string out from twelve to fourteen hours; but they also spend the summer at the seashore, or the winter in California or Florida, or take a trip to Europe, or stay at home a day or so at a time, if indisposed. And the man at anvil or forge, at drill or plane, keeps right on until nature refuses to let him live any longer.

It is true workingmen do not improve the opportunities they now have, and will waste some of the time gained when they win a strike for shorter hours.

For this they are to be blamed, yet not so much as at first blush appears.

"I don't know why it is," said an intelligent wage-worker to me only a short time ago, "but the moment I take up a book on political economy, I immediately fall to sleep."

There is nothing strange in this. To read any such matter intelligently, one has to think, and thinking is hard work, especially for the untrained mind, just as ditch digging is for the untrained muscle. Those who are to blame as much as anybody for this condition of affairs, this ignorance of the underlying cause of low wages and long hours, are those who, knowing the truth, allow themselves to be persuaded to forever chase after amelioratives. A plaster is all right to cover a sore, but it will never cure if the disease is in the blood.

If half the energy exerted by the machinists to raise wages and shorten hours was used against the present system of landholding, whereby the people are deprived of the values they create, the 12½ per cent increase demanded would look little indeed beside the benefits that would accrue to all wage-workers, mechanics and laborers alike. Every year the unearned increment going into the pockets of the landholding class, and out of the pockets of the wealth producing classes runs into the millions of dollars. And in addition to this, labor pays all the taxes, for it is only by taxing wealth created by labor that taxes can be paid. Now, suppose the people of Detroit, the machinists among them, should declare that this unearned increment should be used to pay taxes, leaving labor untaxed, is it not evident that labor would escape one burden at least?

But this is only one of the things that would happen with enterprise unrestrained. It would give such a boom to the building industry, with which machinists are closely connected, that the minimum scale for painters and carpenters, instead of being thirty cents an hour, would double—perhaps treble. For

cheap land would give many a man a chance to build his own home, and that means a business revival such as the world has never yet seen.

Some of the machinists and some of the manufacturers are beginning to see a glimmer of this, and are asking for more light. This is one of the good things that comes from strikes.

Yet striking is wasteful. The lost time can never be recovered. When the sun goes down, with no work done, that day can never be recalled. Still, the wage-worker on strike knows that during the year he will anyway lose a certain amount of time. It will be either voluntary or involuntary. And he reasons, and correctly, that no matter if he does lay off a week or so, the work requiring to be done will demand him at a time when otherwise he would have had nothing to do. In other words, the strike only shifts his leisure or idle time.

The manufacturer is not so well situated in this respect. He has his capital in his machinery, and his taxes, insurance and many other expenses are piling up all the time whether the shop is running or idle. He has stock in process of manufacture, the sale of which will enable him to take up the various notes which supplies him a part of his capital. If the work is not done, the notes must be extended, and new obligations incurred, and, though the bankers may be friendly, the manufacturer soon learns that business is business, and that money is not loaned to people who cannot pay it back when it is due.

So, at the end of the year the wage-worker finds that his wages average up about the same, even if he hadn't struck and remained idle for a few weeks. The manufacturer, however, incurs a positive loss that no exertion on his part can ever recover. And it must be kept in mind that a skilled mechanic cannot be picked off of every wayside bush like a common laborer. While four years is little enough to learn a trade, some parts are so complicated that a dozen years' experience is all

too short. Surely such men should be worth to themselves and to their employers more than mere ditch diggers.

A straw that no man should despise in watching the world of industry, is the increasing frequency of strikes. The papers are full of them. This is in the main the efforts of workingmen to make their wages keep pace with the increasing cost of living. Rents have made a marked advance, and as rents average about a quarter of a workingman's income, it is natural that he must have an increase or come out short in some other direction.

The only weapon he thinks he has is to strike, and this he does. The weak employers cannot long afford to have their plants stand idle, and give in. Others acknowledge the justice of the claim, based on the increased cost of living, and make a new agreement with the men. So, between the financially weak and the fair-minded employers there is given a good start to the new wage scale, which eventually others are compelled to adopt. The strike is won, and the increase in the wage fund is immediately felt in the retail stores of the city.

But in due time the chill will follow the fever. Trade will slacken. Employers will demand concessions, and an increasing number of idle men on the market will enable him to enforce them. It will then be a strong union, indeed, that can hold its own. All it can do is to act as a brake on the declining wage scale, and save something from the wreck.

When matters in the industrial world are as they should be, there will be no strikes, for the recompense of each worker will be in exact proportion to the labor performed. Then no one will work for another for less than he can earn working for himself. With land free, there will be a vent for surplus labor forever preventing a glut in the labor market.

