

NORTH AMERICAN REVIEW.
No. CCCXCV.
OCTOBER, 1889.
p. 385-399

THE WARNING OF THE ENGLISH STRIKES.
BY HENRY GEORGE.

How it may come that the New Zealander shall yet sit and meditate on the broken arch of London Bridge, the strike of the London dock laborers gives something like a suggestion.

War is the great destroyer. Of all wars, civil war is most destructive. Of all civil wars, that which rages, not between different sections of the same country, but between different classes in the same territory. And most destructive of all civil wars of this kind is that waged in great cities.

Such strikes as that in London are in reality incipient civil war of this kind. Passions that make man the most destructive of animals are aroused. They find expression, it is true, only in passive, not in active form — in refraining rather than in doing. But it is like superheated water, which, so long as confined, retains its liquid form. Once let the pressure be relieved, and with explosive force it flashes into steam.

Consider the spectacle that the banks of the lower Thames have presented for some weeks past. The wheels of industry blocked, commerce paralyzed, perishable cargoes rotting, ships unable to go to sea, trade driven away, enormous losses going on, ordered armies of tens and scores of thousands parading, great bodies of men fed by public rations — for the time it could hardly have been worse if the Channel fleet had been annihilated and Continental squadrons blocked the river's mouth.

Yet law and order have reigned throughout. The forces that keep the peace are strong in London. The police are numerous, of splendid physique, and well disciplined, and large bodies of the flower of the regular army are constantly in reserve. And the leaders of the strikers have used their influence to prevent violence. But what has been going on in London is nevertheless war — a contest in which both parties have been trying to inflict loss and injury on each other, counting for success on doing so. Only passive war, it is true; a contest of endurance, not of physical force. But the war spirit was there — the sense of injury and feeling of animosity; the passion that leads to the taking of life and destruction of property. And the danger was there. It needs but an accident to convert passive into active energy. Burns said two weeks ago that his influence alone had prevented the firing of London in several places.

Greatest of great cities, the world's metropolis, Babylon of Babylons, yet steadily growing with accelerated rapidity, London is today what New York and Chicago and St. Louis and San Francisco promise to become; the type towards which all great cities tend. It is in London of all places on earth that one may see and feel the strength and weakness of modern civilization, its glory and its shame, the high possibilities it is opening, and the explosive forces it is generating. There is London and London, it is true — the London of society, of science, of politics, of religion, of philanthropy, [sic] of business, of amusement. And he who has password and key

may see one London and be hardly conscious of the existence of any other. But there is also the London of hard strain and bitter pinching, of want and misery, of vice and degradation.

And if one strives to realize what the whole great city is and what it holds, the streets of London are the place where it may most clearly be seen that the tendencies of modern civilization are towards catastrophe; and that, as Macauley saw, the Huns and Vandals that may be yet to come, will come not from without, but from within.

A few weeks ago I stood in New Bond Street before a painting in a dealer's window. It was by a noted painter, Moscheles, but of an every-day scene. Not only an every-day scene in London, but in New York and other great cities. In the background fine shops, with the passers and loiterers one sees in fashionable retail streets; at the curb a private carriage, the liveried coachman erect on his box and a fur-caped footman springing to open the door for a richly-dressed lady coming out of a jeweler's establishment. In the foreground, three sandwich-men tramping along.

I noted for a few minutes those who stopped. They glanced at this picture a moment, and then, as though it were too familiar for attention, turned to picture of mountain or seacoast, of fruits or flowers, or the graceful female form. A man with high-lettered hat and long oilcloth coat all printed over glanced in a moment from his handing out of circulars. I asked him what the picture was. It was a picture advertising a theatre, he said.

It was more. Into this picture of familiar things the painter, with the subtle power that is in his art, had put the problem of modern civilization. Underneath it, a piece of cardboard bore the legend, "In the year of our Lord, 1889!"

Almost twenty centuries; and in the greatest and richest of Christian cities, whence missionaries are sent to Asia, to Africa, to the islands of the sea, human labor is cheapest of commodities, and man, "the roof and crown of things," is turned into a signpost! It is this paradox and problem that this London strike brings out.

