

**LABOR PARTIES
AND
LABOR REFORM**

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Labor Parties and Labor Reform by Samuel Johnson

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LABOR PARTIES AND LABOR REFORM.

THE Council of the "Workingmen's International Association," in their Defense of the Paris Communists, define what they call "the true secret" of the world-wide movement which they represent. It signifies, we learn, essentially "a working-class government, the product of the struggle of the producing against the appropriating class,"—the function of which shall be "to transform the means of production, land and capital, into the mere instruments of free, associated labor." And its authorized organs, while disclaiming for the present any intention of appealing to violence, yet already announce the purpose, in Europe and America alike, to "transform all land, forests, railroads, canals, telegraphs, quarries, and all great properties, such as manufactories, in favor of the State," which is to "work them for the benefit of every person engaged in producing;" in other words, "for such as earn by the sweat of the brow."*

However startling for America, the substance of this "true secret" is familiar enough to French experience; being but a new phase of the "coercive communism" of Babeuf, St. Simon, and Louis Blanc. It is to make short work with private liberties and responsibilities, and apply the forces of modern materialism in constructing such an autocracy as the world has never seen. It would in fact substitute the State

* The Statement of Dr. Marx, its Secretary, is given in *The New-York Herald*, of Aug. 3, 1871. For a fuller account, see Mr. Hinton's valuable article in *The Atlantic Monthly*, for May, 1871, or Eichhoff's pamphlet, *Die Internationale Arbeiterassociation*, Berlin, 1868.

for the Person, and forcibly "transform" man,—not the poorest men only, as monied and titled monopoly must, but even worse,—man as such, every living soul, into a creature of legislation, a mere functionary and machine. Such a result would be none the less destructive, whatever the kind of legislation that had led to it. Here, however, we have the *absolutist legislation of a class*.

Let us do this Society justice. It denounces war; demands education for all; adopts a noble motto,—“No rights without duties, no duties without rights.” It did good service to our Union in the war with slavery. It is, moreover, the natural recoil of their own enginery on the oppressing classes in Europe. The victim of “regulation” has but grasped the weapon which has proved so effective against him; he will see now what it can do to make him in his turn the master.

We fully recognize also the miseries of low-paid labor, that disgrace the most enlightened sections of our own country. We hear its cry of endless dependence and hopeless competition; its demands that can no longer be suppressed or ignored. And therefore we mean to enter our protest against a method of dealing with it that would, we believe, not only aggravate every industrial evil, but strike at the very substance of manhood.

As its career is just opening in this country, this great organizing force will doubtless be hailed as promise of relief from their bitter burdens by thousands who can have but slight conception of its tendencies. Many programmes of labor reform, too, are drifting in the same direction, which have not yet reached its principle of absolute coercion. They contain elements already which forbid them to represent the real interests and rights of labor much better than feudalism or caste. They play into the very hands of monopoly, by following its example, in putting oppressive burdens for free opportunity and empty formulas for the laws of social science and the forces of civilization. The era of social justice will not be ushered in by those who have nothing better to urge

than the old strife of classes for supremacy, and who make arrogant assumption of exclusive right to the honorable title of "working-men." It is in these points of view, which most deeply concern the liberties of labor itself, that I propose to criticise these methods of reform.

