

Should Labor be Paid or Not?

Benjamin Tucker

28 April 1888

In No. 121 of Liberty, criticising an attempt of Kropotkine to identify Communism and Individualism, I charged him with ignoring “the real question whether Communism will permit the individual to labor independently, own tools, sell his labor or his products, and buy the labor or products of others.” In Herr Most’s eyes this is so outrageous that, in reprinting it, he puts the words “the labor of others” in large black type. Most being a Communist, he must, to be consistent, object to the purchase and sale of anything whatever, but why he should particularly object to the purchase and sale of labor is more than I can understand. Really, in the last analysis, labor is the only thing that has any title to be bought or sold. Is there any just basis of price except cost? And is there anything that costs except labor or suffering (another name for labor)? Labor should be paid! Horrible, isn’t it? Why, I thought that the fact that it is not paid was the whole grievance. “Unpaid labor” has been the chief complaint of all Socialists, and that labor should get its reward has been their chief contention. Suppose I had said to Kropotkine that the real question is whether Communism will permit individuals to exchange their labor or products on their own terms. Would Herr Most have been so shocked? Would he have printed that in black type? Yet in another form I said precisely that.

If the men who oppose wages — that is, the purchase and sale of labor — were capable of analyzing their thought and feelings, they would see that what really excites their anger is not the fact that labor is bought and sold, but the fact that one class of men are dependent for their living upon the sale of their labor, while another class of men are relieved of the necessity of labor by being legally privileged to sell something that is not labor and that, but for the privilege, would be enjoyed by all gratuitously. And to such a state of things I am as much opposed as any one. But the minute you remove privilege, the class that now enjoy it will be forced to sell their labor, and then, when there will be nothing but labor with which to buy labor, the distinction between wage-payers and wage-receivers will be wiped out, and every man will be a laborer exchanging with fellow-laborers. Not to abolish wages, but to make *every* man dependent upon wages and to secure to every man his *whole* wages is the aim of Anarchistic Socialism. What Anarchistic Socialism aims to abolish is usury. It does not want to deprive labor of its reward; it wants to deprive capital of its reward. It does not hold that labor should not be sold; it holds that capital should not be hired at usury.

But, says Herr Most, this idea of a free labor market from which privilege is eliminated is nothing but “consistent Manchesterism.” Well, what better can a man who professes Anarchism

want than that? For the principle of Manchesterism is liberty, and consistent Manchesterism is consistent adherence to liberty. The only inconsistency of the Manchester men lies in their infidelity to liberty in some of its phases. And this infidelity to liberty in some of its phases is precisely the fatal inconsistency of the "Freiheit" school, the only difference between its adherents and the Manchester men being that in many of the phases in which the latter are infidel the former are faithful, while in many of those in which the latter are faithful the former are infidel. Yes, genuine Anarchism is consistent Manchesterism, and Communistic or pseudo-Anarchism is inconsistent Manchesterism. "I thank thee, Jew, for teaching me that word."

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Liberty Vol. 5, No. 19
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