Do We Want Industrial Peace?

by Eugene V. Debs

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In the December *Forum,* Prof. William G. Sumner, asks the question, "Do We Want Industrial Peace?"

At the first glance, the question appears preposterous. As we proceed in reading the paper, the absurdity of the interrogative increases rather than diminishes. The learned Professor does not advance far into the subject before he arrives at the conclusion that the discussion of the "so-called labor question has fallen into certain grooves and revolved around certain assumptions and pet notions."

What the "grooves," "assumptions," and "pet notions" are, the learned Professor does not permit himself to state. At the very beginning of the discussion, the writer seeks to push the "so-called labor question" beyond the boundaries of common sense treatment, and to reduce it to the silliest of twaddle- jargon, and yet the Professor seemingly removes his necktie, unbuttons his shirt collar, rolls up his sleeves, pins back his ears, and sails in and makes the following startling start. He says:

> The labor question is the most remarkable example that could be brought forward of a topic of public talk which has never been reduced to any definite form. According to the only actual attempt to define it which has ever been made by any body within my knowledge, the labor question means things in general, and consists in a regret that the world is such a hard place in which to get a living, and in an enthusiastic aspiration for greater ease and facility in that respect.

In this we have Professor William G. Sumner's idea of the "so-called labor question" with which lie proposes to wrestle for the enlightenment of the readers of the *Forum.*

The writer affirms that the “labor question” is “ill-defined,” and therefore its discussion runs “off into whims and useless wrangling,” and that “as almost the sole result of the discussion, we have a whole vocabulary of words of which we have no settled definition, for example, labor and capital, monopoly, competition, working- man, wages, cost of production,” and the learned Professor thinks it difficult to go on with the discussion because he is required to use “terms which within his knowledge, have become parts of the jargon of pseudoscience and bogus philosophy.”

Such are a few of the goblins which Prof. Sumner sees in the way of an intelligent discussion of the “so-called labor question," and they evidently frighten him into asking the question, “Do we want industrial peace?”

The Professor refers to the present condition of things in Germany, and to the remark of Emperor William who is quoted as saying that he “could and would stop strikes.”

Prof. Sumner is of the opinion that the Emperor has taken a large contract, and intimates, if the German Parliament should ask the question, “How can we put down strikes?” “the first incidental question will be: how do you know that you want to put down strikes?”

So far, no one, we conjecture, will credit Prof. Sumner with being either comprehensive or lucid. He does not reduce the “so-called labor question” to any “definite form.” He indulges in “whims.” He says “there are only two ways in which strikes can be put down.” First: to make a strike “a crime;” second: to compel employers “to pay what the employed ask for” The first way, he says “is effete,” and if the second is enforced, “social freedom is violated” and “hence the obvious fallacy of arbitration.”

It will be conceded, we, think, that Prof. Sumner writes at random. In whatever department of learning he takes rank as a “professor,” when he enters the labor field of discussion, he impresses his readers as having gone crazy. Even when most sane, when his mental machinery is in its best working condition, there are evidences of a lack of grasp, as engineers say, “traction” and the machine “slips.”

The learned Professor takes occasion to bring into prominence the contract system for the regulation of wages. He says: “At present, wages are fixed by contract between two consenting parties,” and that there is no time when a man is more supremely sovereign and independent than when he is making a contract, for then he is freely subjecting himself to conditions which he considers satisfactory.” No

