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SUBJECT:-, "The Influence of Trade Unions on the Economic Conditions of Labour."

Trade Unions have been heard of more during the last two decades and particularly during the last five years than ever before. The growth of population and industries has given wider field for their propagation; greater necessity for their existence, and has naturally created greater interest for and against them. The part that Trade Unions are playing in industrial life is therefore worthy of consideration, for the problems with which they deal are not of temporary but of lasting value.

Schoenberg thus expresses the general convictions of the students of history and of our age: "Never in the history of economics were the questions of economic reform so numerous, nor the demands for the rearrangement of the economic conditions so great as they are at present in all enlightened nations." There is no doubt about the truth of this statement and time alone will reveal what will be the ultimate outcome of the industrial struggles now going on, but one thing is clear, economic conditions are rapidly changing and year by year the changes are becoming more far-reaching and important.

In this great industrial revolution labour organizations must be classed among the dominant forces in the labour agitations and reforms of the day. They are to be found in all civilized countries and are evidently destined to exert on industry a greater influence in the future.

Men have almost ceased to question the right of labourers to combine for the protection and promotion of their interests. Their existence so far as this is concerned is justified. The unions, however, have many enemies who would love to be their friends. This, no doubt, is due to the fact that a few members of some unions have committed excesses in times of peculiar excitement. Public opinion is favoring them more and more. In an article in the Independent September 1901 the writer says, "It is quite unnecessary now to insist that the more thoughtful and dispassionate observers of social tendencies have come, not only to look tolerantly upon the organization of labour but also to see in it elements of positive good, that seem to be indispensable to safe and normal development of democratic institutions." He further states that "employing classes in England and America would become intolerant were they not confronted from time to time with organized resistance." The writer of this article is not a member of a Trade Union.

In order to arrive at a fair estimate of their influence it is necessary to approach the question with an unbiased mind, weighing fairly the facts that exist, and basing our conclusions on the. It should be remembered first of all that the great majority of the members of Trade Unions today have not the privileges and the culture of the better situated classes; that their experience is limited, and that they cannot do otherwise than make their real or supposed grievances, their prejudices and aspirations, the basis of their action.

PURPOSE FOR WHICH THEY EXIST:-

Most of those who say that they believe in Unions if properly conducted, mean to confine their approval to such unions as are purely social or beneficial. Trade Unions

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generally embody some such features but they are not the central reasons for their existence. If they were, the average employer would be ready to endorse them, but the main purpose for which they are organized is this, as expressed by Mr. and Mrs. Webb: "To provide a continuous association of wage-earners, for the purpose of maintaining or improving the conditions of their employment." This purpose the average employer does not approve. When the union begins to exert its power in regulating wages or hours or conditions of labour, he thinks it is getting out of its sphere and becoming a menace to the social well-being. This, then is the main function of the Trade Union—to organize and express the will of its members in bargaining about terms and conditions of labour. No one can honestly say that he approves of them unless he approves of giving to the men who are organized in them the right of dealing, through their representatives, on equal terms with their employers, concerning the wages they shall receive, the hours they shall labour, and the conditions under which their work shall be done.

BRIEF HISTORY OF THE TRADE UNION MOVEMENT:-

Before we can adequately consider the influence of Trade Unions on the conditions of labour it is necessary to know the origin of the movement, to trace its history and observe its growth down to the present day.

Like all movements which have their roots deeply buried in history it is difficult to state exactly what was the origin of the Trade Union movement, and to say what influence every institution has had on it as it exists today. There are some authorities who trace the movement back to very early times. By the best authorities, however, it is held that the short-lived combinations that existed in the early ages of slavery had very little connection with the origin of the modern movement; that the frequent rebellions of subject races, the slave insurrections, and the Semi-Servile revolts of which the annals of history are full, cannot be seriously regarded as in any way analogous to the Trade Union movement of today. These forms of the labour war fall outside an historical sketch, not only because they in no case resulted in permanent associations but because the strikers themselves were not hired workers, seeking to improve the conditions of a contract of service into which they had voluntarily entered. It is only when we pass from the time of slavery to that of the nominally free citizenship of the medieval town that we are on debatable ground. Here we enter upon the history of a people who are free to work or not to work and only such can form voluntary associations of workmen. In the middle ages there existed alongside of the independent master craftsmen, a number of hired journeymen who occasionally combined against their rulers and governors. These combinations are stated to have existed sometimes for months or even for years. In 1387 for instance, the serving men of the London cordwainers in rebellion against the overseers of the trade, are reported to be aiming at making a permanent fraternity. In 1417 the tailor's servingmen and journeymen in London have to be forbidden to dwell apart from their masters as they hold assemblies and have formed a kind of association. These and other instances derived from the very fragmentary materials at the disposal of authorities, suggest that a more complete examination of the unpublished records might possibly disclose a whole series of journeymen fraternities and enable us to determine the exact constitution of these associations.

