

The Inequitable Wage Scale

The apprentice or inexperienced worker demands a wage which is out of proportion to the wage of the man who has mastered his trade and had years of experience

By B. K. SANDWELL

One of the most alarming aspects of the wage situation now in existence on this continent and in a large part of Europe, and resulting from the dictation of the wage scale by the employed class rather than by the employer, is the inequitable distribution of the wage fund among the different classes of workers, as differentiated by age and experience. If it be true that the matured worker, the man of forty to fifty, who has devoted most of his life to the practice of his trade, is not overpaid at the present scale, it is impossible not to conclude that the youngest members of the wage earning class are paid out of all proportion to their value and to their needs.

A report from Toronto states that a demand is being made before the Board of Conciliation on the Toronto Railway Company's electric workers' schedules, for the establishment of a sixty cents per hour wage for all boys employed by the company, and for their classification as apprentices. A very brief calculation shows that on the basis of a 44 hour week this would amount to an income of \$26.40 per week for boys possessing absolutely no knowledge or experience of business, and enjoying supervision and tuition which in three years turns them out as fully equipped journeymen electrical workers, and which is imparted wholly at the expense of the employing corporation. It is not surprising to learn that the representatives of the company stated that it would be utterly impossible for it to continue employing boys on these terms.

This, as a matter of fact, is a very moderate instance of the size of the wages now demanded and very frequently received by juvenile workers whose time must be almost as much devoted to improving their own abilities as to producing value for the employer who pays them. In a period of large demand and short supply of labor, these youngsters are thus able to secure employment from factory owners who know that they can increase the price of their product to cover even such abnormal charges as thirty-five and forty dollars a week for unskilled and uneducated boys of eighteen. It need hardly be said that when labor is plentiful and employment short, these costly workers will be the first to be laid aside.

It is not the fact that the wage is disproportionate to the product of this labor, that constitutes its chief objection. It is the fact that the wage is disproportionate to the requirements of the whole class of persons so employed. The boy of eighteen has no need and no legitimate use for a salary exceeding twenty dollars a week. In nine cases out of ten, he is tempted by the desire for pocket money into taking a job of this kind, when his family are able and willing to continue his education; and thus, for the sake of a few dollars to be foolishly spent in his salad days, he throws away the prospect of fitting himself for a far more useful and better remunerated position in his later years. In the present state of domestic discipline, it is rare indeed that a juvenile worker of this kind makes an adequate contribution or indeed any contribution towards the cost of his upkeep. He feels no responsibilities, argues that his family would keep him if he continued studying, and might as well keep him also if he goes into work.

A very large part of the extravagance of the present day is due to the possession by the juvenile

worker class, both male and female, of abnormally large incomes which they refuse to spend except on their own whims and desires. It is not the heads of families, as a rule, who are spending money extravagantly even in these days of high wages and continuous employment. We do not see the mature working man frequenting the cabaret, nor his wife climbing in and out of taxicabs with a lavish display of silk stockings. We do see the sons and daughters of these people, reckless of the future and practically convinced that their present affluence will last forever, expending every dollar of their twenty-five or thirty or forty a week, upon their clothes, their amusements and their meals.

The present writer heard, the other day, of the case of a young man scarcely eighteen, but possessing some special skill in connection with the fur industry, who was offered employment at forty-five dollars a week, and scornfully refused it, saying that he did not have to work and was not going to work for anything less than forty-eight dollars. His reason for not having to work was simply that his family were keeping him. He did not have to make any contribution to the family expenses, and did not do so even when he was earning forty-eight dollars. He had been earning forty-eight dollars for some time past, and being unable to get through that enormous sum, he had accumulated a reserve of some thing over one hundred dollars, which he proposed to spend on his own gratification if further employment at forty-eight dollars was not forthcoming.

