

CHAPTER XI
CONSUMER CONTROL
MAN'S UNDOING

It is rather late in the day to consider fundamentals, because there seems to be an idea, which has become fixed in the minds of politicians and labor leaders, that the essential processes of industry are all changed. Still, there is this to be considered: a day must come when people will be forced, through misery and hunger, to search for the reasons of their undoing. Then, perhaps, we shall be driven to look back, a long way back, for points in the progress of man which mark the periods when he lost his way. In this connection, the whole question of natural rights may be revived once more. Therefore, it may be to our advantage to take time by the forelock and look a little more deeply into this question of rights.

What are these rights? The primary rights of man are three: (1) the natural right of a man to himself, which includes the rights of freedom of thought, freedom of speech, and freedom of action. Without the right to himself, thought, speech and action cannot be used in his own defense nor as aids to his sustenance. (2) The natural right to use the earth, for the reason that he cannot draw food, fuel, clothing, and shelter from any other source. The earth is indispensable to him, as it is to any other animal. (3) The natural right to the product of his labor. These are the three natural

rights, and it was not until he lost his right to use the earth, when the State born of conquest and robbery was set up, that he discovered he had lost his right to the full value of his produce. Then, so that he would not make effective complaint, the State gradually took from him the remaining rights of freedom of thought, of speech, and of action. It is true it has not yet devised a means of taking thought from him but, so long as the State can restrict speech and action, thought has little or no practical value.

CONSPIRACY

Now turn to the modern use of the term right, and consider what is meant by it. First, let us take the phrase "right to work," which, in our civilization, we heard little or nothing about until the people were driven from the country into the towns. The conspiracy (referred to by Sir Thomas More in his *Utopia*) under the Tudors, started at the time of John of Gaunt, was twofold in its severity: (1) it was for the purpose of shifting the burdens of taxation, borne by landlords, onto the shoulders of the workers; (2) to divest the worker of his right to work for himself by taking his land (common land) from him and forcing him to enter the labor market. There are many references to this conspiracy in English history, but none so damning as that to be found in Thorold Rogers' work *Six Centuries of Work and Wages*. That which gives this reference great importance is the fact that Rogers was Drummond Professor of Political Economy at Oxford, and Professor of Statistics and Economic Science at King's College, London, and perhaps the most thorough investigator of labor conditions who worked in the nineteenth century. He says:

"I contend that from 1563 to 1824 a conspiracy, concocted by the law and carried out by parties interested in its success, was entered into to cheat the English workman of his wages, to tie him to the soil, to deprive him of hope, and to degrade him into irremediable poverty. For more than two centuries and a half the English law, and those who administered the law, were engaged in grinding the English workman down to the lowest pittance, in stamping down every oppression or act which indicated any organized discontent, and in multiplying penalties upon him when he thought of his natural rights."

THE LAND QUESTION

There was a time when working men thought it was worth while to debate the question of "the right to work." They were not satisfied then just to mouth the phrase; they wanted to know what it meant. There were two reasons for this: in the first place, they had not become electoral pawns in the game of politicians. Most of them had no votes. The other reason was there was little or no relief for able-bodied men. A third might be added, and that was that trade unions had just passed out of their infancy, and were not yet organized for political action. There was no government to support them as voting assets. In these debates that took place, it was usually found that the phrase "right to work" was included in the natural right to use the earth. It was an integral part of that right and could not be dissociated from it in principle. But the phrase was used by landless men—men who, having lost the alternative of working for themselves on land, were forced into the labor market to compete with their fellows for jobs. There, in the labor market without alternative, the phrase "right to work" was valueless as petition or aid

in getting a job. Hence, the coming of the land question into the domain of practical politics, and thereby opening up the historical inquiry of ascertaining how the people had been driven from the land into the towns. It was the landless man who made the land question popular; it was not a few political economists. Furthermore, in the debates that took place at that time, working men soon realized that the phrase "right to work," uttered by men in a congested labor market, had no substantial value politically or socially because, having no alternative, man's so-called "right to work" depended on the demand of consumers for the products of labor, and the only right to work that could be granted, was that which was entirely dependent upon the demand of consumers for goods. Many a time I have heard orators, speaking for the men, say the phrase "right to work" uttered by landless men in a congested labor market was something of a cruel joke. The demand of consumers for goods depends largely on the price and the quality of the desired article, and this again depends upon the purchasing power of the people's money, the purchasing power of the bill when exchanged for the articles required by the household. "How much will money buy?" was the question asked in these debates. Therefore, abundance was necessary to keep prices low. An extra penny tax on tea, or bread, or tobacco, or beer, meant a penny less for some other article that was required. You cannot pay the tax and have it. These debates, which afterwards were carried to the political platforms of the land, made it a simple thing for working men to understand the advantages of a free trade system and, also, the still greater advantage of a government that cost as little as possible. For a generation and a half the slogan of the working man in England was, "Peace, Retrenchment and Reform."