This strike of dock laborers is, in many respects, the most remarkable of the industrial conflicts which in recent years have been so many; remarkable because of the class of men embraced, the endurance manifested, and the sympathy excited, and for the growing ideas and new influences it discloses.

The London dock laborers consist of a small class who have something like steady employment, and a larger class of casuals who are taken on by the hour as needed. The work being unskilled labor, the London docks have been the last chance of unemployed men physically able to do such work. It is at their gates that the pressure for employment has most strikingly shown itself. Around them have gathered every morning thousands of men — men with hungry wives and children, men who had walked the streets all night, or got what rest they could in alley-ways, beneath railway arches, in doorways, or behind boxes — waiting the appearance of the contractors or dock foremen to pick out those to be set to work, and then pressing, scrambling, fighting for the chance like hungry dogs for a bone. Journals like the *Pall Mall Gazette* have made their readers familiar with these scenes, not merely by pen-pictures of onlookers, but by accounts from men who have gone amid the crowds and struggled for work; and sympathy has

been excited which has shown itself substantially during this strike.

But for this deep and wide sympathy the dock laborers would have been unable to maintain a strike for more than a few days, if even beyond a single day. Besides the contributions that have flowed in through newspapers and directly to the committees, every parade and public meeting has been made a means of collecting money from the crowds, some £400, mostly in pennies, having been taken in at the Hyde Park demonstration; and the streets in the East End have been scoured by strikers' collectors, who accosted every passer and boarded every omnibus. Besides the contributions of money — in which far-off Australia bore the palm — the shopkeepers in the vicinity of the docks made liberal donations in kind, even the pawnbrokers having reduced or waived interest on articles pawned by strikers or their wives. The Salvation Army soup-houses reduced their prices to strikers and their families one-half at the first, and afterward, I believe, dealt out food on ticket without charge.

All the charitable and religious societies working in the east of London seem, in the same spirit, to have done what they could to assist and support the strikers. Pressure has been brought to bear on the dock directors by city business men to induce them to yield, while the religious elements working to the same end included such extremes as General Booth, of the Salvation Army, the skirmishers, so to speak, of the low wing of the Established Church, and the Bishop of London, its official local head; Albert Spicer, the leading Congregational layman; and Cardinal Manning, the foremost representative of English Catholicism.

Perhaps even more striking than all this — at least even more ominous to “things as they are” — is the fact that the policemen detailed to march with the first procession of strikers subscribed among themselves to pay for a band, and that the guards in their barracks at Birdcage Walk cheered the Hyde Park procession as it passed. It was when the French guards sided with the mob that the Bastille fell. And when the day comes that policemen refuse to club and soldiers to shoot men to whom they are bound not merely by human but by class sympathy, the guarantees of the existing order, on which all over Europe the House of Have so confidently leans, are gone.

It would be a mistake to suppose that all this sympathy which has enabled penniless, unskilled men to hold out for a month is merely sympathy with poverty and suffering, such as might go out to victims of flood or fire. It is something more. It has in it the feeling — ranging from uneasy suspicion to passionate conviction — that the dock laborers are victims of social injustice. It has in it, in large degree, a desire to do more than to help the dock laborers — the desire to raise the spirit and promote social discontent among the most downtrodden of the English people. And it is as an evidence of the growth of such discontent that this strike is most significant. It is in this respect far more significant than any of the strikes of the skilled trades.

An English politician of the first rank, then a cabinet minister, said to me some years ago: “In spite of its shocking contrasts, the existing order of things is secure in England. Go to the entrance of the park of an afternoon in the season. There you will see in long procession the utmost extravagance of luxury, the very ostentation of wealth. Look at the faces of the poorer people crowded together to watch the show. You will not find in them, the expression of envy or hatred, the consciousness that their robbery provides this luxury, but of pure admiration. This is really the feeling of one extreme towards the other. The poor admire the rich. The man who

cannot find work does not feel bitterly towards the great landlord or capitalist, but towards the man whose competition he thinks is depriving him of employment. The man who has three shillings a day envies only the man who has three and sixpence. And so through all gradations of society, each class is more than content to see others above it, because of the conscious superiority with which it looks down on those beneath it.”

