

## ADVANTAGES OF UNIONISM.

The Position of Unionists Clearly Defined by Prof. Ashley.

A fortnight ago Mr. P. J. McGuire, general secretary of the United Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners of America, delivered a lecture in Toronto on "The Burdens of Labor and How to Relieve Them," before a large audience. Prof. Ashley, M.A., of Toronto University, occupied the chair and, in introducing the lecturer, made the following remarks:

Ladies and Gentlemen,—When the Toronto branch of the United Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners asked me to preside on this occasion, although I was gratified by the kindly feeling which the request displayed, I ventured to ask for a little delay before I gave my answer. I wished first to read some of the printed utterances of the speaker who was to address you. Your committee put into my hands a copy of an address which Mr. McGuire had recently been delivering before the convention of officers of bureaus of labor. There I found such excellent common sense, such absence of mere sentiment and tall talk, such courage to express the unpopular truth even to the workmen themselves, if necessary, that I felt I could hesitate no longer, and at once consented to be with you to-night. You have come together to hear Mr. McGuire and I will not take up your time. But before I call upon him to address you it may not be out of place for me to say somewhat of my own position in this matter. I should not of course be here this evening if I were not of opinion that the Trades Union movement is one which, in spite of some defects and drawbacks, is greatly for the benefit of the working classes. When I say that combination among workmen is absolutely necessary in the great majority of cases if they are to obtain as good terms as the condition of trade really warrants, when I say this I am not expressing the opinion of a youthful sentimentalist, but that of almost every economist of any reputation. John Stuart Mill himself, a man who did not take an over sanguine view of what trade unionism could effect, long ago pointed out that combination alone could secure for the workmen that genuine freedom of contract which, isolated and disunited, they could enjoy only in name. Moreover, a man must indeed be blind to experience who does not recognize that in the country where unionism has been most successful, in England, it has distinctly contributed to the improvement in the material and moral well being of the working classes. But I am ready to confess that if I thought trades unions benefited only the working classes I should have felt some difficulty in being present this evening. Even the thought that a greater diffusion of comfort among the masses of the people would lead to a healthier and happier state of society might still have left me hesitating; for it might be urged with some show of propriety that as trade unionism is primarily an organization for the purposes of industrial warfare, it was inconsistent with the duty of one who ought to occupy a position of impartiality and neutrality to throw himself on one side or other in the struggle. But I am convinced that the formation of strong labor unions is not only for the good of the working classes, but also demonstrably for the advantage of society as a whole; and that for three reasons. The first is, that the better organized the laborers are the less frequent do strikes become. There is an idea abroad among the general public that the officers of trades unions, and especially the delegates from central unionist executives at a distance, spend their time in fomenting strikes, and that if there were no such agitators strikes would disappear. But it would be clear on a lit-

