

Ontario Workman.

THE EQUALIZATION OF ALL ELEMENTS OF SOCIETY IN THE SOCIAL SCALE SHOULD BE THE TRUE AIM OF CIVILIZATION.

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A SHORT SKETCH OF THE RISE, PROGRESS, AND PRESENT POSITION OF THE AMALGAMATED SOCIETY OF ENGINEERS, &c.

Previous to the year 1824, Trade Societies which then existed did so only upon sufferance, and in defiance of law. It was illegal for workmen to combine either to fix the number of hours' work in the day or to settle the rate of wages. If dissatisfied, they dared not meet in numbers to consider the course they should take to remedy a grievance, and were thus driven to act either singly or in secret with their fellows; and it was even dangerous for a number of men to make the same demand on the same day, as that showed mutual understanding.

In 1824 the House of Commons repealed the Combination Laws, and the relations of masters and workmen which had existed for 300 years were swept away, giving place to a condition that neither party should resort to threats or coercion against the other.

Soon after 1824 the principal societies, which were afterwards incorporated as the Amalgamated Society, sprung into existence; the Steam Engine Makers' Society in 1824; the Journeyman Steam Engine, Machine Makers, and Millwrights' Society in 1826. The first of these, in 1851, numbered about 2,000 members; the second about 7,000 members. These two were the main societies between which the trade was divided; but there were other bodies, composed of those who belonged to special departments, but were more of a local than a general character, as, the "Old Society of Engineers and Machinists" of London; the "New Society of Engineers and Machinists" of London; the "Old Millwrights' Society" of London; the "New Millwrights' Society" of London; the "Pattern Makers' Society" of London; the "Smiths' Society" of London; the "General Smiths' Society" and the "Millwrights' Society" of Manchester. All these societies represented some sectional department of the engineering business, and, with the exception of the Manchester Millwrights and the General Smiths' Societies, were local in their operations. The Manchester Millwrights had extended their organization to different places in Lancashire and Yorkshire, and the Smiths had branches in principal towns of the United Kingdom.

The relative positions of the above societies may be judged of by the fact, that while those societies which were extended in their operations over different districts numbered thousands, the local societies were only counted by hundreds, and in some cases did not exceed one hundred members. From the fact of so large a number of sectional or local societies being in existence at one time, each with its own form of government, a feeling of petty jealousy often arose between members of different societies, which tended to divide classes of workmen, and engendered feelings of exclusiveness and selfishness. This was exemplified in London in 1834. When the Journeyman Steam Engine and Machine Makers' Society and the Steam Engine Makers' Society were introduced they met with the greatest opposition from the old local societies. But mutual wants and mutual dangers will bring men together, in spite of the tendency of petty jealousies and differences to separate them; and in 1836 an event occurred which did much towards laying the foundation of a great and powerful Union.

It had been the custom of the London trade, up to the year 1836, to work 10½ per day, and overtime till 10 at night for the same rate of payment as ordinary time. A general feeling then evinced itself that 10½ hours should be reduced to 10, and a check should be put upon overtime, by charging time and a quarter up to 8 o'clock, and time and a half after that hour. This gave rise to a strike, which lasted six months, and cost nearly £5,000 for the support of men out of work; which sum was raised by contribution from the whole of the trade.

The action taken against overtime may be regarded as the first overt movement of the men against systematic overtime, and it also showed the aptness of the employers to combine in order to defeat the objects of the men. The men did not look upon the payment of time and a quarter for the first two hours and time and a half after that as a sufficient compensation for their being transformed into mere machines; they were not willing for that to barter health and strength—the hours they might devote to mutual improvements, enjoyment of home, the family circle, and the

pleasures of social intercourse. They saw that the working of overtime was an indirect means of keeping wages down; as labour, like other commodities, is ruled by the law of supply and demand, and the hours worked as overtime kept a supply of labour in the market which had to be supported from the funds accumulated by the labour of those in employment; hence the desirability of reducing the supply and increasing the demand, thereby causing higher wages to be given.

