

Economic Power and Action

BY F. J. McNEY.

AS the confusion of ideas with regard to what economic power and action really is appears to be worse confounded at the present time than ever before, it might not be a bad idea to trace the subject back to its origin and deal with it from an historical point of view; in fact this is the only method of dealing with any social problem so that it may be thoroughly understood.

It will be granted by everybody, I think, even by those who profess to despise a dictionary, that the word "economics" means the science of wealth production and distribution. It will hardly be denied that the term "economic production" means the production of wealth, or the necessities of life, and that it applies to "every historical epoch" in which wealth has been produced. Nor will it be denied that the term "economic conditions" means the conditions under which wealth is produced at the present time, or has been produced in the past. We might go on in this manner and show that whenever, and wherever, we use the words "economic" or "economics" we refer in some way to the production and distribution of wealth, and all is clear sailing until we come to economic power and action; then we are lost in the fog.

Now we must remember that words and terms are used to express ideas, and ideas are the mental reflexes of things and conditions; let us therefore get down to things and conditions, and reason the proposition out logically and historically. I have already given what I consider the correct definition of the terms "economic power" and "economic action." I will give them again here, then we will apply them and see how they work out.

Economic power is the power to produce wealth. The power of man over nature. The power of man, individually or collectively, to transform nature given material into things fit for human consumption.

Economic action is the result of the application of power to the natural resources of the earth for the purpose of producing wealth. The action necessary to the whole process of economic production and exchange.

Taking the above definitions as our premises, let us go back to a period in human history when economic power and action did not exist, to a time when man lived much the same as any other animal. In those days he lived in trees or in caves, and made use of whatever he could find in the way of subsistence, but had no power or ability to increase the supply. In the course of time, however, he began to use his physical and mental energy to force from nature more of the necessities of life. He began to transform natural material into things more in harmony with his needs, and to use the forces of nature in his own interests, and for his own ends. Just when, and where, and how, this change first came about does not concern us here; it is enough to say that it was a slow, gradual process, and that it began many thousands of years before the human animal commenced to keep any record of his activities, but no matter when or how it began, it was the dawn of economic power and action.

After a period of unknown duration, but which was no doubt a "right smart" length of time, the human animal had acquired so much skill and efficiency in making tools, building houses, taming and raising cattle, tilling the soil and so forth, that it was possible for a part of society to produce enough of the necessities of life to support all. Thus slavery was possible and slavery became a fact. We do not know just when and how slavery was first established, but we do know that "it was so" and that it still remains so, "and God saw that it was good."

Although we do not know exactly when and how slavery first came into existence, there are indications to show that it was not, in all cases, by any means a peaceful and harmonious process. It appears that in the majority of cases those individuals

who were destined "by divine providence" to do all the work objected to the scheme, and that drastic persuasion was found necessary to keep them at it. Now it is obvious that a man might just about as well work himself as have to stand over other men all day and keep them working. How, then, was this problem solved by those who wished to benefit by the introduction of slavery in order that they might have leisure to amuse themselves as they saw fit? By the simple method of teaching slaves to watch the slaves. If you want proof of this just look around you at the present time. The only difference is that the method is a little more complicated at present than it was "in the brave days of old." In those days it was merely a question of selecting a few able-bodied slaves, arming them with weapons of various kinds, and convincing them that they would have a much better time and more rations if they would consent to guard other slaves and keep them working than if they worked themselves. No doubt care would be taken to select the guards from different tribes than those they were intended to guard. This was the origin of one branch of politics.

After chattel slavery had been in operation for a few thousand years it was supposed to be the only possible method of producing and distributing wealth. The fact that the human animal had been producing wealth and improving his tools and methods of wealth production without any compulsion other than that of economic necessity for many generations before slavery of any kind was possible, was, no doubt, unknown to even the most educated men of the great chattel slave empires. The slave owners of ancient Greece, for instance, could not even imagine a man working unless he was compelled to do so by coercion, and neither could the slaves. This was one point upon which everybody agreed. Consequently, the philosophers in their study of society discovered what they considered two irrefutable facts, first, that wealth could not be produced unless somebody worked; and, second, that in society as they knew it, nobody would be crazy enough to work unless he was compelled to do so. Reasoning from this premise they arrived at the conclusion that the power and action necessary to keep the slaves working was part of the power and action necessary to the production of wealth. In other words, that political power and action, and economic power and action, were merely complementary parts of one whole, or at least so closely connected and interrelated that it was impossible to distinguish between the two, a conclusion which was quite logical under the circumstances, in those days, but which indicates a confused mentality at the present time.