At the time of the last Boer War an extraordinary strike took place in the mines of South Africa, which in itself provided a lesson for the landless man in England, and one so near to his own heart that he would not have forgotten it, if his attention had not been turned to the Great War. The strike in the gold mines was the Kaffir strike. The conditions under which the South African native had to work were so horrible, according to Sir George Giffin's Commission, that the natives shook the dust of the Witwatersrand from their feet and trudged back to their kraals. There, they demanded of their chiefs their piece of land, which was theirs by natural right, and they grew their mealies and brewed their beer, and took their ease. These Kaffirs to whom we sent converting missionaries had what the vast majority of Englishmen had lost: they had an alternative. When the conditions in the mines were so bad that even these Kaffirs could not stomach them—they struck; but there was never a strike meeting held in Johannesburg or neighborhood. There was no soap-box oratory about the poor working man. They went home; that was sufficient. The strongest and richest companies mining gold were crippled, and the proprietors were obliged to petition the British Government to permit them to bring in Chinese labor to take the places of the Kaffirs. It might be said that the Kaffir strike was the only effective strike that will ever be recorded. They returned to their kraals and began tilling their land, harvesting their mealies, brewing their beer, with a deep feeling of economic security.

It is of no use for labor to talk about the "right to work" so long as it is landless, and the only way that it can have this right restored is by recapturing the alternative to entering a congested labor market. But, as trade union leaders have always given the land ques-

tion the cold shoulder, there is little hope for the men in our labor market. Trade union leaders in the past thoroughly understood what it would mean to them if labor had an alternative.

It is curious how the Marxians and the Sorelians in the ranks of labor, and in and about the White House and Congress, have missed in *Das Kapital* the only section of the work that deals with fundamentals. I have never yet met a Socialist or a Communist who revealed to me that he had taken the trouble to read Marx's chapters on *The Modern Theory of Colonization*. There is a very good reason why this should be, and that is the reference to Mr. Peel's colonial experiment, of which Marx says:

"Mr. Peel . . . took with him from England to Swan River, West Australia, means of subsistence and of production to the amount of £50,000. Mr. Peel had the foresight to bring with him, besides, three thousand persons of the working class, men, women and children. Once arrived at his destination, Mr. Peel was left without a servant to make his bed or fetch him water from the river."

Why? Because they landed on a shore where landlords were unknown, and when they saw the free and open land, they decided they would not work for Mr. Peel; they would work for themselves. They left England landless and, when they reached Australia, they had only to step ashore to have all their natural rights restored. Is it any wonder that Marx was forced to the conclusion that "the expropriation of the mass of the people from the soil forms the basis of the capitalist mode of production."

SCARCITY OF TERMS

There is another extraordinary "right" which trade unionism arrogates to itself, and that is the "right to organize." This is one of the most peculiar "rights" that has ever been invented and, as was well said in the debates in Parliament years ago, trade unionists in demanding the "right to organize" were harking back to the worst times of the Tudors, for when the State grants the privilege to organize, once more is opened up the whole detestable system of King's privilege, the privilege he granted to his courtiers for despoiling the people. There is no such thing as "right to organize." A right is co-extensive in economics with every man, woman and child. The phrase should read "privilege to organize." Unfortunately, we are rather short of a precise terminology. With all the new words that our modern philologists love to gather, there is a scarcity of essential terms. The many meanings given in the lexicon to the term "right" are enough to turn the heads of Philadelphia lawyers. Mr. Justice Holmes was so fogged that he sometimes called a privilege a right. There seems to be something in the word that frightens a lawyer, and that may very well be, because he may sense (if he have enough wit) that one right restored might easily supplant thousands of laws.