Supposing, therefore, that further investigation were to prove that such combinations of hired journeymen against their employers, did actually pass into durable associations of like character, we should be constrained to begin the history of the Trade Union movement with the fourteenth or fifteenth century, but at the present time, basing our conclusions on the evidence that exists, we are convinced that there is no proof of the existence of any such durable and independent combinations of wage-earners during the Middle Ages.

It may be asked, why has the growth of stable combinations among the workmen been so slow? If today they must combine to protect themselves why did they not form permanent labour combinations long before the modern organization began? The answer to this must be sought in the conditions of the times. Before the introduction of machinery, industry was carried on, on a very much smaller scale, and nearly every skilled workman possessed the prospect of economic advancement. So long as industry was carried on by small masters, each employing but one or two men, the period of any energetic man's service as a hired wage-earner could not, in the natural order of things, have exceeded a few years, and the industrious man might very well hope to set up in business for himself, hence he would have no desire to belong to a permanent organization of wage-earners.

There were some labourers or certain classes of skilled manual workers, it is true, who had no chance of ever becoming employers and combinations were formed by these, but they were put down by law. This was so with the masons in the early part of the fifteenth century who had their "yearly congregations and confederacies" but these were expressly prohibited by Act of Parliament in 1425.

Each act of combination amongst the workpeople, as they were found out by the employers, companies, or corporations, was brought before Parliament in some form or other, and in almost every case an Act was passed prohibiting that particular form of combination. If further researches were to throw more light upon the constitutions and workings of these associations they might be found to possess many points of resemblances to the Friendly Society of Operative Stonemasons today, which was established in 1832. No trace, however, of its existence is found later than the fifteenth century and there is now no hope that more light is forthcoming.

When we come to the eighteenth century there is no lack of information regarding combinations of workmen in almost every skilled trade. Parliament was besieged by employers who came to lodge complaints about the misdeeds of their workmen. These combinations, nevertheless, increased till, by the middle of the century, we find there are journeymen's associations in nearly all trades. These received their birth not from any particular pre-existing institution but from the circumstances of the time.

The Consolidated Society of Book-binders seems to have originated, according to Webb, from the gathering of journeymen "To take the social glass of porter" together. Other permanent unions arose from strikes, while some grew out of the repeated unions of workers to petition the House of Commons and to carry on an agitation for some reason.

The essential cause, however, we find in the economic revolution through which certain industries were passing. In all cases in which Trade Unions arose the great majority, of the workers had ceased to be independent producers, themselves, controlling the processes and owning the materials and products of their labour. When more capital is needed to establish a given business, than a journeyman can easily accumulate in a few years it is then we find the opposition of interest between employer and employed. The latter begin to group themselves together and trade societies arise. Thus we find that at the beginning of the eighteenth century the "typical journeyman tailor" of London and Westminster had become a life long wage-earner. It is not surprising therefore that one of the earliest instances of permanent trade unionism occurs in this trade. The master tailors in 1720 complains to Parliament that "The journeymen tailors in and about the cities of London and Westminster to the number of seven thousand and upwards have lately entered into a combination to raise wages and leave off working an hour sooner than they used to do." From that time onward the journeymen tailors of these two cities have remained in effective, though sometimes formal combinations.

An equally early instance of permanent trade combinations is the wollen manufacture of the West of England. Here the rise of a class of life-long wage-earners took a form altogether different from that of the London tailoring trade, but it produced the same result of combinations among the workers. These men combined because their employers were often merciless and the law of the land unjust. Strikes and any organized resistance to the employers were put down almost cruelly. Legal persecutions were common and trade unionists regarded as rebels and revolutionists. Nevertheless the unions increased and the opposition they encountered seemed to give them new life. Later on, the movement elicited the sympathy and support of one of the High Court Justices, - Joseph Hume M. P. - who was chiefly instrumental in bringing about the repeal of the Combination Laws in 1842. The assembling of Parliament in 1825 found the employers of the country thoroughly aroused. Hume and Place had warned the unions against a possible reaction. Early in the session, Huskisson, President of the Board of Trade and member for Liverpool, moved for a Committee of Inquiry into the conduct of the workmen. This committee was appointed and Hume placed on it as a representative of the workmen. The original intention was to have only a few of the employers to give evidence and to exclude altogether evidence from the other side. Hume and Place, however, arranged for committees to represent all unions, and these kept up a persistent agitation against the reenactment of the Combination Laws. These committees testified to the good result of the Act of the previous year. The result was, the Shipowner's Bill, under which Trade Unions and friendly societies would have been impossible, was abandoned, and the House of Commons was recommended to pass a measure nominally reestablishing the general common law prohibiting combinations, but specifically exempted from persecution associations for the purpose of regulating wages and hours of labour.

This was like a charter to the organized workers and great activity was displayed between this and 1832. In 1845 there was started what is called the "National Association of United Traders." It was useful as an example of what consolidated trades could accomplish. In 1844 the Co-operative Movement began and was stimulated in 1858 by the great strike in the London Building Trades.

The carpenters, masons and bricklayers had presented a petition for certain demands, and one of the employers promptly dismissed the man who presented the memorial. Two weeks later every master builder in London had closed his shop against the men and 2400 men were thrown out of work.

