

The Unemployed

Frank Kitz

November 6, 1886

The title of this contribution refers to two widely different classes in society — one at the top ever seeking to escape labour, and one at the bottom ever engaged in a vain search for labour. The rich unemployed, falsely styled the upper classes, have called to their aid the French word *ennui* to describe the languor bred by sheer pampered idleness ; the poor unemployed find the word *starvation* expresses their condition. Not always the actual deprivation which gives occasion for those annual returns of death from starvation, which forms one of the strongest counts in an indictment against the present system, but the slow lingering stinting which, allied with anxiety for the morrow, brings strong men down to weakness and hurries the old, young, and weakly to premature graves. Whilst the wealthy are asking where and how to vary their pleasures, and the journals which pander to them are discussing the merits of the brothel stage-displays they affect, thousands are facing a fate in preference to which summary execution would be humane. Week by week the roll of pauper and suicide deaths mounts up, whilst the rich are canvassing the qualities of their cellars and viands, or the lachrymose details of three-volume novels.

The unemployed have at the present moment many champions, who were silent when some few years back a band of men strove to draw attention, not only to the distresses of the unemployed, but to the normal wretched state of the mass who constitute the fringe of labour, and who ought certainly to have the largest share of sympathy from the true revolutionist. The noisiest always secure the greatest attention, and the present agitation anent the unemployed receives its chief impetus from a totally different cause than that ascribed by the capitalistic press, which with singular blindness attributes all the commotion to the unfortunates of our bastard civilisation, those whom they describe as “social wreckage.” On the contrary, it is because the wave of commercial depression has reached a higher grade of workers that the present outcry is heard. It may be writing with bitterness, but not without truth, to state that this class has looked upon the gradual development of machinery in the hands of capitalists, and the consequent displacement of hand labour and increase of pauperism, prostitution, and crime, with great indifference. They have joined chorus in the harsh epithets which the upper thief class has bestowed upon the lower ; and the often involuntary idler of their own class receives from them his full share of censure, whilst they ignore the profligacy and luxurious living of the idle rich, who prey upon all. They have passed without protest and often with approval, on the ground “that it makes good for trade,” the criminal atrocities committed by our troops abroad in order to make fresh markets

for the shoddy products they think are goods. But now the fear of starvation is before them, they clamour for a huge system of out-door relief in a tone that is at once pitiable and degrading.

No, sapient writers of the daily bond-grabbing press, it is the very “genuine working men” whom you are so fond of distinguishing from the “residuum,” who are now your chief trouble, and who are not likely longer to bestow much attention upon your favourite dodge of erecting the meetings of coteries of ex-beer-duty, ex-fair-trade, ex-almost-every-thing agitators, and the renegade Socialist, into representative gatherings.

The aristocratic snob, some specimens of which are turned out fresh from our universities, are contemptible ; still more so are the snobs of the counter; but the worst of all are the contented slaves who only ask “ for work, work, work, however exhausting and wearisome, and regard with indifference those who are crushed by the system. This class will be readily appeased by relief works, and their revolutionary ardour will soon cool under the discipline of State-paid gangs, and the men who achieve these results, whether they belong to the possessing classes or not, will be the true saviours of society, as Society stands to-day. The fringe, the unhappy weaklings and others who cannot take part in the bitter struggle for existence as capitalist greed orders it to-day, will remain where they are, to be punished for others’ failure in work-house, hospital, and prison. It is by no means the business of revolutionary Socialists to help the exploiters to save themselves for a time by “timely concessions,” but by educating away the miserable prejudices and narrowness of the working class to proclaim the solidarity of all, instead of the frequent cry, “Am I my brother’s keeper?” — to infuse a feeling of brotherhood and sympathy with those at the very base of society, as the result of enlightened views as to the cause of their position, and to join with the demand for work and bread, which is now heard alone, the demand for leisure, culture and refinement — in short, equality. A revolution must be accomplished by revolutionists, and is not likely to be accomplished by those who are simply discontented because an inherently rotten system can no longer afford them continuous toil. An agitation will commence not because they are unemployed but because they are ever poor, and instead of the miserable spectacle now so frequently seen in winter, of gangs of men accompanied by police asking alms of their enemies, there will be an irresistible demand for the restitution of the land and means of production, which will have a different echo to a cry for gang labour.

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