

**NATIONAL ANTI-CONVIC-CONTRACT
ASSOCIATION. PROCEEDINGS OF THE
NATIONAL CONVENTION, HELD AT
CHICAGO, AUGUST 26TH, 1886:
TOGETHER WITH OTHER INTERESTING
MATTER TO CONVICT-CONTRACT LABOR**

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L. D. MANSFIELD

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NATIONAL
ANTI-CONVICT-CONTRACT
ASSOCIATION.

PROCEEDINGS OF THE
NATIONAL CONVENTION,

HELD AT

CHICAGO, AUGUST 26th, 1886.

TOGETHER WITH OTHER INTERESTING MATTER RELATING TO

CONVICT-CONTRACT LABOR.

EDITED BY

PROF. L. D. MANSFIELD, M. A.,

ASSISTANT SECRETARY.

CHICAGO:

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1886.

1896
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Home Insurance Building.

Chicago, Dec. 1st, 1886.

IN presenting to manufacturers, workingmen, legislators, and to the general public, the proceedings of the Anti-Convict-Contract Convention, and the Constitution and By-Laws adopted by the National Organization, it seems proper to make some introductory remarks.

The evil which this Association seeks to combat is not an imaginary one, nor yet one of small significance; but an incubus which has weighed heavily upon the industrial interests of the country for years. It has elicited no little discussion on the part of political economists and manufacturers, as involving the interests of both capital and labor. It has engaged the attention, and induced the action, of the legislatures of several of our largest and most important States—New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Ohio, and California being already arrayed against the convict-contract system.

It is the aim of this Association to secure in all the States, and by the National Government, the same wise and equitable legislative measures in regard to convict-contract labor which have been

adopted by these States, and to secure such an exhaustive examination of the whole question as to effect a practical solution of the difficult problem, viz.:

"What shall be done with the convicts of our prisons and penitentiaries?"

That they must work, and not be kept in idleness, seems to be conceded on all hands. The terms of their sentence—"to hard labor"; the health and discipline of the prisoners; the necessity of their earning, at least, the principal part of their own support, and not be maintained by the tax-payer, all demand that the convict shall not be kept in idleness. This point may then be considered as settled, and should be eliminated from the problem.

The two principal questions to be considered, are: First, the evils which flow from the convict-contract system; Second, the remedy for those evils which shall bear the least on the industrial public.

Both these points will be found to have been most ably discussed in this Convention by business men, as well as by political economists,—men of large affairs and of comprehensive views,—to whose utterances the reader is referred. The Convention was not composed of utopian theorizers and doctrinaires, or of political demagogues, but of practical, thoughtful men, representing some of the largest manufacturing companies in the country, in many different lines of business, millions of invested capital, and the interests of tens of thousands of operatives.

Notwithstanding these well-known facts, a New York iron trade journal, which derives its principal support from manufacturers, has seen fit to say, referring to this Convention:

"Most of the anti-contract agitation of the past few years has been pure demagoguery, and those who have been misled by it are ignorant people who do not reason closely, and who are ever ready to follow any hue and cry that may be raised."

The list of well-known and honorable names of those taking part in the Convention is a sufficient answer to this aspersion.

The facts which are hereinafter submitted show conclusively that convict labor, which is sold to the contractor for an average of not more than fifty cents per day, is a disturbing element in the labor market, and in lowering the values of articles produced

by free industry; both reducing the price of labor—thus defrauding the free artisan of the rewards of his toil,—and the price of the manufactured article,—thus depriving the manufacturer of the full value of his goods.

Thus the State antagonizes the interests of its free citizens—both capitalists and working people—by selling the cheap labor of the criminal classes at a price which forbids successful competition. It must be obvious, that the legitimate manufacturer cannot pay three or four times as much as the prison contractor for his labor, and sell at the same price. The logical result is, that in order to continue his business, the manufacturer must cut down the wages of his workmen. Under this enforced reduction of wages workmen become restive and dissatisfied; strikes and hostility to capitalists are provoked; the whole framework of society is disturbed and the public peace jeopardized.

Convict-contract labor does not extend to all branches of business, but the derangement of values in these is not confined to those immediately affected, but extends sympathetically to all other branches of business, and so the element of convict-contract labor becomes a wide-spread disturbing force.

It has been noticed, in the labor troubles which have recently prevailed, how strikes in one department of labor produce strikes in others, and how all forms of skilled industry are so intertwined by the organization of the Knights of Labor, that all kinds of skilled industry sympathize and co-operate.

How much of the dissatisfaction of wage-workers is due to the injection into our free industries of this prison-labor element, it is difficult to say, but that it has wrought no inconsiderable part of the mischief scarcely admits of a doubt.

It is alleged that the amount of convict-contract labor is so small, compared with the aggregate amount of free labor employed in the same industries, that it cannot possibly affect the price of products or of free labor. Before submitting the facts, which show, that both products and labor are cheapened, by this miasmatic influence, below the point of proper remuneration to the workman and of profit to the employer, it should be considered that markets are made to rise and fall,—not by the aggregate holdings of all,—but by the prices consented to by some.