This declaration of war against trade unionism, gained the men enormous support and revived the feeling of solidarity. Out of it grew the London Trades Council. By 1860 councils had been formed in Glasgow, Edinburgh, Sheffield and Liverpool. In 1867 a Royal Commission was appointed to enquire into the conduct and actions of the Trade Unions. On this committee the trade unionists had a true friend and sympathizer in Mr. Frederick Harrison. Mr. Harrison's opinion has been of great value in the more recent movement for restoring the position of Trade Unions to the Ante-Taff Vale decision. In 1869 he drafted a bill, embodying the principles contained in his minority report which was introduced by Messrs. Mundells and Hughes. It received the denunciations of the employers, but the hearty support of the unionists, and the government, finding it difficult to evade the question any longer, abandoned its hostility and allowed the second reading to take place, upon the understanding that a Government Bill should be introduced next year. In the meantime a provisional measure, giving temporary protection to Trade Union funds was hurried through at the end of the session pending the introduction of the large bill.

This was the first triumph of the political action of Trade Unions. The following year, the Government conceded that no Trade Union was to be illegal because it was "in restraint of trade." Every union was entitled to be registered and union funds were to be protected. In 1872 an appeal was made to the Government to have the Criminal Law Amendment Act repealed, for it nullified the main principles of the Trade Union Act of 1871. Mr. Gladstone, however, as Prime Minister, refused to admit that there was any necessity for further legislation. Greater efforts were put forward by the unionists and an opportunity was afforded by the approach of the general election. The result was that the Criminal Law Amendment Act was unconditionally repealed in 1875. The Master and Servants Act 1867 was replaced by the Employers and Workmen Act.

Collective bargaining with all its necessary accompaniments was, after half a century of hard struggling, recognized by the law of the land. This was indeed a great triumph for the trade unionists. They were now free to do what they could to improve the conditions of the toiling masses and to raise their standard of life.

THE NECESSITY OF ORGANIZATION:-

Perhaps the fullest recognition of the power and necessity of Trade Unions is furnished by the organization of employers. Just as labour was obliged to organize in order to secure fair terms from capital so employers have found it advantageous to form themselves into combinations in order to adjust their relations with their workmen.

There is little doubt today that the organization of labour is an absolute necessity if the working men are to have fair play in the keen competition of modern industrial life. By the use of a concrete illustration we can see why organization is necessary.

If there are one thousand labourers available for a certain piece of work at which only nine hundred are required. The one hundred superfluous ones may, where there is no organization, reduce the wages of those who find employment, without securing work for the unemployed. The employer deals separately with each labourer and fixes his wages. The hundred idle ones are used to make every man employed yield to the employer's conditions. Whoever refuses to accept the terms is rejected because the hundred needy, hungry ones are anxious for the place.

The labourers, as mere unorganized units are helpless. Their very necessities oblige them to compete with one another and to accept any terms that will secure them and their families a livelihood. After they are employed they cannot expect to improve their condition but may have to submit to a reduction of wages. There are still one hundred idle, constantly pressing for work. Besides, there is no united action. If one or a few make complaints, they are discharged, and their places are filled from the ranks of the unemployed. Even if they retain their places what means have they to prevent ill treatment? In their unorganized state they are simply at the mercy of their employer who may or may not be kind and just.

Labour is indeed made a commodity but it is not true that like other wares it can be taken to market and sold at the owners price or else retained. The labourer must sell his labour or starve, and so long as he is isolated, if there is a surplus of labour, he cannot control the market, while the buyer who finds more than he requires, controls him and fixes the price of his labour. It is now universally agreed Professor Marshall tells us "that manual labourers as a class are at a disadvantage in bargaining" and he further says "the effects of the labourers disadvantage in bargaining are cumulative in two ways. It lowers his wages and thereby lowers the normal value of his labour and in addition, it lowers his efficiency as a bargainer, and thus increases the chance that he will sell his labour for less than its normal value."

Let us now suppose that the thousand workmen combine, nine hundred are needed as before. They now face their employer as a united body and as such they must be bargained with. Capital wants labour as labour wants bread, and now capital and labour enter into the bargain on more equal terms. The nine hundred will not submit to unfair wages because one hundred are idle, but with fair wages they will help the hundred, and assist them in getting employment in some other place. They are now in a position to resist every attempt to reduce their wages unjustly or to treat them unfairly in any way. It is true, labour may be selfish and unreasonable in its demands, equally so with capital, but the very organization may protect employers against unjust demands and the turbulence of a few unruly workmen.

Labourers are learning every day that their cause depends largely on the sympathy of the community and this they are sure to lose by unreasonable demands or violence. The fact, is employers usually find it easier to deal with organized labour than with an unorganized mob, and many prefer to deal with the organization because it speaks and acts with authority.

When we take into consideration the position in which individual workmen are placed; their powerlessness to obtain any redress in case of oppression by their employers, and their utter inability to demand fair play if those who employ them wish to withhold it, we are convinced that a thorough organization of the entire working class, is the most vital necessity of the present day.