

THE ORGANIZATION OF LABOR

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(FROM THE METHODIST MAGAZINE.)

But, as I said before, you cannot permanently defeat a tendency which arises out of the economic situation itself. The workmen begin to form secret unions in the teeth of the law; and—as may be anticipated with men of scant education and toilsome lives, burning under a sense of being unfairly treated—they were often guilty of crimes which cannot be palliated. And the memory of those crimes, which, of course, the employers can hardly be blamed for making the most of, still clings round the name of "trade's union," and unconsciously influences the judgment of those who would otherwise be sympathetic. But we must in fairness remember that the worst of these crimes were committed when the governing classes were maintaining a system which, in its working, subjected the men to continual injustice.

We will grant, then, to begin with, that under modern circumstances it is inevitable that workmen should seek to form unions, and that they are right in so doing, inasmuch as only through union are they in a position to make a fair bargain. But this principle carries with it certain consequences which are by no means universally acknowledged. The first is that a union must have some sort of organization, some sort of representative officials; and that in negotiations as to wages, employers will do well to recognize these officials, and treat with them, if there is reason to believe that the men do really look upon them as their representatives. This course is desirable, if only from the point of view of expediency. Let us take an example from a safe distance—from Australia. The great Melbourne strike arose out of a dispute between the shipowners and the captains and mates of the small coasting ships. The latter asked for an increase in wages, and, when refused, formed a union, and affiliated themselves with the trades union organization of the country. Thereupon the shipowners professed their readiness to grant the increase, but refused to confer with the officials of the new association; they would see them as individual employees, but not as representatives of a union. Now this was in the highest degree unwise. The captains of the trading ships belonged to a different class from the great body of the unionists, and if the shipowners had just bided their time, there was great likelihood that the alliance between the new association and the federated unions would have come to an end of itself. But they chose rather to try openly and at once to break up the association; and the result has been a disastrous strike, which has brought distress to the whole community; for the demand of the shipowners was in itself sufficient to confirm the men in their opposition, if they had any spark of independence of spirit.

Of course I do not mean to say that an employer is to take the trouble to negotiate with any two or three men who claim to represent the workmen, and that he must not treat with any one else. It is a matter of common sense. If the union includes but a small number of men, the employer may fairly say that the union delegates do not really represent the mass of the work people; but when the union does really embrace most of the men, it is both unjust and imprudent not to treat with it.

Let me take another example, and this time from England; from the great South Wales strike of 1890. Here one of the chief difficulties in the way of coming to terms was that the employers refused to treat with the representatives of the unions, on the

ground that they were "outsiders." They would treat, they said, with their own workpeople, but not with paid demagogues. This feeling is very natural. The unionist secretary is usually a person with more facility in speaking than the workmen; and he is able to put their case in a very telling way, and a way which is not likely to be overfair or generous to the masters. But let us look at it from the side of the men. They realize that they have not the education necessary to enable them to put their case well; they are not accustomed to meet the masters and talk business with them, and they feel themselves at a disadvantage. What more natural, then, that they should gladly choose as their representative some "outsider," with what is called "a gift of the gab?" And the point I want especially to press is this. Suppose the employers have justice on their side—and, of course, unions frequently make mistakes—they will be in a much better position for urging their side of the argument, if they do not begin by arousing bad feeling, by refusing to confer with the unionist leaders. Moreover, they would have much more chance of getting public opinion on their side; and public opinion is a force by which such disputes are largely determined.