On the stock Exchange, or at the Board of Trade, the necessity of some "to realize," frequently depresses the market, and compels others to sell at a ruinous loss. The same principle rules in regard to manufactured articles produced by convict-contract labor. Lines of certain goods—such as shoes, chairs, furniture, metallic-goods, cooperage, etc.,—are thrust upon the market at a low price sufficient to depress values below the point of reasonable compensation, and the fact that prison contractors have not enough of the articles in question to supply the whole market, plays no part in the matter. The convicts produce enough to make a price, and that is all that is necessary, in order to disturb values and inflict great injury both upon the manufacturer and upon his workmen.

But more convincing than anything we can say on this point is an array of facts contained in the forthcoming report of the ILLINOIS BUREAU OF LABOR STATISTICS, from the advance sheets of which we are permitted to copy the following testimonials as to THE EFFECT OF THE CONTRACT SYSTEM ON FREE LABOR:

COOPERAGE.

"The president of a wealthy cooperage company doing business in all parts of the country offers this testimony upon the subject: "The manufacture of lard tierces and pork barrels in prison by machinery, in the various States, has virtually given the complete control of the markets for provision cooperage into their hands. They manufacture more than half of that which is used in the States of Ohio and Illinois. Whenever there is a stiffening in the demand, then the prison cooperage sells at the same price as that of free manufacture. The manufacture of cooperage inside prison walls should be restricted to exclusively hand work. By this means the convict would be taught a trade, the production would be reduced, and the State would not suffer.

"The greatest evil of the present system is, that at certain seasons of the year, and, I believe, at all seasons of the year in Chicago, it brings the level of wages that coopers earn working at provision cooperage

BELOW THAT OF A COMMON LABORER.

In our works, it has virtually compelled us to abandon the manufacture of provision cooperage. It is not, however, over one per cent. of our entire product. Twelve or fifteen years ago, we could safely count on putting a large percentage of our coopers, during the dull season, on this class of work, and, at least, get our money back, and often stand a chance of a good round profit: now we are

COMPELLED TO DISMISS THEM,

and let them hunt other employment.

"The use of cooperage machinery in the prison has divided the labor, so that now a convict learns only a trifling part of the trade; and he is no more of a cooper when he is released than he is a tailor. Cooperage stock should, in my opinion, go into the prison just as it leaves the tree, and all labor upon it should be done by hand.

No convict should be allowed to work more than six months at any one part of the work. This would insure him a trade, and a chance to earn his living when released.'

"A Chicago manufacturer of cooperage, with many years' experience in that market, gives this emphatic testimony as to the consequences of the contract system :

"The competition of prison-made goods in our market has caused such a decline in prices that we estimate present rates to be

FROM 25 TO 40 PER CENT. LOWER

than they would be if the convict contractors did not force their goods upon the market. The large amount of cooperage manufactured at Joliet has also very much

REDUCED THE HOME DEMAND,

and as it is virtually impossible to ship cooperage, on account of its bulk and the freight charges upon it, we are practically at the mercy of the prison contractors.

"This impairment of the demand and the price for our goods has made it necessary to reduce the wages of our employes to such an extent that, although they are skilled workmen, it pays them better to work when they can as laborers on the streets. The quality of prison-made goods is not generally equal to that of private manufacturers, and purchasers know it; but as we must sell in this market; they also know they will get our goods at prison prices if they wait long enough.

"In the last ten years half the cooperage establishments in this city

HAVE GONE OUT OF BUSINESS,

and the remainder have been compelled to discharge about half their employes. The influence of convict-contract labor in our business, owing to the enormous quantities of goods made and forced upon the market at any price attainable, is so demoralizing that in the last ten years it has

RUINED THE PROSPECTS OF EVERY ONE

concerned in that industry. It has forced employers out of business, long hours, hard work, and starvation wages upon employes, and injured all kinds of manufacturers of the raw material throughout the State.'

BOOTS AND SHOES.

"The president of one of the oldest and largest boot and shoe establishments in Chicago, or the country, having an invested capital of over a quarter of a million dollars, makes the following statement, based upon the observation and experience of his firm for many years, in regard to the influence of convict labor upon their business :

"Prison labor in the manufacture of boots and shoes has depressed the prices of those goods at least 20 per cent.

THE WAGES OF OUR MEN ARE MUCH LOWER

than they were before the prison contracts were given, and I ascribe the lower wages entirely to the competition arising from convict labor. The quality of prison-made goods is equal to that of private enterprises. Manufacturers can not make goods and sell them at the same price with prison-made goods at a profit. There are fewer factories in Chicago to-day, making boots and shoes, than there were years ago, owing to the establishment of the prison shops. Some who did manufacture here have been obliged to take prison contracts in order to compete with others who had them, and have consequently closed their factories here. *Free labor can not compete with prison labor!*

"Another firm engaged in the manufacture of

WOMEN'S AND CHILDREN'S FINE SHOES

replied to our inquiries, that