The employers, in their resistance to the demand of the men, used nearly the same arguments as were employed upon more recent occasions, especially in the dispute of 1852. They contended that if the demands of the men were conceded their businesses would be ruined; they would be unable to compete with foreigners; the trade would be driven from England. Of the fallacy of these objections we have had convincing proof—and let us here record it; the employers actually found themselves in a better position after they had yielded something to their men. But the favorite argument of the employers then, as now, was that the men were dictatorial, therefore their requests must be resisted; that if they gave way then, once for all there would be an end to all order and subordination; they would no longer be masters of their own factories—all would be "anarchy broke loose," "confusion worse confounded." Yet they did succumb. The men obtained the full of their demands—ten hours a day and time and a quarter for first two hours' overtime, and time and a half after first two hours; and though 37 years have elapsed since that time, the prophecies of the employers have not been verified, and we have yet to learn that revolutionary opinions have subverted any of the London engineering firms.

In 1844 another reduction in the working hours per week was asked of the London employers, on the ground that 57½ hours were considered a week's work in many of the provinces, and it was agreed that 58½ hours should constitute the week; and so it has remained until the granting of the nine hours by the whole of the engineering firms in the country. In 1850 a preliminary meeting of delegates from various societies was held at Warrington, to take into consideration the question of amalgamation; at which meeting delegates attended from the Steam Engine Makers Society, the Journeyman Steam Engine, Machinists, and Millwrights' Friendly Society, and the Smiths' Society. This committee drew up a number of suggestions, which were, in fact, the basis upon which amalgamation afterwards took place, upon which the opinions of the members were taken. This meeting was followed by a general delegate meeting, held at Birmingham in September of the same year, when the suggestions were discussed and a code of rules drawn up for the government of the proposed Amalgamated Society. The time fixed for amalgamation was the 1st of January, 1851; but it must not be supposed that the resolution was carried without some opposition, as some timid minds were averse to a change, others had not freed themselves from old prejudices, and a few had interests which might be endangered. Some of the original societies had a sick fund, others were without it; and it was no easy task to reconcile conflicting interests and opinions upon that point. But a Provisional Committee, which had been appointed by the General Delegate Meeting in Birmingham to sit in London, and make all necessary arrangements for the 1st of January, 1851, acted with prudence, energy, and determination; all obstacles of consequence were removed, and amalgamation did take place at the time fixed upon. The New Executive Council met on the 6th January, and in February the number who had given in their adhesion was 7,417, and in December, 1851, numbered 11,829.

The amalgamation was accomplished, and was highly expedient, both with reference to the nature of the trade, and the position the men occupied with respect to the employers. For years it has been discussed, debated, sifted and viewed in every aspect and from every point; the result was not worked out hastily or thoughtlessly; it was based upon widespread conviction, and developed with moderation, and when it was attained a few were hostile to its accomplishment.

Amalgamation was never proposed as an end, only as a means towards an end. The members were evidently of this opinion; for shortly afterwards applications crowded in upon the Executive Council to make an attempt to abolish piecework and systematic overtime. Previous to any thing being done

in this matter by the Executive Council, the Manchester branches took the question of overtime into their own hands. The members of that locality held an aggregate meeting in October 1851, and resolved that "systematic overtime is an evil, and we pledge ourselves to cease working it on and after November 1st 1851." In accordance with this resolution, the men did discontinue working systematic overtime at the time stated.

So satisfactory were the results of this partial movement, that on the 1st of November and the 1st of December the largest firms in Manchester had practically consented to the arrangement, after a very partial resistance. Among those in whose factories systematic overtime was abolished may be mentioned Sharp, Brothers, & Co.; Roberts, Dobinson, & Co.; Parr, Curtis, and Madeley; several railway works, and about 25 others. These facts prove two points of considerable value; they demonstrate the feeling which existed in trade, and which pressed upon the Executive; and that the Association of Employers, which took its rise in Manchester long after the 1st of November, when overtime was abolished there, did not spring out of the dread of the abolition of systematic overtime, but it was acted on in two ways—First, by the dislike they had to the growing power of operatives, and fear of the effects of large combined efforts by them; secondly, by representations of Mr. Platt of Oldham, made to a meeting of employers on the 24th December, 1851, to the effect that the Amalgamated Society have demanded "The unconditional discharge of all machines, or tools of a similar character, and the employment in their stead of mechanics, members of a Union."

