

# THE WEEK.

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## THE LABOUR CONVENTION AT RICHMOND.

IN the industrial world all eyes are turned to the Labour Convention at Richmond. We shall see whether it will give birth to any practical and intelligible plan for improving the condition of the wage-earning class, or whether the aim of its conveners is merely to organise the wage-earning class under a centralised despotism for hostile action against the rest of the community. We cannot hope much in the way of a cure for social maladies from physicians whose diagnosis is not that of intelligence, but of passion. There are the usual invectives against the tyranny of Capital. In the name of common sense, what do those who utter the invectives suppose Capital to be? Is it not everything except bare manual labour? And what can bare manual labour by itself do? Suppose Mr. Powderly and his mates were set down upon an island where there was not a single capitalist nor a cent of capital, do they think that the result would be wealth and happiness? This is the logical consequence of the theory that Capital is the arch enemy of the workingman. Suppose there were a dearth of Capital in one place and an abundance of it in another, would Labour Reformers advise a mechanic in quest of employment to go to the place where there was a dearth? Accumulated capital in particular is the object of malediction on these occasions. But let it be shown how without accumulated capital any great work can be undertaken, and how, unless great works are undertaken, civilisation can go on. What is it but the accumulation of capital that has caused wages to rise, notwithstanding the immense increase of the numbers of the working class? What is it but the accumulation of capital that has caused interest to fall and produced that very cheapness of money which Labour Reformers propose, but would totally fail to produce, by tamperings with the currency, which would derange the whole industrial and commercial system? Mr. Powderly does not shrink from telling workingmen that their condition under the tyrannical reign of gold is actually worse than was the condition of the slave. It is a pity that he and those who believe his words cannot be raised for a few years out of their present abject condition to the higher state of plantation hands. The prospect of improvement in industrial relations is not bright when those to whom the workingman confides his cause base their policy not on fact, but on monstrous and malevolent falsehoods.

From the usual language of Labour Reformers, it would be naturally inferred that every workingman was literally the bondsman of some capitalist, or, at all events, that the whole body was in bondage and that a workingman was liable, as slaves were in the South, to punishment if he were found at large; yet it is perfectly open to mechanics any day to leave not only the employment of any particular capitalist but the employment of capitalists altogether, and to set up for themselves on the co-operative principle, distributing capital—if that accursed thing is to be retained—and wages among the co-operators in exactly such proportions as may accord with their sense of justice. If we lay aside declamation and

come to facts, what is meant by the tyranny of the capitalist is simply this—that he hires labour as cheaply as he can and requires a full day's work for a full day's wage, instead of giving more than the task is worth and paying for idleness. But the declaimers are themselves exercising precisely the same tyranny every day of their lives. They are not direct hirers of labour, but they are indirect hirers of labour in respect of every article which they consume, and when they buy their clothes, their provisions, or their crockery as cheaply as they can, they are keeping down the market rate of wages and keeping up to full hours of work labour of every description in every part of the globe. That the producer is also a consumer, and, as a consumer, an employer, identified with other employers in interest, would seem to be the most rudimentary of truths; yet it is habitually left out of sight, as is the truth, almost equally rudimentary, that the real employer of labour is not the capitalist, who is merely the organiser and paymaster, but the community which buys the goods, and which cannot be bullied by any association or demonstration, on however large a scale, into giving a cent more than it chooses and can afford.

"Monopoly" is another cry. We are told that if the people will only rise in their might and exterminate monopolists a reign of justice and happiness will commence. A monopoly is an exclusive privilege of exercising a particular trade, and there is no such thing, properly speaking, on this continent except the coinage, which is necessarily a monopoly in the hands of the Government. Protectionism is a monopoly as against the foreign producer, and in the opinion of Free Traders it works much mischief, injustice, and corruption; but it leaves internal competition unrestricted and it is not among Trades Unionists that its determined enemies will be found. Rings and corners, though, like gambling in stocks, very bad things in their way, are different things from monopoly, and are nuisances not to the working class solely or specially but to society at large: happily they, with gambling in stocks, are in a fair way to be extinguished by their general unprofitableness, without the use of the guillotine. Railroads from the nature of the case cannot be duplicated, but that they have not been privileged is practically shown by the large number of those which have never paid any dividends on their original stock. The monster against which we are exhorted to tilt is at present a dark figment of the Labour Reformer's fancy. But we are threatened with the erection of a monopoly of employment in the hands of an organisation which, by boycotting and other engines of lawless tyranny, will deprive of their right to labour and of their bread all who do not choose to submit to its domination and conform to its exclusive rules. Against this the community is indeed called by regard for its most vital interests as well as by the voice of justice to contend. It must maintain without finching the freedom of the labour market and the unrestricted right of employing and being employed.

Mr. Powderly is said to have exhorted the delegates at Richmond to abstain from strong drink during the Convention for fear of giving scandal. In issuing that admonition did the thought cross his mind that not all the ills, perhaps not the principal ills, of the mechanic's estate were due to the tyranny of employers or to the vices of the social system? There is a bondage to drink, or sensual indulgence, and there is a bondage to debt, both of which are far more real than the bondage to capital. It has been noted by those who know most about the English factory hands, that the condition of men who draw the very highest wages is often not so good as that of those who draw a rate below the highest, because the very highest wages, by placing a more expensive class of luxuries within the mechanic's reach, tempt him to dissipation on a larger scale. That this is only too excusable in men who live the life of factory hands is true; still it is a different thing from the tyranny of the employers, the vices of the social system, or anything which socialistic violence could possibly remove. The system of co-operative stores, in the North of England, is the work of men who have never dealt in social venom; and by liberating the workingman from debt and making him a proprietor, it has raised not only his condition but his character far more than either the one or the other has ever been raised by unionism or strikes. Why cannot our Labour Reformers, here, sometimes give their minds to practical and amicable improvements of this kind? Is it because there is a set of men, styling themselves representatives of Labour, but really not working at all, who subsist by industrial war?