man at all conversant with the facts would make such a statement. Nominally men are free to make contracts, because in this country it is a favorite assumption, that all men are free. Practically, however, this much vaunted freedom is a fallacy, as treacherous as a mirage, a cruel illusion — and it is safe to say, that nine-tenths of the so-called contracts between employers and employees, the employee is not "supremely sovereign and independent," and does accept conditions which are unsatisfactory and unjust conditions which he knows are oppressive and which rob him of his legitimate share in the wealth his labor creates. Multiplied thousands of workingmen accept what is offered. When they do accept such wages as are offered, there is an implied contract, but in the whole realm of burlesque no greater travesty could he perpetrated than to intimate that under such conditions a contract has been entered into between employer and employe. For the employee under such circumstances to be "supremely sovereign and independent" would he to invite the penalty of idleness and all of its attendant woes. And this condition, the Professor admits when he says: "Now if one man can force another, by virtue of law and social force, to enter into a contract which is not satisfactory to him, that is to say, which is not the best one he thinks he can make, then the latter is a slave, and the relationship might serve its a definition of slavery." Evidently, Prof. Sumner is correct in saying this, and had he permitted himself to let "well enough alone" it would have been creditable to his mental faculties, but he assumes that the employer and employee occupy the same positions, the same vantage ground, and that in case of making a contract the employer may be us effectually reduced to "slavery" as the employee — a proposition so foreign to fact, so utterly at war with history as to reduce his argument, if argument it may he called, to the merest flummery.

Having placed employer and employee in positions to be reduced to slavery by the "contract" process, Prof. Sumner is prepared to say that "industrial war is, in fact, an incident of liberty." This "industrial war," the Professor thinks "is an inconvenience," but he doubts "if it is an evil." Here is a learned Professor, who favors "industrial war," and asks, "Do we want industrial peace?" No wonder he asks. "How do you know that you want to put down strikes?"

Why does not this knight errant ask, do workingmen want justice, fair play, honest pay for an honest day's work? In a sense, industrial war is an "incident of liberty." A strike is industrial war, but it is

in a far more pronounced sense, an incident of injustice, oppression, and degradation, than of liberty.

Prof. Sumner, is clearly of the opinion that the United States does not want industrial peace and urges as a reason that “industrial war is worth all it costs,” that industrial war maintains “industrial liberty,” and that "the most important consideration is that the industrial war is solving questions which can never lie solved in any other way.”

As we have said, industrial war means strikes. The strike is the declaration of war. There is no industrial war when no strike exists. Professor Sumner relegates to the rear and to silence all means to obtain and maintain industrial peace except the strike. The ballot, the court, the legislature, the labor organizations, arbitration, compromise, argument, reason, common sense, all ideas of justice, of righteousness, moral suasion, everything except “industrial war,” which is the strike.

If Prof. Sumner is correct a gloomy future presents itself for the contemplation of workingmen. They are to expect nothing that is not secured by industrial war. Education, reason, enlightenment, religion, civilization, the school, the press, the pulpit, the forum, singly nor combined can he expected to accomplish anything for the industrial masses. “Industrial war” is to conquer an industrial peace, and here the questions recur again: “Do we want industrial peace?” and “How do you know that you want to put down strikes?” It is such frothy discourse, such rigmarole that finds its way into the *Forum* receiving thereby the stamp of erudition.

The country wants industrial peace founded in justice to workingmen. The workingmen of America do not desire to perpetuate industrial war. They would willingly accept the right, based upon an equitable distribution of the wealth they create, and have the record stand that the last strike had come and gone. Every effort organized labor is making is to put an end to industrial war, and enthrone industrial peace throughout the land. Organized labor is animated by hopes of peace, prosperity, and good will. It believes the ballot can help. It believes that honest men can he elected to office. It believes that debauched courts can he purified. It believes that righteous laws can he enacted. It believes that trusts, monopolies, and unholy combinations of human sharks can he broken up. It believes that the water in stocks and bonds can he squeezed out. It believes the hours of work can he reduced, the idle he given employment and wages increased, and for these things organized labor is straggling and is mak-

ing some advancement. For these things labor is organizing and federating, and as a last resort will strike.

The work of education is going forward. Time is required for the accomplishment of great undertakings. Capitalists will combine, marshal their forces and resist the onward march to an industrial peace, but as certain as that the “Father of Waters" has grasped the hills in its hands and dragged them down to the sea, as certainly will labor conquer an industrial peace.

Edited by Tim Davenport
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