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THE POLITICS OF LABOUR.*

THE problems connected with what is generally known as Socialism are, at the present time, pressing with unusual urgency for consideration, if not for solution. Questions are arising, more and more, as to how far liberty of contract may be interfered with by law, and indeed these questions are concerned with the whole relations of what is called Socialism to our present system.

One or two things are becoming quite clear, and should be made clear to the minds of all who give attention to these subjects. In the first place, Socialism and Nihilism, although they may often seem to be associated, have in reality no necessary connection with each other. In some respects, indeed, they may be regarded as opposites, and this in two respects; for in the first place, with the Nihilist or Anarchist the individual is everything; whilst, with the Socialist, the community is everything and the individual almost nothing; and again, the Nihilist would have every one to be his own master, abolishing the policeman and the soldier, together with every form of government, whilst the Socialist would have a very strict government, protecting the community and compelling the individual to be subject to the same. This is a most important distinction, and the forgetfulness of it has often confused the minds of persons who have attempted to understand these subjects. The writer of the volume before us is no Anarchist, although in one part of his book he exhibits a little ill-natured sympathy with the condemned (and now executed) Anarchists of Chicago; but this sympathy evidently proceeds from dislike of the present state of society rather than from positive agreement with the principles of the condemned men.

Another thing should be noted. When we speak of Communism or Socialism, we may mean one of a great many different kinds of things. Without referring to Fourierism, St. Simonism, and other forms of the theory, it may be proper to remark that Mr. Thompson does not, for the present at least, advocate the confiscation of all private property and the making of it over to the State, although he does want a great deal more of legislative interference with the relations between the employers and the employed. It is obvious, therefore, that there is no impassable gulf between Mr. Thompson's general views as here announced and those of the ordinary anti-Socialist of the present time. No one now will plead that all contracts between employers and employed should in all respects be left to be controlled by the mere incidence of supply and demand. The limitation of the hours of work and of the ages of the workers and various other similar restrictions are now held to be subject to the lawful exercise of the powers of the government. On the other hand, moderate Socialists, like Mr. Thompson, do not at present argue that property is theft, although they would curtail its privileges to the utmost.

No one has the right to deny that those who are clamouring for increased privileges to the labouring classes have at least an apparent case. The growth of enormous fortunes in one class of the people and the abject poverty of vast numbers of the opposite class are facts which are too evident; and it is quite proper and necessary that their causes should be investigated. Further, it is quite obvious that the evils connected with this state of things are not prevented, that they are probably not ameliorated, by democratic institutions. There are certainly more millionaires created in America than in England; and there would probably be a much greater amount of destitution if the area of territory occupied by the people were relatively as small. It is clear, therefore, that democracy by itself, as it has hitherto been understood, is no remedy for this state of things.

We go then entirely with the representatives of the working classes

when they say that every effort should be made to devise some means by which the profits, which are the product of labour, should be more equally divided between the employer and the employed. It is very desirable that some means should be discovered of preventing the "tyranny of Capitalism." But we hesitate and doubt when the friends of labour seem bent upon substituting the tyranny of labour for the tyranny of capital; and this not merely in the interests of the capitalist, but in the interests of the labourer as well. Most certainly, if the labourer can be really and permanently benefited, the employer will not ultimately suffer. Our confidence on this point is based upon considerations not merely politico-economical, but also upon moral and religious grounds. What, however, we are afraid of is that the tyranny of labour may destroy the capitalist, and then discover that its own existence is undermined.

Mr. Phillips Thompson has unconsciously uttered a prophecy on this subject, which reminds us of other unconscious prophecies recorded in history. He remarks: "Labour is just awakening to a dim consciousness of its political strength. Hitherto like a shorn and blinded Samson, it has ground in the prison house of partyism, the mock and sport of its despoilers. The time approaches when the aroused giant will put forth his long wasted energies, and level to the dust the strongholds of oppression."

These words really deserve very serious consideration. It is indeed quite possible that some such uprising of the masses may take place. It is quite as likely to take place when they are freed from the disadvantages to which they are now exposed. It is not generally when oppression is strong that the oppressed rise. It is more often after attempts have been made to improve their condition. But, in whatever circumstances, we are not prepared to deny that the working classes may some day rise against the moneyed classes, and overwhelm society under the ruins of the fabric which they have destroyed. But the prophecy involved in Mr. Thompson's illustration will then most certainly be fulfilled. The blind Samson slew more in his death than all those whom he had slain in his life; but he also slew himself. He slew them in his death. And so, when the classes—downtrodden and otherwise—whom we now speak of as the masses, rise against the organized society to which they belong, they may indeed bring back chaos but they will themselves be a part of it. It is very easy to rail at "the classes" and at capitalists, and it is quite certain that the wealthy have in many ways failed in their duty. But are they the only ones who have failed? It is quite true that their responsibilities were great in proportion to their privileges and abilities. But it is less easy to show how matters can be improved by any species of legislation. When we come to the part of Mr. Thompson's book which contains his proposed remedies, we feel very doubtful of their efficacy, in some cases of the possibility of applying them.

Something may be done by co-operation between employers and employed, by giving the workmen an interest in the profits—and also in the losses—of the business in which they are employed. But how this can be affected by legislation it is not quite easy to understand; nor does it seem quite certain that workmen will in general prefer a plan offering the prospect of uncertain profits and also of probable losses to the present method by which they obtain a definite amount for their labour with scarcely any risk of losing the amount which was to be paid.

One thing which Mr. Thompson proposes we may confidently declare to be unworkable, namely the refusal to recognise the claims of capital, as such, to obtain any return. Let us note how he puts the proposition. "Fixing the share of labour," he says, "by whatever means of legislative authority or of industrial combination it is accomplished, is virtually fixing the share of the capitalist-employer. That accomplished, the next step will be to eliminate the factor of usury from the calculation, and by successive rearrangements to bring matters to the point where 'the share of capitalism' is reduced to a reasonable remuneration for the actual labour of superintendence and direction"—that is to say, the share of capitalism is reduced to nothing. Of course it would be argued that the capitalist had the privilege of choosing the kind of work which he had to do, that he could become overseer, superintendent and the like. But even so he would be paid only for his work and nothing for the capital which he had embarked; and this is sheer and simple confiscation, however we may disguise it.

It is not easy to say of any scheme, however visionary, irrational, insane, that men will never attempt to work it. But there is no great difficulty in predicting the consequences of the attempt. Such measures have always resulted in the same way in human history. They have led to the destruction of liberty, to the establishment of some form of despotic rule. There are many thoughtful persons in these times who believe that representative institutions have seen their best days. Whether this be so or not, few who remember the benefits which they have conferred upon mankind will contemplate their disappearance without a feeling of deep regret; and it is at least difficult for us to believe that a despotic government can ever be really beneficial to a country.

As far as we can forecast the future, we can see nothing better for us than to obey the laws of political economy, to temper the rigour of supply and demand by careful and beneficent legislation, and above all for employers and employed to learn and practise the golden rule which bids us do to others as we would that they should do unto us.

* *The Politics of Labour.* By Phillips Thompson. Belford, Clarke & Co. 1887.