

NOTES ON INDUSTRIAL CONDITIONS

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Notes on Industrial Conditions by J. B. Harrison

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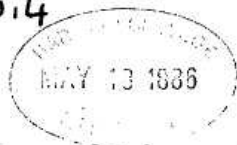
INDUSTRIAL CONDITIONS.

Jonathan Baxter

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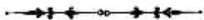
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It is probable that we are passing the worst of our present series of labor troubles. The general success of the labor organizations in obtaining the legislation which they ask for, the unprecedented publicity given by the newspapers to every feature of the current agitation and every proceeding of both parties in all labor controversies, the mass and momentum of the movement of the workingmen into the ranks of the Knights of Labor, together with a pretty general advance in wages in some lines of productive industry,—these causes operating together are likely to produce something of a lull, or pause, in the agitation which has disturbed or threatened the peace of mind of the busy people of our country during the last year or two. There will be a disposition to wait for the effects of the labor legislation of the past winter before making new demands, and after such a general talk all around as we are having of late the country will probably be less inclined to action. We might do many things, good and ill, if we did not expend our energy in talking about them, and one of the benefits of thorough discussion is that it exhausts heat and impulse and leaves us only cold intellectual assent as a reason for action. If from any cause discontent among the laborers should become less demonstrative, and the vigor of the agitation should be

relaxed, the country will soon become tired of the subject, and will be disposed to give its attention to other affairs and discussions more to its taste. Even if there should still be discomfort among the working people in some places they are likely to endure it for the present, or while they see any appearance of effort which promises an improvement in their condition. The great mass of them are still wonderfully free from destructive impulses and inclinations. They have little "talent for turbulence." This is true not only of native Americans, the people who have always been here, but our immigrants from every land are, considering everything, remarkably well behaved.

During the last few months I have received a great number of letters, printed articles and books relating to industrial subjects and to the current labor agitations, with opinions, reflections, suggestions and inquiries from readers in all parts of the country. Most of the writers ask whether I think we are to have riotous outbreaks, great national convulsions and an extensive reign of violence within the next few years. I see no signs of danger from violence in the present temper of the laborers, but in any crowd of strikers there are elements which accident might quickly render inflammable. There is not at this time among the workingmen of the country any general spirit or intention of violence, or concerted movement towards it. If they ever become generally possessed by a riotous or turbulent spirit, if the country ever suffers any considerable injury from violence and insurrection at their hands, it is likely to be after they have been prepared for it by a long course of mischievous education, accompanied by most melancholy and inexcusable mismanagement and inefficiency on the part of those who possess whatever advantages belong to wealth,

culture and influential position. Continued neglect of means for the right education and guidance of the working people might lead in time to any imaginable evils, but it is not too late for preventive effort on the part of men who understand the relation of property to civilization. It does not seem probable that we are any where near the time or conditions for rioting or bloodshed on a large scale. What should rather concern us are the gradual changes in thought among the people, tending to the forfeiture and destruction of the fair heritage of rights and opportunities which they should cherish and enjoy, and should transmit in an improved condition to their children. These changes in thought are certain to subject our national institutions to a very severe strain. A considerable additional advance in the direction of effort for a socialistic reconstruction of our system of government appears to be inevitable. Thus far in our history socialistic changes have most of them been the work of the prosperous men who have had the shaping of the legislation of the country. But the organized laborers are about to improve upon their example, and to take the tools for socialistic work into their own hands. If they can act together they can, of course, control legislation legitimately by the ballot, by sheer and overwhelming superiority of numbers. They have shown splendid capacity for organization, which we can but admire. I have seen a score of American millionaires meeting from week to week in an effort to organize for the promotion of economic interests which they esteemed highly important. But they could not keep to the subject, or rise to the conception of the necessity of a comprehensive plan, subordinate individual preferences, or reach a decision to begin. While they dallied as if the march of events would allow them infinite leisure, more

than a hundred thousand laboring men wheeled into line in an effective organization, marching straight to a common purpose. But of late, under the pressure of necessity, capitalists and employers of labor are organizing for the defense of their interests, and thus another step is taken in the development of the conflict between the two great forces.

It is appropriate to inquire whether the measures already proposed on either side are of such a character as to ensure prosperity and tranquillity for the future. What the country most desires is some arrangement or plan which will satisfy the workingmen, and put an end to the present disquieting agitation, without any considerable interference with the ideas, aims or methods of our existing society and civilization. We wish to be free to pursue without distraction the same objects, worship the same ideals and rejoice in the same possessions and achievements as heretofore. Are not these reasonable wishes? Is there anything to forbid their attainment? The answer must be that any suspension of agitation on the part of the workingmen that may hereafter occur is likely to be only temporary. Their movement will be resumed because it is, in its essence, the product of forces universally operative, the result of the condition of modern society and of its methods of industrial organization. A return to the industrial conditions hitherto existing is now and henceforth impossible. Nothing has been proposed on either side of the controversy now going on between laborers and their employers which can effect more than a brief postponement of the contention. The existing industrial situation is highly complex, and a just estimate of the relative value or vitality of its different elements and factors may be difficult; but the time has come for some attempt at this as the best means for continuing and devel-

oping the more comprehensive discussion which has become necessary.

As the government of a nation is the most highly developed, complex and difficult function of general society we may first refer to the relations between this function and prevalent industrial conditions. Our system of national government has never had opportunity for complete development. It has not yet been fully tried in practice. No practicable or viable system of government can be full-grown at first, or can have complete development when it is established. A government should have a life history of successive changes made in order to adapt it to the changing conditions of the country, but these changes in the government should be in harmony with its type and distinctive character. Such healthful and necessary changes, properly effected, are of the nature of expansion or evolution, and they at once express the vitality of the government and help to maintain it. But changes which are not provided for in the nature of the system and which tend, by gradual modifications of essential features, to the introduction of a system of a different type, are unwholesome and are of the nature of revolution. There has been much discussion of the dualism in our representative system, consisting in the reciprocal relations between the separate states and the general government. The individual State does indeed constitute the formal unit of our national system, but the vital and dynamic unit is the local community, the town, village, or neighborhood. It is that portion or division of the population who live near enough to each other to co-operate in the affairs and interests of local self-government. Before our civil war the public sentiment and action of the local communities were generally characterized by a comparatively high degree