

CHAPTER XIII

A FINAL QUESTION

It has been shown what is possible with labor organization when, with intelligence and open-mindedness, masters and men unite under orderly methods. We have finally to ask in what spirit another disquieting presence rising in our midst is to be met. We may save ourselves a world of trouble by trying, first of all, to bring to bear upon socialism enough intellectual sympathy to understand it. Only in rare instances have our business men, or the public generally, honestly tried to know what the immense sacrifices behind the trade union really mean. At this late day, because of compulsion and inconvenience, we are putting forth some effort to understand the industrial struggle for existence from the point of view of labor organization. It is now seen that a little of this tardy wisdom could have saved the vast waste of the coal strike by doing in the beginning what public opinion compels us to do many months afterward. The joint-agreement of the Boston Building Trades would not only have saved New York and Chicago inconceivable sums, but would meantime have educated both parties to the contract so that a sea of future ills could be avoided.

The opportunity is given us to be wiser with the coming socialism than we have proved ourselves with

trade unions. The German and much more the Belgian experience which has been given, show us that socialism has now developed so that an educational cooperation with it is possible. We cannot at present have the Belgian *coopérative*. For a considerable future our battle will be in cities and with public-service corporations. For the highest educational purposes this gives us every advantage that we need. Thus the final question, as distinctly moral as it is one of self-interest, I conceive to be this: Are we as a people willing to put in practice those methods which increase this educational cooperation? I have given much evidence to show that the trade union, socialism, and business management, taken at their best, are now so far in touch, that a common working basis of industrial and administrative experiment is at least possible. It is through these experiments that our best discipline is to come. There are splendid hopes for a well-ordered industrial society if we are brave enough and generous enough to recognize these possibilities of agreement and to use them educationally.

On the need of industrial reconstruction; on the defects of the wage system; on the abuses of the trade union as well as of the trust; on the need of extending legal regulation, there is now a very remarkable consensus of opinion among able writers, economists, business men, labor leaders, and socialists trained by experience. This general acquiescence does not, of course, extend to details or to methods. It gives us, nevertheless, so broad a ground of common sympathy and understanding, that it should be made the basis of a new educational and experimental activity.

When one of the strongest of the coal operators admits (see p. 32) that there is no hope except in a frank recognition of the unions and the consequent common education that would follow, that kind of employer should be brought into relation with labor men who, for the same reason, are asking recognition. Employer and employed here speak the language of a common experience.

When a first-rate railroad president of large experience with labor says (see p. 33) that in these days a man who is not strong enough to work with labor organizations is not strong enough for his position, we wish to add him to the group. When the head of a very successful corporation (see p. 195) says that in large concerns like his own, not only the trade union but the spirit of partnership should be recognized, we add him to this new fellowship. It is very common to hear this type of business man admit that in large affairs the arbitrary, traditional expressions, "my business," "take it or leave it," "I will manage it as I like," are soon likely to be classed properly with the elder Vanderbilt's "the public be damned." These business men of larger outlook are increasing precisely as a safer and more conservative type of labor leader is increasing. Every device which brings these and those like them together, has in it the binding and educational influence that alone makes for social safety.

As the socialist makes his appearance — as he soon enough will — among our mayors and town councilors, he should be met in the same spirit. As in the case of the trade union, we should welcome the joint-agreement for the teaching power that is in it, so

socialism should be taken at its word. Once in office, it should have safe tether for practical experiment.

The socialist asks for a profound social reconstruction to the end that a new justice and a new brotherhood may obtain among men. The admissions that much of this criticism is just; that much of this organization is necessary and right, are from successful men of affairs who have the gift and the courage to take the social point of view rather than judge so vast a question from the ground of immediate private interest.

As we bring these disinterested admissions face to face with socialist criticism, when it also has learned to take the social point of view, we stand not in sharply divided and hostile camps, but on a common ground where men of good will can work together.

For example, between the older socialist, who believed that the wage system held the whole labor world on the margin of bare subsistence, depriving him of every hope of advance, and the individualist who has nothing but praise for the wage system, there is no ground for reconciliation. But if the individualist has come to see the imperfections of this relation between employer and employed, and the socialist has come to recognize what the wage system has actually accomplished, there is at once room for sympathy and coöperation. My claim is that precisely this is being brought about. Such a possible sympathetic understanding already exists upon the most essential points in dispute, if we select in each of the opposing groups the most socially developed intelligence.

