

THE FARMERS AND THE TRADES UNIONS

In The Commoner of August 31, Mr. C. W. Bowne, of Mica, Wash., has a communication under the head of "Editorials by Commoner Readers" that is worthy of more than a passing notice. Not only should it be read by all who are interested in pushing the reform work, but by those who are seeking to bring about a better relationship between the various branches of industrialism. Speaking of unionism Mr. Bowne says of the attitude taken by certain interests and on July 1, 1906, per organs: "It has created a suspicion in the minds of every thinking and fair-minded man that the authorities are but the tools of the trusts that are determined at all hazards to crush out unionism." Then Mr. Bowne, continuing, expresses the sentiment that should be corrected. He says:

"As a farmer I know that my interests are not with union labor."

Certainly Mr. Bowne has not given careful study to the union labor proposition, else he would not have made such an assertion. It is quite plain that his knowledge of unionism has been gleaned from daily newspapers that, while thoroughly organized in all of their mechanical departments, are controlled by interests that seek to cast suspicion and distrust upon organized labor as a whole. These newspapers would not, if they could, break with the allied printing trades unions, realizing that they get better returns therefrom than they could from unorganized labor at an equal expense. But their owners are engaged in other business enterprises and are striving to break down the labor organizations in order to avail themselves of sweat shop conditions, child labor and ignorant labor that may be secured by connivance with padrones, "agents" and immigration officials who are not above earning a dishonest dollar by violation of the immigration laws. Certainly such newspapers are not good authority on matters concerning genuine trades unionism.

It will require comparatively little research and only a modicum of fairness to convince any fair-minded farmer that the reverse of Mr. Bowne's proposition is true. Of all men engaged in gainful occupations—occupations requiring the maximum of toil for the minimum of reward—the farmers should be interested in the propagation of trades union principles. In order to show the truth of this assertion it is necessary to briefly outline what unionism has done, then to show how these things directly benefit the tillers of the soil.

Trades unions are organized for more than one purpose. They are organized for mutual benefit in the way of sick and death benefits, out-of-work benefits and insurance. They are organized for the purpose of protecting those engaged in a particular craft against the greed and rapacity of employers. They are organized for the purpose of giving the worker some voice in the disposition of his labor. Surely if the manufacturer has a right to set the price upon the article which he hires made, the men whom he employs have a right to a voice in the matter of fixing the price of the labor which enters into the manufacture of the aforesaid article. One workman alone would be helpless under present conditions, therefore the workman seeks the aid of his fellows, and by collective bargaining they secure benefits that could never be secured by individual bargaining. By this system of collective bargaining the trades unions have secured many advantages and benefits. Among them may be enumerated the shorter work day, better sanitary conditions and better wages.

The shorter work day has several advantages. First, it gives the worker greater opportunities to become a better citizen. Second, it means the employment of more men in the completion of a given amount of work, and the employment of more men is beneficial to the farmer for the reason that it creates a greater demand for the products of his toil. The more men employed in the arts and industries, the wider the market for the farmer's produce, and the wider the market and the greater the demand, the more money the farmer receives. By reason of trades union activity a majority of the men engaged in skilled trades today are working eight hours, for which they receive as much as they formerly

received for nine and ten hours. What would be the effect on the farmers of this country if the trades unions were to suddenly disband and every craftsman to hustle for himself as an individual? The individual competition for jobs would soon force a reduction of wages and a lengthening of hours. To increase the hours from eight to ten would mean at once the discharge of 25 per cent of the workmen and a consequent reduction in the demand for the grain and meat raised by the farmer. Soon the hours would be increased to twelve—just as they were before trades unionism relieved the toiler—and that would mean a further reduction of 20 per cent in the demand for the products of the farm.

Unionism has benefitted the farmers in another way. It has made a concerted war on child labor, with the effect that grown men and women are now employed at good wages in the place of children at starvation wages. Certainly the well paid man is a better customer than the underpaid child.

Again unionism benefits the farmer because it sees to it that the union man out of work by reason of slack times, sickness or strike, does not cease to be a consumer in full measure. The unions put such a member on the benefit list, paying him a sufficient sum weekly to enable him to support himself, and his family, too, if he has one, and in this way he continues in full measure to be a consumer of the products raised by the farmer.

And again: Unionism has benefitted the farmer by decreasing his taxes. Before unionism became an established factor in our industrial life the toiler who became incapacitated by reason of illness, accident or old age became a charge on the public bounty, for work as he would he found it a practical impossibility to earn enough to lay up anything against the day of these misfortunes. The maintenance of almshouses used to be a heavy charge upon the taxpayers. The expense for this has been materially reduced in late years, and the chief reason for it has been the trades union doctrine of caring for its members in the day of their misfortune. A sample of this may be had by referring to a recent article in The Commoner relative to the Union Printers' Home at Colorado Springs. The Cigarmakers' International Union has, during the past twenty years, paid out upwards of \$8,000,000 in benefits to its members. The record of all other trades unions is equally good in proportion to numbers. As a result of these things pauperism has been reduced to a minimum, and a constant reduction in the "poor rates" has followed. Certainly these things are beneficial to the farmer.

It is quite evident that Mr. Bowne, like thousands of other farmers, has been deceived by daily newspaper accounts of strikes and riots indulged in by union men in the large centers of population. Sincere trades unionists do not seek to make excuses for those who are guilty of violence in labor disputes. They are opposed to the strike save as a weapon of last resort, and are the most active in the propaganda in favor of arbitration, and are opposed to violence. That violence too often follows a strike is due to the fact that the strikers are men, not to the fact that they are unionists. But if every charge of riot and assault and murder laid at the door of trades unionism were true, it would still be a fact that its hands are clean compared to the hands of organized capital which has sweat the life blood out of millions of innocent children, filled the asylums for the insane with mental wrecks and enriched itself on the unrequited toil of millions in the workshop and on the farm.

Organized labor is striving manfully to correct these evils, but because trades unionists are human they often make grave mistakes; are often guilty of illegal acts. But despite these mistakes and these illegal acts, trades unionism has conferred untold blessings upon the human race—blessings by the side of which its mistakes and its illegal acts sink into comparative insignificance. And the trades unionists have not shared these blessings wholly among themselves. They have been conferred upon all the people, the farmer coming in for a large share

thereof. Through unionism shorter hours of work obtain in a majority of the skilled trades, and that means more men at good wages who are buying the products of the farm. Unionism has taken the children from the factory and the mine and put them into the public schools to secure the education that will fit them for good citizenship. In the blessings which follow this course the farmer comes in for his share. Unionism cares for its own unfortunates, thus relieving the general public of the burden, and in this relief the farmer participates. Unionism makes for better Americanism, and every farmer who is patriotic and law-abiding is deeply interested in that.

Let Mr. Bowne and his fellow farmers study the union labor problem first, hand, not from prejudiced sources. Union men are willing to rest their case upon the facts of history, and will abide by the decision of unprejudiced investigators. Against organized labor's Sam Parkses it will point to organized labor's Sam Parkses—its Mitchels, its Gompers, its Pellams, its Dolds, or an hundred others whose honesty and integrity are beyond question. Against the charges—too often well founded—of riot and violence made against organized labor, let organized labor submit the millions it has paid to the widows, the orphans, the sick and the distressed. Against the molehill of wrong it may have committed, let it show the mountain of good works in the interests of those who eat their bread in the sweat of the face.

Organized labor asks nothing unfair. It only asks that it be judged by its average, not by its worst or its best; that it be given a fair hearing before judgment is pronounced. And it submits on the evidence that it has a well founded claim upon the support and co-operation of the American farmer.

WILL M. MAUPIN.

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