It is true that Mr. Platt was under agreement with his own men to carry out the above arrangement, but it had been discouraged rather than supported by the Amalgamated Society at the time it was made. The Association of Employers thus formed became unscrupulous in their use of tools to carry out their object. Men who had no special interest in the trade or business connection with the employers became their mercenary agents, and hired themselves for a consideration to crush the men. The Amalgamated Society relied solely upon itself, and not a shilling was spent for extraneous help. Thus the dispute began; it lasted for three months, and ended by the men being beaten, and accepting their situations upon the best terms they could get. This cost £40,000. Some members withdrew from the Society disappointed; others were induced to join a society formed by Mr. Sidney Smith, as the paid servant of the masters' association, in which great promises of continuous employment and money support were held out. From these causes, the Amalgamated Society, which in December 1851, numbered 11,829 members, in December 1852, was reduced to 9,767. To a society established with less care and prudence such a shock as it experienced in this contest must have been fatal. There were, however, both vitality and power in its constitution, and its recovery and subsequent progress have been truly wonderful, as, from a state of insolvency in 1852, it was, at the end of December, 1872, worth £158,313 15s. 10½d., and during the 22 years of its existence has expended £546,265 as donation benefit; £234,419 as sick benefit; £80,379 as superannuation; £21,000 for accidents, and for funerals; £74,120, or a total amount for 22 years of £955,183 for the above benefits; and for the same period it has paid for benevolent grants £19,117, and assisted other trades to the amount of £11,136.

It is impossible to overestimate the vast social benefits which the distribution of these large sums has conferred. Not only have the recipients themselves been benefited, but the community generally interested in the proper maintenance of its industrial population. Local rates have been saved by the provident association of so many workmen, and the self-respect of a large artisan class has been conserved by a wise provision against misfortune. Reckless trading, the want of proper management in commercial affairs, the undue exercise of a competitive spirit, or unauthorised speculation, may bring an employer to bankruptcy and his men to want. It is when the employer fails him that the workman experiences the benefit of his trade society, and he flies to it with satisfaction, for no other help is near. In exchange for this great social advantage the employer has nothing to offer his workmen, nor has society either, except the workhouse; and the great value of the Amalgamated Society is that it preserves its members from pauperism.

It is the practice of those who know nothing of workmen's societies to charge the society or its principal officers with originating and promoting strikes. Those who do so, although they profess to lead public opinion, are sadly deficient in knowledge of the subject. The Executive Council of the Amalgamated Society have prevented more strikes from taking place in two years than over they were engaged in. In all classes where differences arise between an employer and his men they ascertain the ground of dispute. If the men were wrong, the Council exercise their influence to prevent them proceeding in their wrong. If the employer be wrong, they endeavour to see him and reconcile the difference, either by mutual explanation or mutual concession. It is not to be expected that among 42,000 members and a large number of employers differences will not arise, and experience has taught the Society that, as a rule these differences can be better adjusted by the friendly intervention of a third party than by those in dispute.

Combinations of workmen, also of employers, do exist throughout the country. They arise from natural causes, and cannot be put down. Between the two sets of combination differences will arise; but these need not necessarily lead to strikes. Fluctuations of trade give rise to altered conditions of employment. When trade is bad and the labour market is overstocked, then employers are seized with a desire to get their work done for less money, and often give notice of a reduction in wages. When good trade returns and men are fully employed, then the men desire a better rate of wages. Now, if the doctrine "that we have a right to buy in the cheapest market and sell in the dearest" be true as respects labour, then both parties are right; but it will happen that in the higgling for terms differences will arise, and the question is how to settle these differences without a strike. It can only be done by employers of labour giving force to their own doctrine. If labour be a commodity, let it be treated as such. If employer and workmen are simply buyer and seller of labour, and that is the only connection between them, they must necessarily stand upon equal ground. If the workmen say they will not work more than a certain number of hours per day, or for less than a certain rate of wages, that is no more dictation to the employer than the holder of a hundred quarters of corn fixing the price and terms upon which alone he would sell, would be dictation to the buyer. But unfortunately, employers are in the habit of treating with a man's labour as if it were a commodity, and then claiming to exercise the functions of a master. This they cannot properly do. If a man's labour is treated as a simple commodity that ends all claims to moral obedience from the men; it at once becomes the interest and—acting upon the doctrine of buy cheap and sell dear—the duty of the workmen to give as little labour as possible, and get as much wages as he possibly can, without reference to the ability of his employer to pay it. The employer now feels no moral responsibility as to the wellbeing of his workmen—the workmen has ceased to look up to his employer for advice and assistance—the effect of the estrangement is experienced in social conflicts. In the present state of opinion and practice, the only thing which can prevent strikes is for the employer to deal with the sellers of labour as he would with the seller of any other commodity; but when the employer imports anger into the arrangement, then a settlement is impossible, a strike the result. We speak from experience when we say that nine-tenths of the strikes which have occurred might have been avoided if the employer would have treated his workmen with proper consideration and respect when they desired to lay their grievances before him.