This is, indeed, the strength of the existing order. But this keen observer made, I think, the same mistake as one who, from the temper of the crowds that watched the carriages rolling from Paris to Versailles something over a century ago, had argued the permanence of the ancient regime. And though he is doubtless now of the same opinion as when he thus spoke, yet during the seven years that have passed strong influences have been at work beneath the surface of British politics and society. On the one hand, a recognition of the fundamental injustice which denies to the great body of the British people their natural, equal, and unalienable right to the use of British soil, and makes the element on which and from which all must live the private property of some, has spread widely and deeply. On the other hand, socialism has been making way. The two things are widely different and in some respects antagonistic, but both foster social discontent.

And beneath all this is the effect of compulsory education, of the extension of the franchise, of cheap newspapers and cheap books, of the efforts that have been making to improve the intelligence, the morality, the physical well-being of the poor — from the teetotal movement, the Salvation Army, and the People's Palace, to the flower missions and the taking of children from the slums for a month, a week, or a day in the country, there giving them glimpses that forever after make them dissatisfied with what before seemed natural because it was all they knew.

None of these agencies have yet completed their work; they are only beginning it. The board schools have not yet been in operation for twenty years. The only really radical half-penny paper is but two years old. The system of registration which disfranchises great bodies of workingmen, and the property suffrage which gives to richer men two, four, and six votes apiece, still prevents democratic strength from fairly showing itself. And the generation is not yet fairly on the stage in which other ameliorative influences will tell.

But the steady, oftentimes cruel, work of school boards and truant officers in driving even hungry children to school is beginning to show in the decadence of local dialects and the disappearance of illiteracy. The Star has a circulation of over two hundred thousand. John Burns, the leader of this strike, is a member of the County Council, on which peers of the realm are glad to sit, while candidates for office find it to their interest to show sympathy and send money to the strikers.

Let it be granted, as some contend, with an air of thus settling all social problems, that the condition of the masses is, on the whole, growing better. Man is not an ox for whom any standard of contentment can be fixed; who, given so much food and drink, will fill his stomach and chew the cud. His desires grow by what they feed on; are aroused by glimpses of new gratifications. According to De Tocqueville, it is when things are growing better, not when they are growing worse, that revolutions come. This at least is certain: that hope is an essential element in the social discontent that shatters institutions. American slaveholders were right when, in the interests of the “peculiar institution,” they made it a crime to teach a slave to read, and sought as far as possible to prevent his seeing or hearing of a free black.

Each year as it passes is making English thought and English conscience more restive under existing social conditions; is making more certain either peaceful readjustment or blind and forcible revolt. Between these two every one of any influence must take his choice. If he will not aid the one, he is helping on the other.

As I write, pulsing flashes in the cable mirror have told the western world that the strike is ended and London breathes free again. After a month's strife the Cardinal whom men know only to reverence and love, and whose strength in meekness has been abated neither by years nor by Rome's purple, has effected a compromise.

Think of it. So has our civilization soared that what happened in London when the sun was sinking is told in New York ere the shadow's have more than begun to lengthen. Think of what advances in the arts of production this suggests. Then think of what this London strike so forcibly brings out — that in the distribution of wealth we are in reality no further advanced than when barbarian fought barbarian.

We girdle the earth; we weigh the stars; we rule scales to the hundred-thousandth of an inch; we make instruments so delicate that they record and give back again the finest inflections of human speech. Yet when it comes to dividing the product of their joint exertion between labor and capital, we have nothing better than

"The good old plan.

That they should get who have the power, and they should keep who can."

The London strike is over. There was war. There is a truce. And with the next quarrel war will begin again.

The lesson of this London strike ! What is it but the lesson of the strikes and lock-outs in the Illinois coal-fields; of the New York freight-handlers' strike; of the Chicago strike, out of which grew the explosion of the Haymarket bomb and the hanging of the Anarchists; of the southwestern railroad strike; of the Pittsburg riots the lesson of all strikes, coming sharper and clearer as the years go on? It is the lesson that the social problem cannot be ignored; that unless the moral advance of our civilization is commensurate with its intellectual and material advances, civilization itself is doomed. A civilization in which the arts of production advance by leaps and bounds, and distribution is left to war, though but passive war, is like an Eiffel Tower standing on one leg. The higher we carry it the more certain the final crash. That is what we are doing here in the United States, as there in great Britain. And every year it becomes more dangerous.

