

CHAPTER XV

THE FUTURE OF LABOR

FROM now on the struggle for existence will increase in intensity. From now on the cost of living will be more exacting. The chance for a decent human existence is daily narrowing. The number on the border-line of poverty is constantly increasing. All this is inevitable. For the supply of land is constant, and a large part of it is kept out of use. The demand for standing-room is increasing with every tick of the pendulum of time.

The real explanation of the labor problem is obscured by the appearance of things, by the wages system, and the struggles of capital and labor. We do not see through the industrial question into the real struggle of classes which lies back of it all. For lack of employment, hard times, the wages question, and the poverty everywhere appearing are but part of a larger problem, a problem which can only be cured by going back to its cause, a cause which is to be found in the private ownership of the land and the resources of the nation.

This being true, labor can no more improve the general standing of living by organization than a man can lift himself by his boot-straps. Trades-

unionism may maintain the scale of wages in certain trades; it may even increase nominal wages in the highly skilled industries. But even in these trades the improvement will be only an apparent one.¹ For the increase in the cost of living will more than absorb the increase in nominal wages. No array of statistics can modify this tendency, a tendency which has been very manifest during the past few years. But the investigations of public and private agencies show that wages have not been rising as rapidly as has the cost of living. It cost fully one-third more to maintain life in 1905 than it did eight years before. Wholesale prices were higher in 1905 than at any time in the recent history of America. It required \$1.30 to purchase as much in that year as was attainable for \$1.00 in 1897. It is estimated that during the ten years prior to 1907 the cost of living went up forty per cent., while the wages for unskilled labor remained practically stationary. During this period the wages of organized labor increased but seventeen per cent., and organized labor as a whole does not include more than three million of America's working population.²

¹ As a matter of fact even nominal wages have fallen. The Census Bulletin on Manufactures, covering thirty-three states, shows that whereas the average wage in 1890 was \$418.48 a year or \$1.39 a day, in 1900 the average wage was but \$397.53 a year or \$1.29 a day.

² The Bulletin for the United States Bureau of Labor for March, 1908, presents a study of the variations in the wholesale prices of

But nominal wages form only one factor in the equation of real wages. The actual income of any class can only be ascertained by the amount of goods which the income of that class will purchase. Wages are high or low, according to the comfort and happiness of the worker. Nominal wages may be very high, as they are in the Yukon or in the new mining camps of the West, but if every cent that is received is expended for the barest necessities of life, real wages are very low.

It is the unskilled worker who is suffering most from the increasing cost of living. And the unskilled laborer comprises at least two-thirds of the working population. He does not organize. His employment is precarious. His work is of transitory nature. There is no cohesive trade sympathy to keep him united with his fellows.¹ The agricultural worker falls into the same class. He, too, is suffering a progressive diminution in his wages as well as in his standard of living. The same is true of the salaried and professional classes.

From now on the cost of the necessities of life must continue to increase. This is already apparent

258 representative articles from 1890 to 1907. It states that the average price of all articles for the year 1907 was 44.4 per cent higher than that of 1897.

¹ *The Journal of Political Economy* (June, 1905, p. 359), in a scientific analysis of the wages of unskilled labor shows that "the wages of common laborers remained practically unchanged from 1890 to 1900," while the increase in the cost of living has materially reduced their real wage.

in rent. The increase in the tenement districts of New York has been so rapid as to lead to organized resistance. The cost of coal, of beef, of foodstuffs, of cotton, of leather, of wool, of transportation, of coal, iron, copper, of all of the elemental products which come directly from the land, has been going up with great rapidity during the past few years.

This increase in the cost of living is due to monopoly in its various forms, but most of all to the monopoly of the land and the storehouse of nature.¹ It is this that limits labor to the job that is nearest at hand; it is this that herds population into the cities; it is this that closes the resources of nature to humanity and strangles the production of wealth. While men and women are suffering from cold and hunger all over the land, the cotton-growers are destroying their cotton in the fields of the South in order that they may obtain an increased price for that which remains. A great part of the coal land of the country is withheld from production in order that a scarcity price may be exacted for that which is used. Hundreds of millions of fertile acres are kept out of tillage in the West, and to an increasing extent in the East as well, for the purpose of speculation. The railways in many instances fix their charges at the point which will absorb everything that the farmer produces and still