The suppression of strikes by injunction is a serious question with organized labor. Several were issued

in Detroit against the machinists during the fall of 1901, which brought the matter right home to that association as it had been brought home heretofore to the draymen when the now celebrated case of Beck vs. The Teamsters' Union occupied the attention of the Michigan supreme court. Mr. Beck decided that he had gained a complete victory over the union, and a reading of the decision will bring everyone to the same conclusion. Later, Judge Donovan, when he modified the injunction against the theatrical employes, hedged it around with so many expressions of sympathy with wage-workers that it deadened the blow; nevertheless, he draws the line against some things workingmen have held they had the right to do.

It is to be expected that local judges that can be reached by the ballot will interpret supreme court decisions against labor organizations as liberally as possible. The supreme court, however, omitted sentiment, and in consequence a careful reading of the Beck decision shows how very little is left in the way of peaceful persuasion that can be carried on in the vicinity of a factory at strife with its former employes.

But the decisions of the Michigan courts are milk and water compared to the vigorous utterances against picketing, coercion, etc., as expressed by judges in other states. The statement is made that what is lawful for one individual to do may be unlawful if done by two individuals, and in several instances it has been ordered that strikers do not attempt to even persuade men at work to leave employment, no matter if the persuasion is of a peaceable character.

As a rule the courts, like the churches, are against the aspirations of laborers, organized or unorganized. Judges are the creatures of their environment, and, hedged around as they are by precedents, it is little wonder that the rights of employers of labor and of property should be thought of more moment than the rights of flesh and blood, as represented by the "lower classes." Here and there a judge rises to the import-

ance, from a humanitarian standpoint, of the problem before him, but the scarcity of such only accentuates their isolation. They cannot help being what they are, and they are as little responsible for their decisions as would be an idiot trying to fathom the mind of the Infinite.

Nor would the decisions be any the more just were a certain class of labor reformers to be placed in positions of judicial power. Like the Puritans who fled from the old world to escape persecution, and who, as soon as they arrived, proceeded to persecute all who differed with them in religious belief, so these labor reformers would use the coercive power of the government to oppress and despoil. I have heard otherwise honest-minded and industrious workmen make this very threat. It is a part of human nature which is nurtured and grows on present economic injustices, and which would continue to thrive on still other if not graver wrongs.

The man, be he employer or judge, who thinks trade unions can be suppressed by law, whether by injunctions or direct statutes, is mightily mistaken. Trade unions thrived when all the laws and all the courts were bent on their annihilation. In some respects they were more powerful when under the ban of the law than when left free to openly pursue their strike methods. To know what tyranny a trade union may exercise, "Put yourself in his place" must be read. Then it will be seen that, law or no law, injunction or no injunction, when the laborers are entirely right, they are bound to win. Not that every strike will be won, but those that by accident as well as cool calculation are started at the favorable moment when the employer is powerless, will gain their point in whole or in part. On the other hand, let the moment seem never so opportune and the men never so united, if the conditions are such that the employer can quietly rest and watch the men gradually grow discouraged as hunger creeps into the door of the home, he is sure to emerge from the conflict victorious.

As the ban of illegality was removed from the trade union, strikes changed their form of procedure for orderly and peaceable methods. But let suppression by injunction be once firmly established, and at the service of any employer who desires it, and these comparatively harmless operations will be changed to meet the exigencies of the changed conditions. There will be secret cliques formed, inner circles within inner circles, and, more dangerous than any other kind, individual initiatives that will end in terrorism and bloodshed.

When it was a hanging matter to steal a lamb, the thief rightly reckoned that while he was about it he might as well steal a sheep. When a trade union is debarred from attempting to gain its strikes for better conditions, by restrictive measures that infringe on his rights to the pursuit of happiness, the members will be driven to more drastic schemes than are now generally tried to gain their point.

AS TO POVERTY.

Poverty is a relative term. It is not so very hard that one is poor as compared to those who are rich in over-abundance, but what is hard is that the poor should have so little when measured by the simplest necessities of life. There is such a thing as absolute poverty, which does not require the contrast with luxury to breed discontent. But when this contrast is ostentatiously thrust upon the notice of the helpless poor, discontent grows into anarchy. Where one man lives in a palace and the other has not even a hovel for his abode; where one man has the finest of wearing apparel, and the other is scantily clothed even by rags; where one man feasts on the rarest delicacies, and the other starves without crumbs, it is there that we have the compost that quickens into life the poisonous fungi of social disintegration. The conditions of national ruin are hunger, cold and nakedness. Poverty begets ignorance, ignorance begets servility, and servility is that disposition which serves him who pays the least. Fairer wages and shorter hours can better these conditions.—*Benjamin Wood in "Bugle Calls."*