tle consideration that it is not for the interest of unionist officials that there should be an unsuccessful strike. And when the local union is part of a great international brotherhood, as in the case of the carpenters and joiners, it is the universal rule that no union is to go on strike and become a burden on the funds of the society without the previous consent of the central executive. The larger and more consolidated the organization is the more likely is it that the central executive will be men of ability and experience, men who have a pretty shrewd notion of the state of the labor market and the condition of business. In the earlier stages of unionism there have no doubt been only too many cases in which strikes have been precipitated by foolish and even self-seeking agitators. Instances of this kind largely account for the feeling of suspicion towards trades unions which took so long to die out in England, and still survives in America. But it is the universal experience that when once a firm organization, with a properly chosen executive exercising adequate authority, and administering considerable funds, has come into existence—such an organization as your brotherhood—the influence of the central officers, instead of always being in favor of strikes, is in most cases against them. "During the six years ending 1882, years of unexampled bad trade, and reduction of wages, and industrial disturbance, there were a great many strikes, and during that period seven great trade societies in Great Britain expended in settlement of disputes £162,000 only, out of a capital of nearly £2,000,000. In 1882"—the last year for which I have the figures easily accessible—"these societies with an aggregate income of £330,000 and a cash balance of £360,009, expended altogether in matters of dispute about £5,000, which was not two per cent. on the whole of their income, and not one per cent. on their total available resources for the year." The same is true in America, and how this comes about has been admirably stated by Mr. McGuire himself. Now, of course, Mr. McGuire advocates restrictions on strikes in the interest of the workmen; he is desirous that a battle should not be fought until there is a prospect of its being successful. But whatever the object, the result is that there are fewer strikes, and even if these are more serious, that strikes should be fewer is for the advantage of trade and industry. It is infinitely better in every way that there should be a few big struggles than a never-ending series of little ones. It disturbs industry less; it creates less soreness between employers and employed, and when the contest does come it is much more likely to attract general attention and to set men of public spirit and practical ability to devise some means by which strikes can be obviated in future. And this brings me to my second point. Trades unions are the necessary basis for the most hopeful methods of maintaining industrial peace, viz., arbitration and conciliation. I have recently spoken at some length on this topic and will not return to it again, except to say this much: The time has gone by when employers could expect that the workmen would accept whatever wages were offered to them. I do not underestimate the amount of business ability which is requisite in the successful employer. Economists to-day are laying more and more emphasis on the extent to which the successful prosecution of any business undertaking depends on the possession of business skill. But though this business ability is a factor of immense importance in modern industry, human labor is still indispensable; and on the conditions under which it is employed depend the happiness of the great body of the people. And with the growth of democratic feeling and the spread of education workmen are quite sure to claim an equal voice with the employers in the settlement of

the terms upon which they shall labor, and it is time that this fact was faced. The only means of satisfying this demand which is consistent with the conditions of industry and within the sphere of practical politics is to provide for regular periodical and businesslike conferences between representatives of the two interests. But unless the men are accustomed to act together, unless their representatives on the board are their usual leaders, conciliation is sure to break down. Even on the side of the employers, there is the same need of combination, if they are numerous; or otherwise the action of the employers on the joint board will fail to carry with it the acquiescence of the whole body. So that, although combination among the masters might give them a somewhat better chance in a contest with the men, I should nevertheless welcome combination among them, wherever it was needed for the proper working of arbitration or conciliation. And, returning to trades unions, it is worth while considering, even by those who have little sympathy with unionism, whether it is not a necessary stage on the way to something better. And then there is this third reason for believing that a vigorous trades unionism is for the good not only of the working classes, but also of the whole community; it is the most efficacious antidote to revolutionary socialism. I am not an alarmist; but it is very certain that when every adult man is given an equal share in political power, and every man is able to read, there will grow up much dissatisfaction with the existing distribution of wealth. It is to this natural dissatisfaction that the revolutionary Socialists appeal. They are ready with the argument that nothing short of a violent overthrow of the present social system can be of any avail. But if it can be shown that without overthrowing the present basis of society, viz., private property, workingmen can ameliorate their own condition by their own efforts, the ground is cut from beneath the Socialists' feet. Accordingly your genuine Socialist has usually been everywhere the bitterest enemy of trades unions; and in proportion as unionism has been successful have the workmen given up wild and visionary dreams of social revolution. In all seriousness, therefore, the attention of the more comfortable classes may well be called to trades unionism as being in its essence and purpose, in the truest sense of the word, conservative. If only people would give a great and dispassionate attention to the subject there would be some prospect that many prevalent misconceptions would disappear. The well-worn objection, for instance, that unions fix a hard and fast wage for good and bad workmen alike would be seen to rest on a misunderstanding. And if there are still a few unwise rules in some unions, as I must confess, I fear there are—rules, however, which do not touch the essence of the unionist principle—there is much more likelihood that the unions will remove them if they are criticised courteously, intelligently, and sympathetically. That kind of criticism, of which unions have had too much, which proceeds on the assumption of an obvious moral and mental superiority on the part of a critic, has never been of the smallest use. And now, ladies and gentlemen, I will call on Mr. McGuire to address us. I dare say we shall not all agree with everything he has to say; but it is only to the frank interchange of argument that we can look for the growth of a wise public opinion. And Mr. McGuire has played so influential a part in the labor movement on this continent his opinions will certainly be worthy of our serious consideration.

The Prince of Wales has decided to close his connection with the turf.  
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