

The Position Of Labor

By HENRY GEORGE III

One of Shakespeare's characters once said "Something is rotten in Denmark." But, while it has become a household phrase, it does not portend the grim days that lie ahead when we say "Something is wrong in America." For something is wrong, definitely wrong with America, when strikes erupt like boils pouring their venomous hatreds throughout the body politic. Something is wrong when the most productive people that history remembers, in the most bounteous country of which we know cannot fill their bellies.

Man labors that he may eat and sleep and hope, and here, where the productive power of man has been increased ten thousand fold, we find men and women hungry and children suffering with malnutrition, because they have not enough to satisfy their needs. How can such a state of affairs exist?

How is it that millions of our people may only have a transitory decency of living when we are burning and bombing and destroying the fruit of our labor in our effort to destroy our enemies? How could war, which is dedicated to destruction instead of construction, produce better times? How is it that now that the war is over the arm of labor withers, and the brain of invention flags?

Why Isn't Labor Better Paid?

With the capacity of labor to produce fifty per cent more than existed before the war, with the same expenditure of effort, how is it possible that labor cannot enjoy a sixth as well as a seventh day of rest, and yet get more than labor ever received before?

Is the alchemy of our modern science such a poison that while it teaches labor how to produce more it yet makes the produced article yet more unattainable?

How can we have better living if the distribution of the wealth created is so disproportionate that a few have much and the many have little?

It is as though our science of making bread has exceeded our knowledge of how to eat it. There is something that is terribly wrong here at home.

For years we have boasted that American labor can outproduce the labor of the rest of the world, yet we are faced with labor that is actually starving and not just as a result of a recent series of strikes.

Strikes Symptoms Of Sickness

The strikes that have convulsed the nation since the close of foreign hostilities are but the symptoms of the sickness that is spreading throughout our social organism. Men do not of themselves want to band together and form unions or brotherhoods, or fraternities. They do not individually want collective bargaining. They do not want to be called out on costly strikes that empty their bank accounts and dinner pails. But men will resort to all of these measures to attain what they feel is their right. They will give their hardearned dollars to organization workers and leaders even if here and there they be fleeced and gyped rather than continue to accept handouts from those who value them as a commodity or machine.

Labor, organized labor is restive. Too long it has been made to compete with itself for a chance to work, and now, in the weight and might of numbers, it is demanding a greater share in the distribution of wealth.

Natural Laws Govern Prices

For one, my sympathies are with every man who toils, from the bootblack to the bank president, and my indignation is against those who toil not, neither do they spin, yet they have countless retainers who garner their profits of privilege.

But while I am sympathetic to labor, as at the moment in the throes of unproductive strikes, I cannot help but ask how can labor hope to benefit itself and the public at large by demanding that the consumer cost price be maintained while the labor production wage be raised. It is my belief that there are natural laws, such as control matter, light, gravity; laws with which we must reckon if we wish to accomplish anything; laws which if ignored assert themselves none the less to our embarrassment.

And just as there are natural laws which determine the growth of a plant or animal, so I believe there are natural laws which govern wages and interest; that determine the avenues of application of capital, and guide the efforts of labor.

But We Deny

Natural Laws

There is something wrong here in America because we have turned our back on the natural law that holds the balance of blessing or suffering in our social organism. The present strikes may result in all that labor at the moment demands, but that will get labor no nearer the equitable distribution of wealth.

If labor's efforts are ever to be permanently effective they must be based on the law that governs wages, and not on legislative enactments. They must strike at the cause of inequality and stop quibbling about the artificial pump-priming.

No tree has ever been effectively felled by chopping at the top, but the axe that bites close to the roots controls the direction of fall.