

Progress and poverty



Better Education

As to the effects of education, it is evident that intelligence, which is or should be the aim of education, until it induces and enables the masses to discover and remove the cause of the unequal distribution of wealth, can only operate upon wages by increasing the effective power of labour. It has the same effect as increased skill or industry. And it can only raise the wages of the individual in so far as it renders him superior to others. When to read and write were rare accomplishments, a clerk commanded high respect and large wages, but now the ability to read and write has become so nearly universal as to give no advantage. The diffusion of intelligence, except as it may make men discontented with the state of things that condemns producers to a life of toil while non-producers loll in luxury, cannot tend to raise wages generally, or in any way improve the condition of the lowest class.

Greater industry and skill, greater prudence and a higher intelligence are, as a rule, found associated with a better material condition of the working-classes; but that this is effect, not cause, is shown by the relation of the facts. Wherever the material condition of the labouring classes has been improved, improvement in their personal qualities has followed, and wherever their material condition has been depressed, deterioration in these qualities has been the result.

The fact is that the qualities that raise man above the animal are superimposed on those he shares with the animal, and that it is only as he is relieved from the wants of his animal nature that his intellectual and moral nature can grow. Compel a man to drudgery for the necessities of animal existence, and he will lose the incentive to industry – the progenitor of skill – and will do only what he is forced to do. Make his condition such that it cannot be much worse, while there is little hope that anything he can do will make it much better, and he will cease to look beyond the day.

It is true that improvement in the material condition of a people or class

may not show immediately in mental and moral improvement. Increased wages may at first be taken out in idleness and dissipation. But they will ultimately bring increased industry, skill, intelligence and thrift. Comparisons between different countries; between different classes in the same country; between the same people at different periods; and between the same people when their conditions are changed by emigration, show as an invariable result that the personal qualities of which we are speaking appear as material conditions are improved, and disappear as material conditions are depressed. To make people industrious, prudent, skilful, and intelligent, they must be relieved from want. If you would have the slave show the virtues of the freeman, you must first make him free.

Combinations of Workmen

To raise wages in particular industries or occupations, which is all that any combination of workmen yet made has been equal to attempting, is manifestly a task the difficulty of which progressively increases. For the higher are wages of any particular kind raised above their normal level with other wages, the stronger are the tendencies to bring them back. All that trades unions can do in the way of raising wages, even when supporting each other, is comparatively little and that little moreover is confined to their own sphere. The only way wages could be raised to any extent by this method and with any permanence would be by a general combination which should include labourers of all kinds such as was aimed at by the Internationals. But this may be set down as practically impossible, for the difficulties of combination, great enough in the most highly paid and smallest trades, become greater and greater as we descend in the industrial scale.

In the struggle of endurance it must not be forgotten who the real parties are that are pitted against each other. It is not labour and capital. It is labourers on the one side and the owners of land on the other. If the contest were between labour and

capital, it would be on much more equal terms. For the power of capital to stand out is only some little greater than that of labour. Capital not only ceases to earn anything when not used, but it goes to waste – for in nearly all its forms it can be maintained only by constant reproduction. But land will not starve like labourers or go to waste like capital – its owners can wait. They may be inconvenienced, it is true, but what is inconvenience to them is destruction to capital and starvation to labour.

Besides these practical difficulties in the plan of forcing by endurance an increase of wages, there are in such methods inherent disadvantages that working-men should not blink. A strike, which is the only recourse that a trade union has for enforcing its demands, is a destructive contest – just such a contest as that to which an eccentric, called “The Money King,” once, in the early days of San Francisco, challenged a man who had taunted him with meanness, that they should go down to the wharf and alternately toss twenty-dollar pieces into the bay until one gave in. The struggle of endurance involved in a strike is really what it has often been compared with – a war; and, like all war, it lessens wealth. And the organization for it must, like the organization for war, be tyrannical. As even the man who would fight for freedom must, when he enters an army, give up his personal freedom and become a mere part in a great machine, so must it be with workmen who organize for a strike. These combinations are, therefore, necessarily destructive of the very things that workmen seek to gain through them – wealth and freedom.

Henry George (1839–1897) travelled the world lecturing on the cause of poverty and the solution.

Albert Einstein said of him: “One cannot imagine a more beautiful combination of intellectual keenness, artistic form, and fervent love of justice.”

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