¹The percentage of increase in rent from 1897 to 1902, as ascertained by the Labor Bureau of Massachusetts, was 52.43 per cent.

keep him at the plough. The packing-houses and warehouses have adopted the same rule of charges. They depress the price of raw material on the farm, and by a similar understanding exact all that the consumer can pay at the other end of the line. The sugar, tobacco, beef, leather, wool, iron, steel, oil, and copper monopolies screen themselves behind a tariff wall, and collect such tribute as their owners see fit to charge through their alliance with the government and the transportation agencies of the nation. It is these influences that are increasing the cost of living in America. And so long as man remains a land animal and the people permit the highways to be privately owned and used for stock-gambling purposes, the cost of living must continue to increase.

The landlord is the paymaster of all other classes. He limits the opportunities of labor and profits by every babe that is born. For the growth of population is increasing the demand for standing-room. It raises the rent which must be paid for its use as well as the cost of all the necessities of life. Society increases the value of the land, and then is charged a tribute for that which it has created.

When one contemplates the methods which have been pursued in the abandonment of our public lands, it seems as though our policy had been inspired by the employing classes, just as is the immigration of cheap labor from Europe. For had

the lands been opened up to use only as they were actually needed by settlers, wages would have continued to rise for many generations to come, while homes for many times our present population would have been available. Then the employer would have been forced to compete with the free lands of the West. Under these conditions labor would have continued to receive something like the full value of its services. For wages are determined by the existence of free lands and the outlet which they offer to increasing population. When such an alternative exists it is not necessary for men to shift their employment to agriculture in order to secure the full return of their labor. The very existence of an alternative automatically keeps wages at the amount or somewhere near the amount that can be produced on the free land.

But the enclosure of the public lands has destroyed this alternative. The worker is reduced to a competitive scale. His wages are determined by the hunger of those outside of the gates of the factory. The alternative of being a free man, upon a farm of his own, is now gone forever.

That free land is the determining factor in fixing wages has been recognized by at least one economist.

“Free land being given,” says Achille Loria, “the division of society into a class of non-laboring capitalists, and a class of non-capitalistic la-

borers, is, in either case, out of the question; for, under such circumstances, it is impossible for an idle capitalist to acquire any profit.

“Colonial countries where free lands abound offer striking illustrations of these propositions, and any one who has rightly comprehended the development of these interesting lands must recognize the truth of our assertions. Note, for example, in the descriptions of the early days of the United States, how this fortunate country is depicted as inhabited by a noble race of independent laborers, ignorant of the bare possibilities of capitalistic property; read Washington’s letters, which tell how impossible the farmers found it to acquire any income whatever from their lands unless they cultivated them along with their laborers; and mark how Parkinson, Strickland, and other Europeans who travelled in America during the eighteenth century, were one and all struck with amazement at this strange land where money did not breed money. We can also understand why the slave system of the ancient world and the serfdom of the middle ages were both reintroduced into our modern colonies; for it was only by resorting to such means that profits could be acquired during these epochs preceding the appropriation of the soil.”¹

We are fearfully afraid of names and phrases in America. We resent the suggestion of “industrial servitude.” Do not our written constitutions declare that “there shall be no slavery nor involuntary servitude” within the commonwealth? Are we not protected by manhood suffrage and the

¹ *Economic Foundations of Society*, p. 3.

guarantees of personal freedom? But economic laws recognize no bill of personal rights, and economic servitude is no more incompatible with Magna Charta and the Declaration of Independence than it is with the despotism of the czar. We can enslave ourselves through the forms of democracy as completely as we may be enslaved by the Sultan of Turkey. And chattel slavery has probably disappeared among the civilized nations as much through the change in economic conditions as through the growing humanity of man. Cheap labor was only possible by legalized slavery when free land was open to all. Then the slave could only be kept in subjection by positive law. But as soon as all of the land had been taken up, the necessity as well as the economy of chattel slavery disappeared, and the relation of employer and employee, of landlord and tenant arose to take its place. It is probable that the labor cost of the bonanza farms of the West is far less than the labor cost on the plantations of the South prior to the Civil War. Free labor is more efficient than slave labor. The slave must be reared to maturity. He must be maintained in a certain degree of physical efficiency. He must be cared for in old age. Slave labor is notoriously shiftless. It is inspired neither by the hope of reward nor the fear of want. The wage-earner, on the other hand, comes to the employer with none of the costs of rearing. He is impelled by the hope of promotion and the fear of

hunger, and his place may be filled at any moment by an advertisement in the newspaper.