A man who has managed with brilliant success, for many years, from one to five thousand men,

tells me that the day is near at hand when the present methods of wage payment must undergo very radical changes; that it is too inelastic to meet the new conditions of industry; that it results in enormous waste through strikes; that the old idea of contract needs modification. He does not profess to know how these changes are to be brought about, but thinks it is likely that the spread of industrial training will more and more make it possible to admit groups of workmen into a practical partnership in the business. He affirms that a good deal of business, that is most vital to the whole public, has already reached a stage in which the business ideas upon which he was brought up seem to have no place. Now I am certain that if this man were to spend an evening with socialists like Von Vollmar, Bernstein, Millerand, Ansele, and Professor Hector Denis, he would find so much in common that he would not think of them, or they of him, as separated by an impassable gulf. He would not think of them as moving east while he was moving west. His own admission about the defects of the wage system would bring them near enough, not only to understand each other, but to see that some measure of practical coöperation would be easily possible. These socialists have learned as much that is favorable to a long-continued use of the wage system as this business man has learned of its defects.

A Belgian socialist, after some years' experience in managing a coöperative bakery, told me: "I was taught to believe that payment by wages was the deadly economic sin, but I don't see how we can ever do anything but modify it a good deal. If business

is highly organized, we shall continue to pay something very like wages. We shall continue to employ a class of middlemen that I used to think unproductive, because they did not actually make things. But to get products where people want them is just as necessary as to make them, and those who do this have to be paid." I should go far to listen to a discussion between this socialist and the business man just quoted on the changes in the wage system, which both admitted to be desirable. Each would have understood the other's speech; each appreciated the other's difficulties.

Twenty years of hard work under responsibilities has brought socialism to the point where it may be cooperated with in ways that educate and at the same time furnish the very evidence we need as to the superiority or inferiority of its methods. The first demand of the socialist mayor or town council is to set aside the contractor and build the schoolhouse or the sewer directly by the city employees. This represents in theory a step in the socializing of profits. If they should succeed in this, the community gains. If, by doing poorer or costlier work, they fail, the failure goes down at once to their discredit.

A people as fearless and as careless of tradition as we claim to be, should welcome the occasion to say: "You socialists condemn our private profit-making régime. It is true we have made poor work in managing our cities. There has been extravagance and corruption. You come with promises to improve upon this. You shall have a perfectly fair chance to put your methods on trial before the community.

You shall do enough city work without the profit-maker to furnish your own evidence. If, in expense or in excellence, you can serve the city better, the credit shall be yours. To prove that the contractor is a useless burden to the taxpayer, will bring you new votes.

From a confidence like this, no social interest could suffer. It throws upon the collectivist innovators a burden of work so serious that its educational influence acts with automatic directness. Under this responsibility of *doing* things, they learn the soundest lessons upon the very points where ignorance is a social and industrial danger. Day by day, made accountable for results, they learn the value and place of new machinery; they learn prudence in lowering the hours of labor; they learn the risks of limiting their output, and the necessity of applying the minimum wage with business caution; they learn why the "universal strike" is a folly and why the wage system is still of service; they learn that coöperative substitutes must come gradually and prove their superiority step by step. Best of all, they learn that the Mecca of the coöperative commonwealth is not to be reached by setting class against class, but by bearing common burdens through toilsome stages, along which all who wish well to their fellows can journey together.

The noblest word that I have ever heard from any coöperator was this: "You cannot make this more democratic business work, without calling on more and more people to help you. If it should ever conquer the hand-to-hand fight of competition, then everybody, whether they wanted to or not, would *have* to help everybody else."

The habits which gain strength from this consciousness of mutual aid would give to labor the serenity and delight which it has too rarely known.

This dream of a day when life's work — even the drudgery and the routine — may be done with the ennobling sense that every energy of hand and brain helps the many as it helps the doer, has in it the most sustaining of all enthusiasms.

To work slowly and painfully toward this end is a possibility that need not be deferred. The sacrifices that it requires are the surrender of many things that are now our vexation and our curse. Some abandonment there would have to be of a stiff and contemptible class pride; much yielding of domineering temper; some shattering of idols where dotting worshippers pay homage to the meanest symbols of social inequality. We shall survive even these deprivations. They are losses which make no man poorer, but rather add to the riches of us all.