The next proposition I have to lay down is that workmen are justified in striking, just as every dealer is justified in refusing to come to terms if he thinks he can make a better bargain. Of course it must never be forgotten that real success in the case of a strike is something more than success in the particular dispute; it is not real success if the result is to diminish or destroy the trade. And in saying that strikes are justifiable, I am speaking only of the refusal to work in itself. I shall be told that everybody admits it; I doubt it. Among persons of what we may call the "better-to-do classes" there is still a strong feeling that a strike in itself, whatever the merits of the particular quarrel may be, is a bad thing. Two reasons are given. First, that it causes great inconvenience to the public. Here I would draw a distinction. We must distinguish between forms of labor which are of immediate importance to life or limb or public order, and those which are not. In the case of the former I would go so far as to make it a penal offence to leave work without notice. It is obvious that we cannot permit gasworkers to leave a town in darkness, or railroad men to abandon trains en route, or policemen to refuse to go out on a night's duty, without word of warning. Yet the contract must not be a one-sided one. If the employees in particular occupations are not to quit work without a specified period of notice, they must not be dismissed without an equally long notice. But in most cases the inconvenience is not so serious as this; and of course one of the objects of the strikers is to cause inconvenience to the public, and so draw attention to their claims. But it is extraordinary how hard some people find it to look at a question from somebody else's point of view. Thus I have heard it remarked how unfortunate it was that the progress of the university buildings was hindered by a strike. But then people have gone on to imply that there was something positively wrong in the bricklayers refusing to proceed as fast as they could with so noble a task. But the time when the public wants certain things very much is just the best time for the laborer to put forward his claim. To judge from the lamentations of some good folk, it would seem as if the only proper time for men to strike was when there was no demand for their labor.

A second reason which is given for condemning all strikes is the amount of suffering which it entails, to the strikers and their families. Even if they succeed, it is said, they will never be able to make up for the privations they have undergone. It was at one

time a favorite form of argument to draw up a sort of balance sheet, and present on one side the amount of wages lost during the strike plus the expenditure of the union in strike pay, and to argue that even if the union succeeded it could never make up for the loss. But this is a ridiculously insufficient argument. Putting on one side the not infrequent case where the gain of a strike to the men does pay for the cost of it, the true answer is that the gain from the men's point of view of a strike cannot be measured in dollars and cents. To do this you would have to know the indirect influence of a successful strike, and, indeed, of many an unsuccessful one. One victory, or even a hard-fought battle where the men were defeated, may make many subsequent struggles unnecessary. A successful strike, or even an unsuccessful one that has proved costly to the employers, may influence them towards making concessions in the future rather than run the risk of considerable loss; and this in many other fields of employment. It would be a narrow view of the dockers' strike which was limited to its results on the dockers themselves. Their success has led all over England to a very general increase in the wages of unskilled laborers.

I advance now with some trepidation to a final proposition. If we allow that men have a right to combine and come to a common agreement as to the terms upon which they will work, we cannot fairly restrict them in the range of the conditions which they may think desirable. Let me take at once the sort of case that may be present to your minds. Suppose the men are anxious to secure and render permanent a certain rate of wages. The masters, we will suppose, are ready to grant the rise, but ask to be allowed to retain the right to employ other men at the same time, non-unionists, either at the same or a lower wage. Obviously it would be folly for the men, from their point of view, to accept the proposal; for it might be the thin edge of the wedge which would finally get rid of the union altogether. It would create that very competition among men which it is the object of the union to do away with.

Or, suppose that during a strike the employer has been able to get a few non-union men to work for him. Suppose that in spite of this he is beaten. Is he to keep these non-union men in his employ? Of course it seems very hard on these men that they should be turned adrift; but what the unions may urge from their point of view is this: "We want employers to understand that if they determine to reject our terms, and try to get outside labor, they must face the chance of their having to dismiss the outsiders if they are beaten; and if they make any agreement which they may not be able to keep, they must take their chance of having to compensate the outsiders for the breach of contract. And again we want non-unionists to feel that if they choose to help the employers they must run the risk of being left in the lurch."

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

The proposed shuffle in St. Antoine Ward is not likely to materialize without opposition, which those sentimentalists who have undertaken to hand it over will find out. The various speakers at the sympathetic meeting the other day assumed too much when they supposed that the electors of this important ward would consent to be traded off as if they were part and parcel of Ald. Shorey's real estate on which he qualifies. They will have something to say before accepting the rejected of another ward.

The following pen picture of the late Premier, is taken from a Melbourne (Australia) exchange. We leave our readers to judge how near it comes to the original:—"Premier" Mercier, of Quebec, whose accounts are in such a lamentable state, is a little fat man

with two thin, agitated legs, a body like a barrel, no neck worth mentioning, dark hair, a huge moustache, and a long, fierce nose like the beak of the man who runs the bogus turf-sweep. He has an insinuating manner which is partly that of a fashionable tailor and partly that of a suave hair-dresser when he mentions apologetically that you are "rather thin at the top," his eyes are never still, he is hurried and jerky, and has the shiniest and most pointed boots in all Canada."

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