

The Public

A National Journal of Fundamental Democracy &
A Weekly Narrative of History in the Making

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Vol. XIII.

CHICAGO, FRIDAY, JANUARY 7, 1910.

No. 614

Published by Louis F. Post
Ellsworth Building, 387 Dearborn Street, Chicago

Single Copy, Five Cents Yearly Subscription, One Dollar
Entered as Second-Class Matter April 16, 1898 at the Post Office at
Chicago, Illinois, under the Act of March 3, 1879

EDITORIAL

Who Profits by the Increased Cost of Living? Do You?

Some facts in the economic and social conditions of this country have certainly impressed themselves on everybody so that not even the traditional "obstinate jurymen" stands forth to deny them. At the beginning of this year of grace 1910, the cost of living for everybody, measured by a money standard, is extremely high. Prices of foodstuffs and all other necessities of life have been for a long period steadily climbing upward. The measure of a money standard, however, is not the only one nor the best one by which the cost of living is to be considered. We have been told so often by the advocates of "free silver coinage," as well as by the protectionists, that low prices mean hard times and that high prices mean prosperity, that we might accept the present high prices as evidence of that onrush of prosperity which is still the subject of mutual congratulation among the participants in "big business," if it were not for a still more vital fact, as obstinately in evidence as the high money prices for the commodities that all the people must have. This fact is that the wages of labor (and we use the term in its widest sense) have not advanced to keep pace with the rise of the necessities of life; and measured therefore by labor values—the labor, that is, that must be expended to get them—food, clothes and shelter, to say nothing of simple "luxuries" that are real necessities for any developing life.

CONTENTS.

EDITORIAL:

Who Profits by the Increased Cost of Living? Do You?	1
Labor Safety Laws.....	2
"Lead Us Not Into Temptation".....	2
A Test for the Thoughtfully Inconsistent.....	3
Land Monopoly in the Philippines.....	3
The British Revolution (Louis G. Hoeck).....	4

NEWS NARRATIVE:

The British Parliamentary Campaign (Portrait of Winston Churchill)	8
The Nicaraguan Revolution.....	10
"Conservation of Equal Rights".....	10
The "Insurgent" Movement.....	11
A New Morgan Merger.....	11
The Strike of the Forty Thousand.....	11
San Francisco Votes for Municipal Ownership.....	12
Indiana's New Accounting Law.....	12
Boston Under Her New Charter.....	13
Mayor Gaynor Installed.....	13
Close of Mayor Johnson's Administration.....	13
News Notes	14
Press Opinions	16

RELATED THINGS:

A Man Is Passing (Edmund Vance Cooke).....	18
Home Lessons in Economics.....	18
Henry George and Social Reform (Dr. P. C. N. Starcke, Translated by C. M. Koedt).....	18
He Who Would Reap, Must Sow (R. E. Chadwick) ..	20

BOOKS:

The American Revolution.....	20
Books Received	21
Pamphlets	21

are exceedingly and distressingly high. As to the wage-workers and mass of salaried men in cities, nobody denies this disproportion between any increase in the compensation for their labor and the increase in the cost of their living. And now the Secretary of Agriculture declares that the farmers are not getting the benefit of increased prices of foodstuffs even, and that the blame lies largely with the exorbitant profits of the retailer. With the first of these propositions, the farmers unanimously agree; and from the latter the provision dealers as unanimously dissent. One has only to talk with his butcher or grocer in these days to ascertain the emphasis of that dissent.

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Under these circumstances what becomes of the fancied "prosperity," so far as the masses are concerned? If the same labor will buy less necessities, then one must work harder or live more narrowly. A good deal is said about the hitherto high standard of living in the United States for the laboring man as compared with other countries, but apart from the consideration that this is not one of the obstinate facts that everybody agrees to, the whole argument of the "boosters" and economic optimists is that this high standard must be maintained at any cost. For this are high protective tariffs, exclusion acts, *et id omne genus*, to be maintained. And, indeed, the whole economic problem after all is, as it affects the mass of the people, to keep the wages of labor in labor products high. It would seem a queer kind of prosperity, therefore, which by an era of high prices makes the great majority of the people work harder or live more meanly!

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Who gets the benefit of the increased prices? That there is certainly an abundance of "prosperity" in certain classes, and that "the good spenders," the extravagant, the ostentatious, and the idle dissolute, are in high feather, is in evidence in many ways. If the estimate of a leading daily paper is to be taken, a half-million of dollars was spent for extra food and drink alone by these classes in Chicago on New Year's Eve. But it is not they alone who are "prosperous." The men in big business interests, intent on incorporations, consolidations, mergers and trusts—into which they pump "water" and from which they extract "cream," certain pecuniarily fortunate professional men—lawyers, doctors and dentists, and some other classes of people who are the retainers of the "big business" men in our "benevolent feudalism," have been able to increase their incomes and

charges or salaries to an extent which has caused the conservative old fashioned workers in their respective lines to gasp with amazement, and to an extent evidently far beyond any increase in the cost of living. They are "prosperous" and getting rich beyond the dreams of avarice. These "classes" constitute a small proportion of the whole people, however. But they are taking for their own and their children's—mostly in the form of charges and liens on the future labor of the masses and *their* children—a large proportion of what the whole people produce. They are generally the advocates and makers of the laws under which monopoly thrives.

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And it is monopoly and the laws which buttress monopoly, which are at the bottom of all the trouble. "Service for service," which is the foundation of all just social and economic conditions, has been abrogated to an alarming and ruinous extent in favor of service, enforced and rendered compulsory by the effect of bad economic and financial legislation and of vicious systems of taxation, to the holders of privilege and monopoly. If the men high in official business and social life who are giving out interviews at the demand of magazines and newspapers, would but think straight and simply, we should hear more sound economics, and less of the babel of voices about "over gold production," as though that mattered if labor prices kept up with other prices; of the high valuation of farm lands, proving that the farmer was getting the benefit of the high prices of breadstuffs, as though it was not plain that the land held out of use had not increased the monopolistic value of that which remains; of the overcapitalization of railroads and manufacturing corporations, as though that was not the result of the laws which feed monopoly; and of the necessity of subsidizing in some form intensive farming, and irrigation projects, and a merchant marine, and many other things that the genius, industry and intelligence of the masses of the American people would speedily bring about without government aid, if labor of the brain and hand were freed in the United States from the baneful blight of legislation and judicial decision in favor of privilege and monopoly.

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Labor Safety Laws.

We are not fanatical believers in the good effects of restrictive and regulating legislation which affects freedom of contract. But the strongest individualist, regarding the fearful toll of life and limb and health that the great Moloch of