The confusion of economics and politics which has been bequeathed to us from the past, like other superstitions, has helped to keep the revolutionary movement in a turmoil for years, and for that very reason it is a most useful ally of the capitalists; the more confusion there is in this respect the better it is for the capitalist class. The statement often made by radicals, that political power and action cannot be separated from economic power and action, is equal to saying that slavery always did exist and always will. As a matter of fact, if we are ever going to abolish capitalism and replace it by a Socialist commonwealth, we cannot separate political power and action from economic power and action, not only theoretically but practically. When the last form of slavery disappears political power and action will also disappear, but the power and action necessary to the production of wealth will still remain.

Now it must be clear to everybody that "economic power" and "economic action," as I have defined the terms, apply to every phase and every epoch of human history in which wealth has been produced, from ante-slavery times, through chattel slavery and feudalism, and to every nook and corner of capitalism, at all times. It applies to farmers as well as to wage workers. And the fact that in every slave system the class that holds the political power

also owns or controls the slaves, the mass of wealth production, and all the wealth produced, does not contradict this conception in any respect.

Nevertheless, this conception may be a fallacy, and if it is, I hope that somebody will prove it a fallacy. But remember that we are dealing with facts and conditions here, and it is not merely a question of definitions. It is not a case of I say this, and you say that, and my opinion is just as good as yours. The fact remains that power and action is necessary to produce and distribute the wealth of the world. Is this power and action economic or not? If this question is answered in the negative, then it is up to somebody to explain just what kind of power and action it is. After this has been done it will be in order to point out some other power and action that is economic, and apply it to "every historical epoch" in which, as Engels says, "The prevailing mode of economic production and exchange, and the social organization necessarily following from it, form the basis upon which is built up, and from which alone can be explained, the political and intellectual history of that epoch."

And if it does not apply to "every historical epoch," and only applies to certain phases of capitalism at certain times, then it will be necessary to explain that also. It may be possible that economic power and action did not exist during chattel slavery and feudalism at all.

THE CLARION MAIL BAG

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and Maintenance Fund. From North Battleford, Sask., J. H. Moon sends in two subs. for the Clarion. Brief but very welcome.

An enthusiastic letter comes from Com. J. G. Egge, Humboldt, Sask. He refers to the good work done by Lester in that district, and says there is some talk of starting a Local in Saskatoon. He encloses a sub. to the Clarion and an order for literature.

Writing from Sandon, British Columbia, Comrade F. R. Roberts sends cheerful greetings and fifteen dollars for the Clarion, five subs. and ten dollars from the Sandon Miners Union. Tommy! Your're all wool and a yard wide. Our best regards to the lads. From Glacier, B. C. C. P. Cotter sends an order for books, "Evolution of the Idea of God," and "Christianism and Communism." A nice letter containing three subs. comes from Joseph Gray, Renata, B. C. From Anyox, comes an order for literature to the value of three dollars. Com. John Staples writes from Lookout Mountain asking for a back number of the Clarion.

An amusing letter enclosing two subs. comes from Com. J. Cartwright, East Wellington, B. C. He is pessimistic regarding the ability of the slaves of Capitalism to understand their true position. We think the outlook never looked brighter and we are not subject to auto-suggestion at that.

From San Francisco, Sam Clement sends best wishes to Clarion readers, and writers, also a sub. and contribution to the Maintenance Fund. He refers to the ruling class performance which is now being staged in Europe, and wonders what the outcome will be. Writing from Portland, Oregon, Mrs. G. Korlann expresses much pleasure in reading the recently concluded article "The Origin of the World," by R. McMillan. Kind words and a dollar sub. also come from J. G. Lowe, Rainier, Oregon. A welcome letter, worthy of publication as an article, comes from Com. O. Rayner, Los Angeles, California. Sends a sub. and best wishes. A letter enclosing a two dollar sub. and expressing hearty appreciation of the Clarion comes from a comrade in Waterford, N. Y. He wonders that we do not get discouraged and quit. We simply couldn't do it. From Ithaca N. Y., Com. Wm. Mitchell sends in a sub. and best wishes for the Clarion.

This finishes the "Mail Bag", up to 20th January. We earnestly appeal to all comrades to send in their news and views of the movement, and to give what help they possibly can in maintaining it as a force for working class advancement.