

The Tragedy of Toil (October 1904)

Work is joy; labor is pain; toil is tragedy.

We hear much about the “dignity of labor,” especially from those who do not labor. They have inherited the notion of the feudal barons of the Middle Ages. The laborer should be contented with his lot. God knows what is best for him. Even the scavenger should fill the sewer with song and work overtime from pure joy.

To create discontent in the mind of the menial, to tell him that his lot is a beastly one, and that he should rise above it, is and always has been regarded as wicked and harmful, and such mischievous offenders are known to us as agitators and demagogues.

The toil of the scavenger is necessary to present society, but that does not make it honorable. It is the reproach of society. If the human scavenger were necessary and society were civilized, every man would take his turn in that repulsive role. To shirk his share of the necessary social service would be as abhorrent to the mind and morals of a civilized being as to impose upon his fellow men in any other way.

By what moral right is the health of one citizen conserved by destroying that of another?

If Edison had to do his share of the “dirty work” of commercial society — and unless it is done he could not do his — there would soon be mechanical appliances for such service and scavengers would rise to the dignity of human beings.

This is preeminently a commercial age. Almost everything is viewed from the commercial standpoint and to have any value at all it must have commercial value. This is as true of the human being as of any other animal, or any other commodity.

If this fundamentally true proposition can be denied, let the “labor market” be explained.

How do those who expiate the “horny-handed sons of toil” a few days before election reconcile the “dignity of labor” with the “labor market?” The one is a denial of the other.

The term "labor market" expresses the fact that in capitalist society labor is merchandise that is bought and sold at market prices. This is the status of the 25 million wage-workers in the United States and to talk about the "dignity of labor" in the presence of such a condition is to belie the fact, and the public men, such as politicians, professors, and parsons, who engage in this sort of thing are enemies of labor in the disguise of friends, whose wise and conservative sayings are commended by the papers owned by labor's exploiters and whose influence is all given for pay, or position, or other consideration, to perpetuate the slavery of the children of toil.

Society today has two commanding types, namely, capitalists and workers. The workers only are merchandise. The "labor market" silences all doubt upon this point. The laborer goes with this labor-power and when he sells that, as he is now compelled to do or starve, his industrial bondage is sealed and rarely is there any escape from it.

To plead in extenuation that certain millionaires were once bootblacks and errand boys is beside the point and begs the question. These are the rare exceptions that owe their rise to fortuitous circumstances and they but serve to prove the rule.

The great mass of wage-workers live and die wage-workers. There is no release from them except as a whole, and this is the fundamental tenet of the modern labor movement, the mission of which is to emancipate the whole mass of wage labor by abolishing the wage system, and to make the workers themselves the owners of the means of production, so that they, and they alone, shall control their labor and enjoy its fruit.

In that hour labor rises from the low level of merchandise to the exalted plane of manhood.

If it be true, as some affirm, that capitalists are also laborers and in the same category with laborers, then why do we not hear of a "capital market" as well as a "labor market?" The fact is that there is no such market for the simple and sufficient reason that there is no such merchandise. The capitalist is the buyer of labor-power, the expression of the laborer's energy and life, at the market price. He deals in that commodity, that kind of merchandise, but he himself, as a capitalist, is not for sale at any price. Perish the thought!

The "labor market" has upon it the everlasting seal of social execration. The useful have always been detested by the useless. The parasite scorns the gudgeon he preys upon.

In this classless land of democratic institutions where all are free and therefore equal, the working millions are barred from breaking in, by statutory enactment under penalty of fine and imprisonment. Of course they are all right “in their place,” but their place is in their class and their class is in the labor market.

The line is drawn between the classes by social custom, which, after all, is the court of final resort.

No workingman, though pure as Christ and wise as Socrates, not though his character were adorned with every virtue, would be admitted to the exclusive circle of the famed Four Hundred. He would still be a workingman — plebian, inferior, vulgar, repulsive. Such is the social standard of capitalist society, and to protest against it is almost a crime. If a man belongs to the “working class,” his social status is fixed. He must not aspire to associate above his class.

“Oh, dear,” said a “society” lady in the hearing of the writer, “it is too bad that laboring people can’t live off by themselves; they are such coarse creatures and out of place among refined and well-bred people.”

The innocent woman should not be blamed. She but voiced society’s barbarous verdict. She did not know that labor’s degradation is society’s shame and crime and that the penalties are blazoned in every issue of every paper and periodical in every civilized land on earth.

This good woman and the thousands like her do not dream that the “coarse creatures” they despise provide them with food and raiment and shelter; that without these “coarse creatures” they would be stripped nude of their fineries, live upon roots, and lapse into savagery.

Nor does “society,” as is the small and useless section of it called, know better than the misguided sister I have quoted, and so far as “society” is concerned, labor will not only remain unappreciated, but will wear forever the badge of degradation and its menial servility will continue to excite the world’s contempt.

Society needs to be reconstructed upon a new foundation, and the working class — the only class without which society would die and the race perish — the working class alone is equal to the task. The change is needed not only to end the tragedy of toil, but the tragedy of idleness.

Pure morals wither in the exclusive upper atmosphere of the Four Hundred as certainly as they do in the depths of the social cellars of the slums.

The social revolution now in progress will end only when the means of wealth production and the natural resources have been secured to all for the use of all and wealth is produced by all for the enjoyment of all. The working classes are the motive power in that revolution, for they know at last that they never can be free until they are free themselves.

The labor question, intelligently understood, embraces the whole program of human emancipation.

The working class is the power and a united ballot the means to end the tragedy of toil.

In collective society organized upon an industrial basis all will work; none will toil. Modern machinery will be the only slavery. Freedom will be the heritage of all.

The tragedy of toil will have ended and man will be civilized.

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