The rise, progress, objects, and sustaining principles of the Amalgamated Society of Engineers have now been glanced at. It will seem that its objects are to provide against want of employment and sickness, accidents, and old age; then of uniting to protect the workmen's interest against the aggression of employers, who from the very nature of the principles which govern their relationship with the workmen, are ever desirous of obtaining from them the greatest possible amount of work for the lowest possible amount of pay. It is hoped that this information, relating the largest, most completely organized and openly conducted trade society in the world may be of service to those who have for their object the bringing about the better state of feeling between employer and employed.

and the prevention of strikes, which are social conflicts as much opposed to the interests of the men as they can possibly be to the employer; so much so, that they are never adopted except in cases of serious grievance, and only then when all other means have failed in bringing about a satisfactory negotiation of grievances, real or imaginary, that may have arisen. If imaginary, reason and kindness on the part of an employer would soon dispel the illusion and prevent the catastrophe.

Labor Notes.

The woolstaples of Kidderminster have established a Friendly Society, which is in a flourishing condition.

The operatives in the Hartford Carpet Company's Mills are agitating for increased pay, and say they are determined to have it.

The silk-cotton manufacturers of New Jersey and Pennsylvania are urging Congress to increase the protective duty from fifty to sixty cents.

At a meeting of the North Stafford forge engineers it was resolved that "they would at once all join the Engineers' Association."

The three miners' agents indicted at Burnley with Mr. Halliday for conspiracy, and who was discharged, have caused writs to be issued against the prosecuting colliery owners for malicious prosecution.

The Wagonmaker's Society of England, now numbers about 500 members, and has a fund of about £250. They have lately formed an Amalgamated Society.

Thirty-four delegates from Labor Unions assembled in Omaha on the evening of the 9th, and formed a Trades Assembly. The object of the meeting was stated by the Chairman to be the formation of a brotherhood of labor. He said this was the only way to protect themselves against the non-producers, who had entrenched themselves between two oceans.

The Coopers Monthly for March, says: Since January 1, the following new Unions have been organized under the jurisdiction of the C. I. U.: 8 Minn. at Rushford; 9 Minn. at Hokah; 1 Georgia (colored) at Savannah, and 4 Ohio at Cleveland. The following were re-organized: 6 Ind. at Dillsborough, and 23 Ohio, at Navaree.

At a meeting of the executive of the Warwickshire district of the National Agricultural Laborers' Union, it was announced that the district now embraces 90 branches, with over 60,000 members, and during last year had contributed £1,300 to the national funds. Special attention was directed to efforts being made by farmers—notably at Moreton, Morrell, Preston-on-Stour, and Fenny Compton—to reduce wages to the old rate of 12s. weekly. It was resolved to resist the effort energetically, and the secretary was directed to call out all Union men after giving proper notice.

The Crispin strike at New York, has ended. The employers who would not agree to the payment of regular weekly wages for merely 8 hours' work per day have compromised with the men, by paying them on piece work, leaving the question of time for labor to be settled by themselves. Only a few time-men are now employed as cutters. Nearly all the shops are working full time, and some working even over-hours. The men claim a victory, having secured a compromise and assert that no weekly hands will ever again engage with manufacture for over 9 hours per day.

The Workmen's Advocate of the 14th inst. says:—The Crispins difficulty still continues, the employers refusing to abate their demands, and the employees are equally determined to hold out to the bitter end. They say they have no fear of the result—that the threat of the manufacturers to purchase their stock for spring trade in Eastern markets is sheer buncombe, because as soon as their customers know such to be the case, they will prefer to purchase at headquarters—and other than from a middleman. Still we cannot help inquiring, why in an emergency like the present, a co-operative shop cannot be successfully established. While it might not, or certainly would not give employment to every idle shoemaker, there is little doubt but that under proper management and confidence, it would grow to colossal proportions, and teach employers a lesson so far as threats of lock-outs are concerned, which would never be forgotten. What say the officers and representative men of the organization? Let them take courage, resolve at once to make a beginning—and the patronage of 50,000 mechanics can be secured in a year.