It must be evident that from now on wages will tend to the margin of subsistence. What does it cost to feed, clothe, and keep the average worker from starvation? That is the measure of his cost to the employer. His price is fixed, just as is the price of competitive commodities, by the cost of production. The struggle of increasing population against diminishing opportunity, of increasing consumption against decreasing supply, will reduce wages to the margin of subsistence, just as the income of the cottier tenant in Ireland was reduced to a potato diet by the hunger of others, eager to offer all that they could produce for the mere privilege of having a place upon the earth whereon to work.

We can see this process already at work wherever land monopoly is most complete. It is evident in the tenement districts of our cities, where the struggles of surplus labor, of rack-renting, and of periodic evictions form the saddest sights of the slums. It is manifest in the anthracite and bituminous coal regions, where the miner is reduced to a bare subsistence wage, and is kept in such a state of dependence by the operators that he cannot even protest against the death-traps wherein he must either labor or starve.

We can see the reduction of labor to a subsistence wage in every great city. There every material

advance expresses itself. There men and women work with greatest intensity, while labor-saving machinery is most highly developed. There labor is most minutely divided. In the cities wealth is produced with the minimum of manual labor. And here the per capita production is greatest. There, then, we should expect civilization to flower into universal well-being. There want should be confined to those whom illness or idleness has condemned to it. Yet, in every one of our large cities, at least one-quarter of the people are hovering upon the border-line of want or are actually engulfed in poverty. Another quarter are struggling to maintain an existence that varies from that of comfort to one that is far from enviable, while a small group are enjoying incomes far in excess of all human needs.

Wherever the monopoly of the land is most complete, there the fiercest wars of labor and capital have taken place. Labor does not organize in a newly discovered mining region, for every worker is a prospector. He works for himself. It is only when monopoly has laid its hand upon the region and enclosed the opportunity for independent mining, that the wages system comes into existence. In the early days of California, wages were fixed by the returns of the independent prospector. No one would work for another for less than he could produce from his own claim. The same was true

in the early days of the Alaskan gold-fields and the Tonemah and Goldfield districts in Nevada. The great labor wars of these districts followed close upon the monopoly of the regions. So long as opportunity was free there was no conflict, for the worker could change his hand at will.

The history of all mining regions is the same. There were no serious strikes in the anthracite coal-fields so long as competition prevailed. "Before the Civil War amicable relations prevailed between the co-operative forces. Then in the majority of collieries employer and employes lived side by side, and could peaceably adjust their differences."¹ But where formerly there was peace, now there is recurrent industrial warfare. Not only warfare, but the most complete subjection of the worker. Three-quarters of a million people are dependent upon the will of a half-dozen men who determine over a luncheon whether there shall be work or idleness, as to what those who labor shall receive in wages, and when their labor is over, what they shall pay to the mine-owners for the necessities of life.

Organized labor is correct in its diagnosis. It is correct in speaking of the servitude of labor. But servitude is not confined to those who work at the bench or in the mill, in the mine or in the factory. Servitude is a condition into which all classes are

¹ *The Anthracite Coal Industry*, Roberts, p. 104.

born, in every nation and under every flag, where the right to use the earth is dependent upon the will of another. And the servitude has been the same, whatever the form of the tribute, from the age of serfdom down to the present day. And it rests upon all alike, whether they work with their hands or their brains, whether they be skilled or unskilled, whether they be artisans, artists, professional men, or capitalists. It is the servitude of those who labor to those who labor not at all.

And the results which follow from the private ownership of the land are as immutable as the laws of nature herself. That rent is the great absorbent, gathering to itself an increasing portion of the wealth which is produced, is so obvious a fact that it should be the fundamental postulate of political economy. That the ultimate consequence of this phenomenon is the impoverishment of capital as well as labor, may be seen on every hand. That it leads to an ignorant and impoverished peasantry on the one hand, and an idle and irresponsible aristocracy on the other, is the experience of all nations. And we cannot hope to escape the consequences of these laws in America through any declaration of political freedom any more than the superstitious savage can ward off disease by incantation and sacrifice.