

Unions the Real Barons in Present-Day Industrialism

Analogy of Custom of Middle Ages Makes Change of Barons React From Capitalism to Unionism—Purpose of Law to Prevent Failure of Economic Service.

Mr. Edward A. Bradford writing in "The Annalist," New York, issue of November 3rd, contributes a very suggestive article concerning the recent U. S. coal strike, charging the unions as being the barons of the present-day instead of the capitalist. The use of the word baron as applied to a capitalist coal operator arose in a prolonged coal strike in the United States in 1902. Mr. Baer, formerly president of Leading Coal Co., claimed that God has given him, his directors and shareholders the coal property they operated, and it was for them to develop it and work it for the benefit of their fellow men, and their own profit. The doctrine was immediately dubbed "Divine Light," and a New York reporter promptly called Mr. Baer a baron and his miners the serfs. This caught the public fancy and practically laughed the coal operators' case out of the court of public opinion.

Mr. Bradford points out that being themselves attached to capitalist enterprises as serfs, were held to the soil, the unionists refuse to move on in search of satisfactory conditions, but dictate their own terms and forbid others to accept those agreeable to them. The article follows:

"The issue has been made, and, if it must be settled upon the field of industrial battle, the responsibility rests fairly and squarely upon the coal barons alone."

Those are the concluding words of the coal miners' statement, and they suggest the inquiry, Who are the real coal barons? It might equally well be asked who are the "barons" of industry under our modern regime, which began with the substitution of mechanical power for muscle motors.

Feudalism was centuries in dying, and its last years overlapped the birth of capitalism, which was still in its infancy when the Napoleonic era ended. Capitalism is not yet two centuries old, and it is only half a century since Marx predicted that it would collapse in calamity through development of its inherent weakness. No half century in the world's experience has equaled the growth in comforts and humanity since Marx's prophecy has ripened into the catastrophe, for Marxism in Russia which Marx predicted for capitalism everywhere. And the longer back the comparison between feudalism and capitalism is extended the greater the wonder grows that a writer so competent as Marx could not see that capitalism was rather curing its faults than collapsing through them, and that capitalism at its worst was better than agrarian feudalism at its best.

Under feudalism the workers were attached to the soil, and were conveyed with it like the trees. They had none of our modern conveniences, which could not be supplied without capital and capitalism, and their very existence depended upon the valor and loyalty with which they fought under their baron against other robber barons. Of law as we know it there was not a trace until a combination of barons extorted it from their King on behalf of barons and serfs alike. Without law there could have been no capitalism, and without law for the protection of barons and serfs of the shop capitalism itself must die in turn, and be succeeded by what none can tell.

The coal miners, the railway brotherhoods, the American Federation of Labor, and, in fact, practically the great majority, think that the barons of our times are capitalists, trusts, corporations, and other forms of machinery for putting to universal use stored labor, the result of invention, or economy, or management, or other beneficial processes which the Bolsheviks hold in such slight esteem.

If the capitalists in fact were our barons we should be hearing of lockouts, but it is known to all that there is no lockout now. Any worker can get any pay that business can afford and live itself. The coal miners, the railway brotherhoods, the longshoremen, and multitudes of others have the idea that business is immortal and invulnerable, like governments, and that benefits can be extorted from it without limit, like profits and taxes. It is aside from the present purpose to discuss the limitations on profits and taxes. That is in process of demonstration which is just beginning here, and which has climaxed in calamity in Russia. To check that process of disintegration capitalism, and the first step must be an effort to convince the modern industrial barons—meaning the unions—of the error of their course.

That the unions are our modern barons appears from the history of the coal trade, as an example. The very year when the unions succeeded the capitalists as barons may be given. It was the year in which "Divine Right" Baer called for federal troops in vain, and accepted the arbitration which he had vowed he would never accept. Only a half generation has passed, and now the barons of the unions are rejecting arbitration and presenting ultimatums to those who are helpless and throw themselves upon government as the life preserver of society and capitalism together.

"You can't mine coal with bayonets," say the strikers. "We have the expert miners, and the laws won't let you hire amateurs," they add. But the government takes a stand that these barons, like the earlier coal barons, must be curbed, for the alternative of surrender to these assailants of our institutions is not thinkable.

Laws and troops are for government to use only in the last resort. The first step is to persuade reasonable unionists that they are betraying their own interests by beginning war of an internecine sort, as destructive as an attack by an alien enemy. Where are wages to come from if mining stops? The strikers think that wages come from profits, and they accuse the operators of being profiteer barons. But the price of coal was fixed when wages were fixed by authority superior to either miners or operators, and such excess profits as are now being made are due to the strike danger which creates a panic among users of coal. The excess profits would disappear if collective bargaining were less like collective threatening, and mining proceeded during negotiations for a new wage and price scale.

How well the description of barons fits the unionists appears from the statement of their proceedings. They were offering to negotiate at the end of the week, but, when they presented their ultimatum, they had no notion of negotiating. "We decided unanimously," said Farrington referring to the demands of the Cleveland convention, "and it is either that or a strike November 1." Now they say the responsibility rests upon the "real coal barons," who are offering to pay the wage fixed for them, and who must take the price fixed or to be fixed for the coal, and who are offering to arbitrate, or to submit their affairs to government.

If they were the real barons they would be locking out their serfs, or beating them into working or dictating to their overlord, Wilson, our president, who shares the blame with the barons, according to the miners.

The reason for harping upon the phrase which the miners use is to bring home to them that they are trying to substitute the feudalism of the factory, or shop, or mine, for the feudalism of the soil. When the old feudalism ended the serfs became free laborers, and traveled the land seeking work where they could find it. But that is not the idea underlying modern strikes. The workers regard themselves as attached to the capitalist enterprise,