MINORITY RULE

Suppose the industrialists of the country should combine for the specific purpose of protecting their property against organized labor. What would happen? The outcry would raise the heavens. Yet, the so-called "right to organize" is granted by parliamentary institutions, but no institution that granted the same privilege

to employers would weather the storm of protest. So this "right to organize" is selective, restrictive, and especially sanctioned for a mere section of society. When it is taken into consideration that the latest figures of the American Federation of Labor show that it has a membership of less than three million and a half, it may be understood that a mere minority in industry may, because of having been granted the privilege to organize, defy the whole of the rest of labor and the country generally on a point at issue, and cause untold misery and destruction of life and property. Now I take it that we have entered into an entirely new phase of the so-called labor question. Whereas, in the past, violence in strike was mainly accidental, it now becomes deliberate and intentional. This leads one to the conclusion that many of our strike agitators have thrown Marx overboard and have taken to Georges Sorel. The phraseology of the French labor philosopher is noticed in many of the speeches that are reported from strike areas. It is unnecessary to quote more than one of the concluding paragraphs from Sorel's *Reflections on Violence*:

"I believe that I have brought an important contribution to discussions on Socialism; these discussions must henceforth deal exclusively with the conditions which allow the development of specifically proletarian forces, that is to say, with violence enlightened by the idea of the general strike. All the old abstract dissertations on the Socialist regime of the future become useless; we pass to the domain of real history, to the interpretation of facts—to the ethical evaluations of the revolutionary movement. . . . The bond which I pointed out in the beginning of this inquiry between Socialism and proletarian violence appears to us now in all its strength. It is to

violence that Socialism owes those high ethical values by means of which it brings salvation to the modern world."

It will be gathered from this that we have entered a new period, and if there be one person more than another who ought to pay the strictest attention to the Sorelian philosophy, it is a member of Congress, for it is likely that he will be the first to be dispensed with when the great conflict takes place. He will get short shrift under the new regime, for Sorel has not a good word to say for him, and considers that he is a mere obstructionist.

PRIVILEGED GROUPS

Therefore, most of the rights that we hear about today are not rights at all; they are merely privileges strictly limited to what is called "high pressure groups." These controversies are clouded by all the vapors of sentimentalism and superficial notions of political economy, and it is exceedingly difficult for the serious-minded student to come to grips with facts. There is, moreover, more nonsense talked today than at any time in this struggle, for the simple reason that there is no debate. Anybody may say anything, and go unchallenged. What takes place in conferences that are held between labor agitators and heads of industries, in the way of settling a strike, is not made public. All the consumer hears is that either the nominal wage has been raised or shorter hours have been granted, which means that every time the costs have been raised. The consumer, however, has nothing to say. Consumers are merely accessories in the controversy and, so long as they buy the products of labor, all goes well. But suppose the privilege of collective bargaining were extended to consumers. Sup-

pose the consumers of the country, including all the disparate elements of the two labor organizations (preferably the wives and mothers of these men) were to decide that they would do the collective bargaining with the salesmen of the products they desire each day. What then? Strike is a weapon that can be used to advantage by other bodies besides labor. Strikes of the consumers take place just before every slump, but nobody notices that strike, that is, it is not noticed as strike. Yet it is the most effective one that takes place.

History records that there have been numerous tax strikes. The old phrase "redress of grievance before supply" is packed full of the dynamite of effective strike. Labor leaders and politicians take notice! What has happened before may happen again. You cannot grant a privilege to one section of the community with the certainty that no other section of the community will ask for a like privilege. There is, however, this to be considered so far as consumers are concerned: that if they ever organize for "collective bargaining," they will win, whether a privilege has been granted or not. All they have to do is to strike. No pickets will be necessary; no soap-box orators; once the idea takes hold, it will require no publicity, no press agents; it will run through the whole community like quicksilver.

And then what? It is possible that Messrs. Green and Lewis, the administration and its supporters, are sowing seeds that may become dragon's teeth. A long-suffering public, the consumers, may some day turn and rend the forces that are dissipating their means of subsistence. Once Congress realizes that the taxpayers have the power to stop supply, politicians may have to find some other means of making a livelihood. Once they understand that the taxpayers can control

labor disputes, labor leaders will have to return to the pick or shovel, for the day is speedily coming when increased costs of production, and increased taxation, will reach a point when something will break. The mad game of raising the cost of production, and imposing heavier, and still heavier, taxes will be felt by everybody in the land.