

CHAPTER XV.

HALF A LOAF vs. NO BREAD.

Is half a loaf better than no bread? This wise—or otherwise—remark has been used by a Detroit daily paper as a club to whack over the head a painter who, while complaining of lack of employment, refused to take a job offered him if he would work at half price.

“It may be granted,” says the paper to the painter, “that as a house painter you are worth all you ask. But has it never occurred to you that half a loaf is better than none, and that it is the duty of every man to be self-supporting even if he be not able to live as he would like to, or lay aside anything for a rainy day?” And plenty of like character.

The question practically is: Is a man justified in taking a less wage than that generally paid for his kind of work because he is unable for the moment to obtain work? Should he become the factor in the labor market that begins the chain that will, if pursued by all, inevitably reduce wages all around? Let us see how the scheme of being satisfied with half a loaf works.

The minimum rate of pay in Detroit for painters is, I understand, twenty-five cents an hour. Mr. Journeyman A, out of a job, applies for work, and is offered twenty cents an hour. “For the sake of his family,” let it be supposed, he accepts, displacing a twenty-five or thirty-cent an hour man, B. So A has a job, and B is on the street looking for work. Being unable to find it, B comes back to his employer and, “for the sake of his family,” consents to work for fifteen cents an hour. Another change takes place, and A, who first underbid, is again thrown out.

Result: No more work, but a lower rate established for all. For as soon as this cutting begins, it equally affects everybody in the shop, and in a short time the workmen take home much less than they formerly did. The "half loaf" that Mr. Journeyman A accepted as better than no bread, he has lost, at the same time cutting down the size of the loaves of many others.

The fact of the matter is the "half loaf" theory will not work for the betterment of wealth producers. Carried to its logical conclusion, Chinese wages would be princely compared to the rate that would soon be the price for all. One man out of employment would be in a position to reduce the rate of every man in employment in that line of activity, and what would be happening in one trade would happen to all. It would make the rate of life—the average manner in which the average man lives and supports his family—look like much less than "thirty cents."

Society owes a duty to the man out of work, and the man out of work owes a duty to society. What society owes to each citizen is the opportunity to employ himself. What each man owes to society is to return benefits equal to those society bestows on him. These two should establish such an equilibrium that there would be none out of employment willing to work for what the labor will exchange for in an open and free market.

How to bring about this state of affairs is the problem. Certainly the "half loaf" man or the paper who advocates the taking of work at any price are of no account in finding a solution. They would both make conditions harder instead of easier; would accentuate and increase poverty instead of lessening it.

Some of the trades unions of the country meet this difficulty by providing out-of-work benefits. Each member who is idle from inability to find an employer is given enough to live on. The cigarmakers have a very precise plan, and the Amalgamated Carpenters are equally forehanded in this regard. This fund is provided by a small tax on all at work. The mem-

bers realize that one must live, and so they create a fund that not only deprives a member of the excuse for working at less than the prevailing rate, but makes more of a man of him by making the rate high enough to meet what is thought to be "living" expenses. They take men off the labor market, in this way, and thus prevent such an oversupply as will induce conscienceless employers to attempt reductions even when they are making the highest profits in their experience.

No employer can fail to be influenced as to the right rate of wages by having a long line of men and women constantly passing before him and asking for work. Nor is he to blame for wishing to save in this or any other direction. He is subject to the same laws of competition as are the men in his employ. The trend of prices, unless sustained by a monopoly, is toward the cost of production, and strive he never so hard he cannot extricate himself from the planless scramble among his competitors for a market. What can be more natural, then, than the endeavor to get his work done as cheaply as he can, in the hopes that even if he does not employ help below the rates paid by others, at least he is paying no more.

The great middle class is tired of this eternal scramble for a market. And it is because of this that the Bellamy schemes look so fascinating, and have turned so many of this class to the socialistic propaganda which does away with competition, replacing planless with scientific production in so far as the extent of the market for each line of goods is concerned. Socialism, in fact, would do what the great trusts are doing, only the matter of profits would be eliminated, and the economies of production in the mass would be spread over all classes instead of being absorbed by a few stockholders. The objection to the socialistic propaganda does not lie in this direction at least.

Is it right to advise painters to rush into other employments and solicit work at less than the going

rates? What do day laborers think about it? Are they perfectly satisfied to accept conditions that make their employment the receptacle for every Tom, Dick and Harry willing to work for "half a loaf?" They have their rates of life as well as the painters, the carpenters, the machinists, the molders, the printers, the pressmen, and iron and wood workers generally. It is a fact that the introduction of labor-saving machinery has so invaded some trades that it is no longer necessary to serve long apprenticeships to be able to work at these callings, and this has had a tendency to reduce wages; but what complete demoralization would ensue if the theory of "half a loaf" should be the prevailing one! No one would know what his wages would be from week to week, and the bottom would so completely fall out of the labor market that the abyss of want would yawn for all wealth producers even more than it does today.

The trades unions of the country owe a debt to those suffering fellow workers who decline to accept "half a loaf" and insist on being reckoned the equals of their fellow men. They are the ones who are keeping up wages. By their insistence on fair pay, as fair pay goes under the present system of production, they add millions of dollars a year to the wage fund of the country. And they are an actual benefit to all honorable employers, for they steady the labor market by making it difficult or impossible for some to get their work done cheaper than others.

May the day never come when any considerable number of working men and women will act on the principle that, when looking for work, "half a loaf is better than no bread."