

Utility and Futility of Labor Strikes

By Henry George

I have neglected no opportunity of telling workingmen that what they have to fight, in order to accomplish anything real and lasting, is not their immediate employers, but the false and wrongful system which, by depriving the masses of men of natural opportunities for the employment of their labor, compels them to struggle with one another for a chance to work. I have constantly endeavored in every way I could to induce men to revert to first principles, and to think of these questions in a large way; to convince them that the evils which they feel are not due to the greed or wickedness of individuals, but are the result of social maladjustments for which the whole community is responsible, and which can only be righted by general action.

Utility of Strikes

Yet I realize that it is folly to tell workingmen, as they frequently are told, that they ought not to strike because strikes can only injure them. Not only are there many workingmen who have nothing to lose, but it is a matter of fact that strikes and fear of strikes have secured to large bodies of them considerable increase of wages, considerable reduction in working hours, much mitigation of the petty tyrannies that can be practiced with impunity where one man holds in his hands control of the livelihood of another, and have largely promoted the growth of fraternal feeling in the various trades.

The Sympathetic Strike

Nor is it so strange, as some pretend, that one body of workmen, without any special grievance of their own, should strike to help another. The immediate purpose of a strike is to inflict damage upon opposing employers, and there are many places in which employers who could defy their own workmen can be seriously hurt by pressure exerted upon them through the medium of other employers with whom they have business relations. To be sure, third parties, who have no direct interest in the quarrel, do suffer, and frequently the greatest sufferers are the men who thus go out to help their fellows. But if the strike be thus more costly, its results, in causing employers to hesitate before engaging in another such contest, are likely to be more decisive and more effective. And men may strike, as men fight, in a quarrel not originally their own, either as a matter of sentiment, or from the more selfish consideration that they thus make alliances that will render them stronger in any quarrels of their own; or, as is generally the case, from the mingling of both motives.

Coercion in Strikes

A favorite platitude, now finding wide expression in the American press, is that although men have an unquestioned right to stop work themselves, they have no right to coerce

others into stopping work, and the disposition of workingmen to do this when they are on strike is denounced as not merely wicked in the highest degree, but as un-American.

This is nonsense. When our forefathers struck against England they not merely struck for themselves, but compelled every one else they could to join them, first by “moral suasion,” which amounted to ostracism, and then by such measures as tarring and feathering, harrying and shooting; and when they boycotted the East India Company’s tea they were not content with simply refusing to drink it themselves, but threw it into the sea, so that nobody else could drink it. A strike can only amount to anything in so far as it is coercive, and whatever workingmen may say they must of necessity feel that it is only by exerting some form of pressure upon those disposed to go to work that they can succeed in a strike.

Tendency to Violence

For the most part, so far, this pressure has been a moral one, and the penalty of being held in contempt as “scabs” has been sufficient to induce men to undergo actual suffering rather than assert what the denouncers of strikes declare to be the unalienable right of every American citizen. But admonitions are not wanting that in these industrial wars—for they are nothing else—there is a growing disposition to resort to more violent measures. And, whether right or wrong, the growth of this disposition is natural.

Now, it is the tendency of constantly increasing laborsaving invention to dispense with special skill on the part of the mass of workmen, and to reduce skilled labor to the status of unskilled; and the extension of labor organizations, which has been so rapid of late years, has been in the direction of the less skilled occupations. This is the reason of the growing tendency of strikes to violence, and the necessity more and more felt of calling upon men in other occupations for help, by stopping work or by boycotting, to inflict injury or loss upon the employers with whom a struggle is being carried on. If the labor movement is to go on in this direction, every man who looks ahead must see that it will at last come to violence.

Responsibility for Coercion in Strikes

How is it that in a land like ours, abounding in unusual natural resources, there are unemployed men? Is it not because of the power which our laws give to some men to prevent others from going to work?

Let striking laborers accept the dictum that no man has a right to prevent another from going to work. Let them turn from attempts to compel their former employers to employ them, and where shall they go to employ themselves? Where will they go that they will not find some one, backed by law and force, who forbids them to work? There is plenty of unused land in every city. Let them go upon this land and attempt to employ their labor in building houses. How long will it be before they are warned off? They will find everywhere unused fields, on which, without interfering with any man, they might

employ their labor in making a living for themselves and all dependent on them. But they will not find a field, though they tramp for a thousand miles, on which some one has not the legal right to prevent their going to work. What is left them to do but to beg for the wages of some employer? And if, to prevent being crushed by competition of others like themselves, they strive, even by force, to keep others from going to work, is theirs the blame!

