

The New Labour Exchange : A Letter From Paris

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A new illusion to the fore. When, oh when, we may well ask, shall we see the last? Trades' unionism, cooperation, Socialistic legislation, universal suffrage, labor representation, all have had their day in this or other countries, and have failed to bring about social equality and justice. Now to the great joy of all reactionaries, another failure is about to be added to the list—I mean the Labor Exchange.

A few days ago, wandering in the Paris streets, I happened to stop in front of a building which is being adapted for a Labor Exchange. A workman, perceiving the interest with which I watched the work began to talk to me.

"Here at last," said he, "is an institution for the benefit of the working classes! Now-a-days the workman out of employment has to go from door to door as if he were begging, which is simply shameful in a world that pretends to be civilized. In future we shall be spared at least this worst humiliation. We shall be able to go to our Labor Exchange and choose our places, and even dictate terms to the masters. But see," he continued after a short pause, Badly shaking his head, "just because this is an institution for the benefit of the working-classes there is no hurry about it. Look how slowly the works go on. One perceives at once that the place is not intended for a club of card sharpers or debauchees, You ask if we shall have finished by the anniversary of 1789; who knows! Well, the times are stormy, and he is a wise man who can foresee what will happen in twenty-four hours."

The man's passionate tone impressed me vividly, and riveted my attention to the institution I saw growing up under my eyes. A few days after I noticed this Labor Exchange as an item on the program at the Congress of the Parti Ouvrier (Workmen's Party) in Paris.

The next evening a public meeting was called to discuss the project. What was my surprise on arriving there to find that the assembly almost to a man were opposed both to the scheme and to its originators. I briefly summarize what I heard.

The Labor Exchange will be the Misery Exchange. The workman for whom the capitalist has no work will appeal in vain at the Exchange. No ear will be there either, to listen to the poor fellows whose wages are forced below subsistence level by the competition of the labor-market. The Exchange will in no wise alter the fundamental conditions of society for the workers.

But if useless to them, it will serve the turn of the wire-pullers and politicians. It cannot create employment or raise wages in an overstocked labor market, and it will afford a splendid opportunity for ambitious leaders and politicians to get a hold of the various workmen's associations; for every man, dreading the days when he may be out of a job, will fear to offend the managers of the Exchange. It will pave the way for the reign of the Fourth Estate. Already the members of the Municipal Council who belong to the Parti Ouvrier have packed the general committee with their own creatures, and chosen as members of the institution such trade societies as are in their hands or truckle to them. When the Exchange is on a firm footing, the toadies of the leaders of the Parti Ouvrier will be the men to get what good jobs are to be had.

I confess all this sadly shook my first favorable impressions about the Labor Exchange, especially when I glanced round and noted the worn faces, and shiny, shabby blouses of the audience. I have seldom seen a more genuine workmen's meeting, or heard more earnest and revolutionary speeches. For days after I followed the train of thought thus aroused.

It seems to me, I said to myself, that these Socialists of the Parti Ouvrier know very little about Socialism, or they are preparing to betray the people. The very essence of Socialism is the substitution of agreement between man and man for the despotic domination of man by man, which we have at present, with its struggle of clans and of interests. And the basis of this agreement between the members of the future Society is the common ownership of, at least, the means of production, instead of the individual property in them of to-day. The form of this agreement must be the free association of a certain number of workmen for a common purpose, and then free federation among such associations. The Labor Exchange might have been organized on these principles. Each trade might have organized its own section, and the place might have become a common meeting ground from which the workers might take common action when the chance arrives. The present centralized scheme may be politic, it is not Socialistic. Reactionaries like De Molinari have propounded like schemes for the very purpose of supplying the missing wheel in the machine of free competition. Englishmen, compare the recently invented Labor Bureau of the Board of Trade! But Socialists of every shade of opinion profess to desire to put an end to the present competition in the labor market, not to perpetuate it. They profess to look with loathing on a system which makes of human beings wares to be quoted on the Exchange according to the market rate.

The method of Opportunist Socialists in every country seems to be to catch up one by one the rotten shams of the present Society, and puff them as "a means of agitation," until the people, deceived again and again, lose all faith in the very idea of a Socialism dragged through so much mud.

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