For every year society becomes integrated, industry more complex and interdependent, and the stoppage of one function more likely to involve and paralyze others. You may cut a worm in two, and both pieces will live. But a bodkin's touch in a vital place, and your man is dead.

The loss caused by the London strike is estimated at from two to three million pounds. Had it continued in its highest intensity during the whole time, the loss would have been much greater.

Had the stevedores and the wharfmens and the coal-handlers stayed out as long as the dock laborers, every factory in London and its neighborhood might have been closed. As it was, coal rose to forty-five shillings a ton, mail steamers were delayed for days, excursion steamers with full passenger lists had to give up engagements, while colliers, turning back, literally carried coals' to Newcastle. The gas stokers refused to come out when asked, for they had just won a concession on a threatened strike of their own, and sent a donation instead. Supposing they had not won the concession, and had come out, and left London in darkness but for a night — London, where no man knows his neighbor; London, with its army of thieves and vagrants; its public houses certain in such case to be sacked, and their spigots set flowing ere the peal of twelve! The manifesto of the strike leaders calling on all workmen to stop work fell flat. But supposing it had been followed in only a few of the more vital occupations, as at a time when the strike spirit was more rife it might have been, what would have been the loss? and the danger?

As it is, the strike has cost from ten to fifteen millions of our money, to speak of no more than money cost. What has it settled? There is a gain in some ways, but nothing is settled. The dock companies will hesitate before refusing the next demand that involves a strike, and other employers will be warned by their loss. But on the other hand, the substantial success of this strike will prompt to others. The question of division between employer and employed is still left to force; the labor question, the question of questions for our civilization, is untouched.

See precisely what has been the gain. Fresh spirit has been infused into a downtrodden body of workers, and the social question again forced on public attention for the warning of those who have eyes to see and ears to hear; the Socialists have made a gain, and their propaganda will go on with more ardor and zeal than ever; and a considerable body of the strikers will, for a while at least, have better wages and more permanent work. But the dock companies will employ fewer casuals. So far from any vent being opened for the mass of unskilled unemployed labor constantly congregating in London, such poor vent as the docks afforded will be narrowed, perhaps closed, for some of the dock companies do not employ casuals.

This is the hopelessness of trades-unions and strikes, so far as any settlement of the labor question is concerned. It is like leveeing a river subject to flood. Every levee that is raised leveeing a river subject to flood. Every levee that is raised requires constant watching, and every new levee increases the pressure on all. Nay, the illustration is hardly strong enough. For the rise of the water also increases the swiftness of the current that carries it off. But the restrictions with which trades-unions keep each their own little territory from inundation by unemployed labor do not add to the facility with which that labor finds employment.

Am I, then, opposed to strikes? My answer would be, No! A strike is the necessary weapon of the trades-union, and without it the trades-union would be of as little effect as a prohibitory act without a penal clause. I believe, as I have never neglected an opportunity of telling workingmen, that trades-unions can accomplish nothing large and permanent, and that the method of raising wages by strikes is the method of main strength and stupidity. But I also believe that trades-unions and strikes, and especially among such a class as the London dock laborers, may so raise the spirit of men, so, temporarily at least, improve their condition, as to enable them to act in a more promising line. There is no hope from the very poor. They are as dangerous as the very rich.

The organization of the dock laborers in Glasgow and Belfast,* which preceded the London strike and won considerable concessions, was initiated by Scottish single-tax men, and the money which enabled the Glasgow strikers to hold out until they brought the employers to terms was advanced by an English single-tax man. These men look on labor organizations and their necessary weapon, the strike, merely as a means for infusing heart and hope into a downtrodden class, and so improving their condition that they may be able to see in the monopoly of the natural element of all production the real cause of the unnatural competition in the labor market, and in the restoration of equal rights in the soil, the simple remedy to be applied through the ballot. The London organization and strike seems to have been initiated and managed by Socialists, though supported by all who have sympathy with the condition of the laborer, and brought to a final close by the offices of Cardinal Manning.