The Primary Coercion

The very worst the strikers do or think of doing is to prevent others from going to work, in order that they themselves may work—may earn a living by hard toil. But what are the dogs-in-the-manger doing who are holding unused city lots, farm lands, mines and forests—the natural opportunities, in short, that nature offers to labor? They are preventing other people from working, not that they may work themselves, but that they may live in idleness on what those who want to work are compelled to pay them for the privilege of going to work. If laborers were to form societies which should by force prevent any one from going to work without their permission; were to charge the highest price for the privilege of going to work, which the necessities of others would compel them to pay, and were then to sit down and live in idleness on this blackmail, they would only be doing to others what organized society permits others to do to them.

While it is perfectly true, as an abstract proposition, that no one ought to be permitted to interfere with the legitimate business of another, or by going out of his own right to inflict or threaten injury or loss as a means of coercion, yet it is also true that, under existing conditions, it is only by combining together to interfere with the legitimate business of others, and to coerce others by the fear of injury or loss, that workmen are at all able to resist the tendency to crowd wages down. The great fact that is ignored by those who talk so flippantly about the wickedness of coercion in strikes is that all this coercion is in reality coercion against coercion, the attempt to use force in resistance to force. What labor unions are attempting to do is to secure for themselves a monopoly in supplying labor, and the real cause and only justification of this effort is the existence of monopolies in the things vitally necessary to the use of labor.

An Illustrative Story

Before the Cadi of an Eastern city there came from the desert two torn and bruised travelers. "There were five of us," they said, "on our way hither with merchandise. A day's journey hence we halted and made our camp, when following us there came a crowd of ill-conditioned fellows who demanded entrance to our camp and who, on our refusing it, used to us violent and threatening words, and, when we answered not their threats, set upon us with force. Three of us were slain and we two barely escaped with our lives to ask justice."

"Justice you shall have," answered the Cadi. "If what you say be true, they who assaulted you when you had not assaulted them shall die. If what you say be not true, your own lives shall pay the penalty of falsehood."

When the assailants of the merchants arrived they were brought at once before the Cadi.

“Is the merchants’ story true?” he asked.

“It is, but — ”

“I will hear no more” cried the Cadi. “You admit having reviled men who had not reproached you, and having assaulted men who had not assaulted you. In this you have deserved death.”

But as they were being carried off to execution the prisoners still tried to explain.

“Hear them, Cadi,” said an old man, “lest you commit injustice.”

“But they have admitted the merchants’ words are true.”

“Yes, but their words may not be all the truth.”

So the Cadi heard them, and they said that when they came up to the merchants’ halting place they found that the merchants had pitched their camp around the only well in that part of the desert, and refused to let them enter and drink. They first remonstrated, then threatened, and then, rather than die of thirst, rushed upon the merchants’ camp and in the melee three of the merchants were slain.

“Is this also true?” asked the Cadi of the merchants.

The merchants were forced to admit that it was.

“Then,” said the Cadi, “you told me truth, that, being only part of the truth, was really a falsehood.

You were the aggressors by taking for yourselves alone the only well from which these men could drink. Now the death I have decreed is for you.”

The Fundamental Labor Remedy

The true line to follow for the emancipation of labor is not the multiplication of restrictions but the sweeping away of restrictions—not the creation of new monopolies, but the abolition of all monopolies. And the fundamental and most important of all monopolies is that legalized monopoly of the earth itself which deprives the laborer of all right to the use of the natural means and material for the employment of labor, and which, by thus making him helpless to employ himself, and forcing him to buy from some other human creatures permission even to live, compels him to compete with others, disinherited like himself, for permission to sell his labor.

Out of the multiplying and menacing labor difficulties of our time there is but one way to escape, and that is by the restoration to all men of their natural and unalienable rights to use, upon equal terms, of the elements on which and from which all men must live—the land. If there were a brisk demand for labor, there would be no surplus of laborers anxious for work upon any terms, upon which employers could draw. That there is not such a demand for labor is due simply to the fact that laborers are prevented by the monopoly of natural opportunities from employing themselves. Here is the point on which the efforts of labor should be concentrated. The restoration of these opportunities can easily be obtained by the ballot. In the ballot workingmen have in their hands the power of so adjusting taxes as to make the dogs-in-the-manger let go their hold. When this is done there will be no necessity for strikes; and competition, instead of crushing the laborer, will secure to him the full reward of his toil.

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