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FINANCE AND INSURANCE REVIEW.

MONTREAL, JUNE 3, 1881.

THE LABOR QUESTION.

It is not surprising that at a time when the public are taught to believe that the various industries of the country are in a state of great prosperity, and when, moreover, that prosperity is ascribed chiefly, if not entirely, to alterations in the tariff, which have increased the price of the necessaries of life, there should be a tendency on the part of the industrial classes to claim higher wages than they were able to obtain during a period of depression. It is probable that in most cases satisfactory arrangements have been made between employers and employed, without their obtaining public notoriety, such as is caused when, owing to the failure of

such arrangements, what is termed a strike is resorted to. There are few subjects on which there has been so great a change in public opinion within the memory of men now living as on that regarding trade associations. In the "History of our own Times," by Justin McCarthy, it is stated: "Even after that time (1824), and down to the period of which we are now writing, there was still a marked and severe distinction drawn between master and servant, master and workman in our legislation. In cases of breach of contract the remedy against the employer was entirely civil; against the employed, criminal. A workman might even be arrested on a warrant for alleged breach of contract, and taken to prison before the case had been tried. The laws were particularly stringent in their declarations against all manner of combination among workmen. Any combined effort to raise wages would have been treated as conspiracy of a specially odious and dangerous order."

Owing to the oppressive character of the laws, secret associations were established in many of the great manufacturing towns in the North of England, Sheffield especially having obtained a disgraceful notoriety. The most cruel outrages, including assassination, were perpetrated on those who had incurred the wrath of the trades unions. Manchester was nearly, though not quite, as bad as Sheffield, and other towns were not much better. The consequence of these outrages was that a commission of enquiry, authorized to take evidence on oath, was sent to Sheffield in 1867, with power to offer protection to any one engaged in the commission of the outrages who should give information that would lead to the discovery of the conspiracy. The ring leader himself made a full disclosure of his crimes, and confessed that he selected men and paid them out of the funds of the Union to mutilate and destroy victims against whom they had no personal resentment. The result of the enquiry into the Sheffield outrages was the commencement of a course of legislation, the object of which was to take away the excuse from the members of trades unions that the law was unjust to them and to their class.

Among those who were most active in promoting just measures on the subject was the late Mr. I. S. Mill, who recognized the fact, and persuaded others to do so, that a strike is not a thing which can be called good or bad until we know its object and its history. A most objectionable feature of the trades unions was the combination with them of provident clubs, which enabled the council to punish those

who refused to comply with all their unionist requirements by depriving them of the benefit of a club to which they had contributed for years, and to which they looked forward as a sure resource in sickness and old age. It was only in 1875 that the fair claims of the unions were recognized by Parliament, and the master and workmen placed on absolute equality as regarded the matter of contract, a breach of which was to be treated as giving rise to a civil and not a criminal remedy. An important feature of that legislation was that no combination of persons is to be deemed criminal if the act proposed to be done would not be criminal when done by one person. There was special legislation or particular breaches of contract, notably contracts of service to gas and water companies and in certain railway services, in all of which a breach of contract might involve serious injury to life and property. Violence, or intimidation to compel others to act with one or more associates, is punishable; in short, the right of combination is recognized for every purpose which is not itself contrary to law. No man was bound to work for less wages than he chose, but the law has at last acknowledged that a hundred or ten thousand men have a right to combine in the same resolution, and to put their resolve into execution by way of a strike if they think fit. They have a right to refuse to work in the same establishment with other men of whose proceedings they disapprove, just as the employers have a right to refuse to employ men when they know to be communists, or in any other way objectionable. The important principle which is too often violated in the case of strikes is that unions have no right to coerce or intimidate any one into agreement with them.

A most objectionable rule of the old trade unions was the regulation that its members must not take piece-work or work over time, or work too diligently. Such a rule is obviously prejudicial to the interests of the best of working men. The great benefit to the working men of remunerating them according to the amount of work performed instead of by daily wages is exhibited in Mr. Thomas Brassey's "Work and Wages," in which he furnishes a collection of most interesting facts, the result of the experience of his father, the late Mr. Brassey, the eminent railway contractor. That gentleman in the course of his long career expended in the four quarters of the world about four hundred millions of dollars, and had the best means of judging as to the comparative cost of labor in different coun-