* One of them being a system of pay ticket, cashable in certain public houses, at the price of taking a drink. I have been struck in England and Scotland by the number of ardent teetotalers who are working for social reform, Burns, by the bye, being a strict temperance man. The temperance people who imagine that could drinking be abolished poverty would cease, in large degree mistake cause for effect; but that every advance in temperate habits among the working classes does increase both the disposition and the power to overthrow the conditions that produce poverty is clear.

Nor do the thorough-going Socialists hope by mere trades-unionism and sporadic strikes to accomplish more than preparatory work. In fact, they are opposed to trades-unionism as it has developed in Great Britain and in the United States, as forming an aristocracy of labor, which prevents the union they deem essential. What they are bent on is such a general and universal organization of labor as will enable labor to appropriate all the tools and means of production, to control all industry, abolish competition, and do away with the wage system by putting every one on the pay-roll. It must have been a glad Saturday afternoon to them when the manifesto calling for a general strike in London was issued. The hope proved delusive, but for a few hours at least they must have thought that the time long waited for had come.

Now that I have answered the question, some readers would like to ask, Let me put one. I would like to ask the intelligent, well-to-do people, of whom the readers of *The North American Review* on both sides of the Atlantic are so largely composed — the professors, clergymen, doctors, and lawyers, the bankers, merchants, manufacturers, and capitalists — whether they are in favor of strikes. I do this because on both sides of the Atlantic the influence of this class is, in the main, passively or actively exerted in favor of strikes.

I know that there is a good deal of gush about profit-sharing as preventing strikes, or arbitration as taking their place, talked by, or rather to, this class, — for they, and not workingmen, are its consumers. But this amounts to nothing, unless it be to the admission that organization among workingmen, with some method of enforcing their “reasonable” demands, is, in the nature of things, necessary. The profit-sharers assume that all employers have profits, and that wages called by another name would cease to be wages. The believers in arbitration assume that men who have the power of enforcing their demands will consent to submit them to arbitration, or they vaguely contemplate some kind of courts which will have power to compel employers to pay wages they do not wish to pay and workingmen to work when and where they do not want to. This is the only sort of arbitration that would prevent strikes, for all human law rests

ultimately on force, and though a league of nations might put an end to international war, it could only be on the condition that the power of the league should be turned against the nation that refused to obey the mandate of its tribunal. The profit-sharers and the arbitrationists ought to go to the Socialists, where they belong, for the State Socialists, with their organization of all industry and fixing of all prices, are the thorough-going profit-sharers and arbitrationists. Indeed, they are there already, for they are, in fact, but rose-water Socialists.

There are also those who condemn strikes with the confidence and vigor of men who, from premises in which essential facts are suppressed, argue, by logical methods, to false conclusions. They say that it is the right of every employer to employ, and of every workman to work for, whom he pleases and on what terms he pleases, and that while workmen have an unquestioned right to stop work individually, they have no right to combine to force others to stop. These men have shut eyes for boycotting by employers, but are alive to the wickedness of boycotting by workmen. Against combinations of capitalists to freeze out business rivals, to blackmail and rob under forms of law, they have little or nothing to say, but are bold as lions in inveighing against the violation of personal liberty by labor combinations. Though there is an implied falsehood in their premises, the vigor with which they push to their conclusions is better than the weak tea of the shilly-shally school. But their day both in Great Britain and in the United States is gone, and what influence they may exert on workingmen is the opposite of what they wish.

But the position of the main body of the class I speak of, as shown in press, pulpit, and university teaching, has, in certain fashion, advanced beyond that of the ultras who would put down strikes and substitute nothing. Generally it regards strikes as all right if not carried too far, or, at least, as a necessary evil. Not merely is the influence of this most influential class mainly exerted to prevent the spread of ideas that aim at something better, but it acquiesces in and fosters ideas that look to restriction, regulation, and interference as the only way of doing anything for workingmen.