We cannot, to use an expressive phrase, "go back on" civilization and reject the results of ages. The wrongs of the worst-paid workman are not to be righted by ignoring that breadth of meaning, which the terms of the question have now fairly attained. To discuss rights and interests of "the laboring class," on the understanding that we are to exclude from the category of labor every form of industry but manual toil, is to ignore the whole sense of American civilization. Is it credible that a humane and intelligent people should assume that the work of men's hands has an industrial value as such, beyond that which belongs to their intellectual and sympathetic activities? Will it define productive labor as work by the job, or by the day, and refuse the name to processes of invention that cost the mental wear of lifetimes, and even supply the motive forces of material civilization? Will it consent to narrow its "laboring class," so that the term shall not include the professions whose toils minister, however imperfectly, to constant demands of soul, body, and estate; so that educators of the young and counselors of the old shall be set off as drones in the industrial hive? Are we to throw out of the list of "working-men" the philosopher, who explores moral and spiritual problems, and states the laws of intelligence, the economies that cannot be foregone? Or the poet, who cheers the day with insight that brings health and sweetness to all thought and work? Or the artist, whether musician, painter, sculptor, or dramatist, whose embodiments of nature and feeling refine taste, and broaden sympathy, and concentrate the undefined aspirations of the age into living form and purpose? Does labor exclude the scholar's function, — to present man under different phases of religion and culture, and enforce universality by tracing the movement of

ideas and laws through the ages of his development? Are we to reckon out the cares of maternity, the mutual offices of domestic life, social efficiencies, the subtle forces of character, the friend, the lover, the "fanatic," whose lonely dream prospects the track for coming generations? Are we to count as outside of labor contribution all work that reforms the vicious, relieves the helpless, or sets the poor in the way to self-help?

Stated thus, these questions may seem to answer themselves. Yet it is easy for parties to break away from principles that few of their members would theoretically deny. This will become at once evident if we bring our test closer to what is now technically called the labor question, and ask further, if labor is definable as that kind of service for which wages are paid, in distinction from that kind of service which consists in providing the fund *out of which* they are to be paid; from that kind of service which plans and directs the operation, and bears the risk and responsibility? In other words, is *labor as such* so clearly distinguishable from *capital* in this sense, that the toils of mind as well as body involved in the application of the latter do not deserve to enter into our estimate of "the rights of labor"? We must be very far from the track of science or freedom, if our definitions threaten to fall into such arbitrariness as this.

Yet I cannot but note that the ordinary tone of labor-reform programmes and appeals, so far, involves the assumption that production consists in the direct creation of material values only. Values that cannot be measured, tabulated, invoiced, and made the basis of governmental direction, are excluded at the very threshold. Yet every admission that purely intellectual or moral forces need not enter into estimates of productive industry is an admission that these forces have no claim to share in the wealth that *results* from production. To teach, as most philosophers of the new "positive" schools do, in one or another form, teach, that arithmetical and mechanical values are the mainsprings of civilization, is simply

to sow the seeds of barbarism in the fields of political economy.

The sweat of honest thought and just self-discipline is, to say the least, quite as essential to the preservation of that social order by which all industry is maintained as that which falls from the brow in earning the daily bread: and for a citizen, whether rich or poor, to be ignorant or reckless of this truth proves him to be, so far, socially and politically a destructive. It is, therefore, but the dictate of common prudence that every sign of a tendency to depreciate *invisible* production should be met at once by all trades and professions as a source of demoralization to the whole body politic. Peace, order, credit, mutual help, are as truly the contribution of spiritual labor as the Order of Nature is a temple not made with hands. The spur that industry feels from the family and the home,—economy and thrift, all honest and handsome work, waste avoided, the bitterness of competition tempered, the conflict of interests counteracted by conscience and good-will,—these are all products of moral and spiritual ideas subtly circulating in the atmosphere of the time. And these immeasurable sources of public good can only be guarded by a jealous loyalty, sensitive to every slur cast upon the value of non-material productive forces, whether in the name of capital or labor, of the rich or of the poor.

And in this spirit we must demand of those who rally for a "producing class," as against the rest of the community, where or how they will draw the line which justifies their use of this anti-republican name of "class." Every one is a producer in those respects in which he is a contributor to the public wealth, *in the broadest sense of wealth*, in whatever other respects he may fail to render service. How many men, women, children, are there in a country like ours who are not producers in this sense? Whose work is of a kind so inconspicuous that you can afford to count it out? Even the child in a kindergarten school is a producer, in combining pretty colors, or constructing rude forms and figures that em-