The idea that one hour's work by any one human being is equivalent to one hour's work by any other human being seems to have taken a strong hold upon a large section of the population. Even it were true, it does not follow that it would be socially desirable to pay the same wage to all individuals alike, irrespective of their responsibilities in the community and irrespective also of their probable future attitude towards the industry in which they are engaged. Thus, even as between a man and a woman of equal productive ability employed in the same industry, there is a certain weighting in favor of the man on the grounds both of the average economic responsibility of his sex and of the average future attitude of his sex towards industry. When a man is engaged successfully in productive work in an industry, there are two broad general deductions which may be drawn from the fact. The first is that he probably has or will, shortly acquire responsibilities for the maintenance and education of a family. The second is that he will probably remain in that industry, or in some related industry, during the whole of his active life, and give it the benefit of his accumulated experience. With the woman worker, neither of these deductions can be drawn with any degree of probability. The woman worker, and especially the young woman worker, is usually engaged in industry simply to fill up time until she receives a satisfactory proposal of marriage, and her motive in engaging in industry is very often simply the desire to equip herself better for the competition for husbands. Such a woman neither has nor expects to have any responsibilities for the maintenance of others. Needless to say, the fact that this is the general rule does not prevent the existence of a very large

number of exceptions; but the right of a class to a certain scale of remuneration must be based upon the general average condition of that class rather than upon the condition of its exceptions.

The over-payment of the young and irresponsible worker is one of the most dangerous elements in our economic situation today. The only thing in its favor is that these workers constitute a fringe which can be detached from the main body of workers and thrown into unemployment in a time of reduced output with less general hardship than would be the case with classes of workers who have responsibilities and dependents.

Even so, there will be considerable bitterness and hard feeling among these workers when the source of their present prosperity and the funds for their present extravagance are taken away. It will be hard for them to learn the lesson that a boy of eighteen is not as valuable a worker as a man of thirty, and that a half illiterate girl of seventeen with no knowledge of the routine of business correspondence is not as good a helper in the office as the man or woman who has been engaged in handling business correspondence for ten or a dozen years. The lesson will be made harder for them by the teachings which have been imparted to them by too many of their labor leaders, who have proceeded upon the assumption that because one vote in the labor union is as good as another vote, therefore the owner of that vote should be assisted by the union to get as high a wage as the owner of any other vote.

We begin to hear almost as much today about the liquidation of labor as we heard a few months ago about the liquidation of credit. There is a good deal of similarity between the labor situation and the credit situation. Some curtailment of the use of credit is desirable in order that the supply of it may be sufficient to meet the requirements of the producers and distributors of necessary articles, without their being compelled to pay an extortionate price. The curtailment should take the form of the withdrawal from the least necessary branches of production and distribution. There is an excessive demand for labor, which has had the effect of forcing up the price to an abnormally high level. It is desirable that that demand should be somewhat curtailed, but the curtailment should take place among those whose employment is not necessary to the health of the body politic; that is to say, among those workers who have no responsibilities and who have been spending their incomes upon extravagant enjoyments for themselves. Unfortunately, it is difficult so to regulate both employment and credit in such a way that both may always be obtainable where needed, and unobtainable where their use is not in the interests of the community as a whole. There have been cases of hardship produced by the liquidation of credit, and there will be others. There will be cases of hardship produced by the liquidation of labor, but both processes are necessary for the restoration of the economic life of the community to normal conditions.

One of the worst aspects of the presence in industry of the irresponsible young person is the fact that he or she has no real respect for the job. The man whose family depends upon his exertions for its livelihood is likely to consider it as a pretty strong incentive to attend to business and to pay some regard at least to the permanent interests of the employer. The boy or girl who is working without any necessity for so doing, for a wage which is measured in terms of silk stockings and taxis rides and dinners at cabaret restaurants, has no such incentive. It is notorious to all that have tried it that these things become after a time a weariness to the flesh, and those whose labor has no other motive than to secure them are not likely to work with any degree of seriousness or consistency.