I have not space to point out how in England the real strength of socialism comes from the upper rather than from the lower classes, but in some respects this is obvious. A committee of peers, the chairman being Lord Dunraven, has been for some time taking testimony in regard to the sweating system. The character of the measures they will propose is clear in advance. To cure evils caused by restriction they will propose more restrictions; the enforcement by law of such prohibitions and regulations as trades-unions try to enforce by combinations and strikes. Michael Davitt raised in Ireland the cry of the land for the people. How have the ruling class striven to head off the agitation thus begun? By gross interferences with what they declare to be the rights of property, by stepping in between man and man and fixing prices. And that not sufficing, by furnishing one particular class with capital to buy farms at the cost and risk of the whole body of taxpayers. What is the difference in principle between supplying Irish tenants with money to buy farms and supplying English operatives with money to buy factories, or London costermongers with money to buy donkeys? And since the purse of government is only the purse of taxpayers, since governments produce nothing, but can merely give with one hand what they take with the other, what is the difference, save as a matter of adjustment, between furnishing money to buy these things and the simpler plan of taking them from one set of men and handing them over to another? The difference between thorough-going State Socialists like Mr. Hyndman and the majority of Parliament is not of direction, but of degree. And in this country the same tendency

may be seen. What is our protectionism but a form of socialism?

The great loss of the London strike falls on non-combatants. This is the case with all such strikes, and increasingly. And designedly. Just as towns are bombarded to make garrisons capitulate, so it is the true policy of strikers to make the general public feel injuriously their opponents' obstinacy.

As to strikes being all right so long as they do not involve force, why, all strikes in occupations which unemployed labor can enter must involve force of some kind. This London strike — thanks largely to Mr. Burns, who is really a superior man, and of whom I remember saying to my companion when, some five years ago, I first met him, that if he lived he would be heard of, and thanks to such men as Cardinal Manning, to say nothing of the police — has been, by all accounts, a most decorous and well-bred strike. Nevertheless there was something that kept men who would have been glad to take the places of the strikers from applying for work, and I read in a London paper of a train of meat wagons, which the strikers' pickets mistakenly thought had come from the docks, being compelled to turn back. Did the drivers turn back merely because they feared the pickets would feel bad if they passed on?

Are strikes necessary? Under present conditions in which the opportunity of employment is a privilege, in which men talk and think of those who "furnish work" as benefactors, they are inevitable, and must increase in magnitude and intensity. When wealth is concentrating in great blocks, when capital is combining in all directions, the growing intelligence and increasing aspirations of the laboring masses will not permit them to be crowded to the wall without struggling. Under these conditions strikes can only be prevented by laws which will destroy liberty and put aside the rights of property. But is there no alternative?

What is the real justification of the strike, both in the minds of the men who engage in it and in the minds of those who support it? Is it not that the men who thus try to force their employers have no power to employ themselves?

What more obvious, stated nakedly, than that, while all men have a right to work or not to work as they see fit, no one has a right to prevent any one else from working, and that no one has a right in any way to force another to employ him or to compel him to assent to the terms of such employment. Yet declare this, as applicable under present conditions to mere laborers in London or New York, and you but mock them. For to say nothing of the minor restrictions and taxations which prevent men from working, our treatment of the natural basis of all work is one which prevents men from working.

Go up in imagination, as it were in a balloon, above London or New York, or any city in which unemployed men are struggling for work, or preventing others from working in order to compel some poor little advance in wages. Look down, as it were, from a height.

What is man, the animal who builds cities, and excavates docks, and lays wires under the ocean, and drives ships over it? Is he not a land animal, whose very body is composed of land? What is his production but the bringing-forth on land of materials drawn from land, by moving, combining, separating them so as to satisfy his desires? Look, and in every direction see land

half used or not used at all. Why should there be any scarcity of work; why should men willing to work suffer and strain for want of the things that work produces, while land, the natural source and means of all production, is so abundant? There is no reason in the nature of things. The reason is simply that the natural element on which all men must live and work, if they are to live and work at all, is by human law made the exclusive property of some men, who thus can and do prevent other men from working, and rob them of the produce of their work.

Here is the root of the social problem, of all the paradoxes of our modern civilization.

The lesson of the London strike — it seems to me to be that modern society has but the choice between the single tax and socialism, between justice and war.