

What of Labor?

IMPLICIT OR PROCLAIMED in the policies of every contemporary political regime is an awareness and an attitude toward organized labor.

In the collectivist state labor has been endowed with the symbolism of monarchy, with its duties prescribed and its freedom proscribed. In other totalitarian states it has been indoctrinated with a synthetic nationalist zeal and coerced into a machine of militant aggression. In the states where free political institutions mingle with a lingering oligarchy, labor party victories have been nullified by the conversion of its leaders to the traditional mold. In the traditional democracies, labor, characterized by greater individualism and reluctant to acknowledge a fixed social and economic status, has sought its objectives through group pressure in preference to direct political action.

But democracy's faith in its own institutions has wavered under the recurrent assaults of periodic depressions. Most of the remedies that history has proved fallacious have been tried anew in our current prolonged siege, and labor has been both a power and a pawn in a program of opportunism and expediency.

Popular opinion both friendly and hostile to labor is more frequently emotional than rational, and when tested by economic laws is found to reflect many discarded theories. The belief that wages must be advanced and furnished by capital has yielded to the recognition that labor is the essential active factor in the production of all capital and that in the average course of all production capital expended is as steadily replaced by wealth of greater value. The assumption of a natural conflict between capital and labor has been superseded by the recognition of mutuality of interests as evidenced by the coincidence of the rise and decline of interest and wages. Man's ability to increase manifold his individual powers through cooperation, and his almost limitless capacity for production achieved through his accumulative ingenuity, have disproved Malthus' mournful conclusions.

It is a recognized fact of common observation that combinations of labor can raise wages by con-

certed action. Such increases, if gained at the expense of capital or other laborers, would not be beneficial but harmful. But where land is no longer free competition depresses the basic wage to a subsistence level and lowers the limit of the availability of capital to the cost of replacement. Any forced wage increase, therefore, can come from but one source—speculative rent.

That organized efforts to raise wages may be marked with frequent strife, that wealth may at times be wasted in the struggle, that no general increase may be achieved, that the gains will be temporarily lost in every stoppage of production and that such methods can never win for labor its full share of production, are considerations to be weighed against a single alternative—maximum toil and hours and minimum pay which are the inevitable result of unbridled competition.

Contemplation of a few of the consequences that this alternative entails—resumption of child labor, indiscriminate and unrestricted employment of women and the virtual enslavement of all labor under the pressure of a bare subsistence wage cannot but tip the scales on the side of the labor unions.

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