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Our Three Foes

Lizzie M. Holmes

1892

The honest wage-earner bears besides his own the burdens of two other classes of society—the idle wealthy, who are sumptuously supported, and the idle poor, who are miserably kept. No individual member of either class is personally to blame, but the fact presents an anomaly that should convince every thoughtful mind that something is wrong in the organization of society which ought to be investigated. It does not do to merely denounce and abuse the one class or shut the nation's gates against the inflowing of the other. Mere bitter arraignment without logic and wisdom will not lessen the power or numbers of the rich, nor will immigration laws, vagrant laws, and tramp ordinances decrease the aggregate of human poverty and suffering in the world.

The wealthy classes, which from the all prevailing instinct of self preservation must always be aggressive if they would preserve their privileges, do not affect the condition of the wage class more definitely than does that large army of idlers and criminals which lies a seething, threatening mass beneath them. If economics had to deal only with workers who were always employed, even at very low wages, there would be no labor question as we understand it today. Human beings

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are too prone to leave undisturbed old customs that do not bring with them actual suffering, and if all people were secure in positions of any kind that insured them from want, they would accept the situation rather than rush into ills they know not of. It is the certainty that just without the comparatively comfortable domain of genuine wage working there surges a dismal throng ever ready to rush over any feeble barriers labor may erect, which arouses people to discontent, a sense of insecurity, a tendency to study, investigate and change things and thus a labor question is evolved. It takes no various phases, and this inevitable army is considered by the many different reform movements in as many different ways. But it is always there. There is no getting rid of it without revolutionizing the whole system of society down to the very foundations. It cannot be evaded or ignored: it is always furnishings recruits for the criminal class—a yet more perplexing factor in the labor problem; its injurious effects may be combatted successfully in one direction only to be found pressing harder in another.

It is natural that the industrial classes should feel a deep antagonism toward those who constitute this army, first, because directly or indirectly they must all subsist on the products of their labor. Whether doled out in charities from accumulations of unpaid labor, or taken in petty thievery, all they consume was originally called into valuable existence by the workers. And again, they continually harass them and endanger the workers' opportunities for toil by their very existence. Every struggle of organized labor against the encroachments of organized capital is hampered by that army of men whose needs are so keen they forget fraternity and mutual dependence: The "scab" is not always to blame for being one, but the exigencies of occasions—the "war measures," figuratively speaking—necessary to success make it essential that he should be regarded as an enemy.

In passing, we may remark that the fact that every strike is hindered by an influx of idle men into places left vacant, proves

that the old accusation against the army of tramps and idle men, “they would not work if they could,” is false. The idle army is inevitable under present industrial systems; its members may keep changing, they may or may not be willing and energetic—it cuts no figure, for there are always about the same proportion “out of work.” Those employed work to exhaustion, and there are no places for those outside. Naturally the “fittest service”—that is, the most noble and enterprising obtain the places, but it does not show that the unemployed are necessarily shiftless, vicious or lazy.

Besides the throng of involuntary idle there are the ranks of criminals to threaten the welfare of wage-workers. This much-despised class contains members no more to blame for the position they occupy than are the starving “scabs.” In the first place a study of criminal records and statistics discloses the methods by which criminals are made, the way idleness and homelessness lead to arrests, how arrests throw the culprits outside the pale of respectability and into circles of habitual criminals, and how the path downward is made easy by police, magistrates and other officials who live by the miserable vices of their fellowmen, and then one may know that the official stamp of “criminal” does not always make a villain of a man. The worst enemies of mankind are not always behind prison bars.

But once a man is marked a criminal serving sentence he has no responsibility for what he may do. Perhaps he is better housed, better clothed, better fed than many a poor worker who toils faithfully ten or twelve hours a day; he may be ordered to make shoes when he knows the shoes will be paid for at such rates as to ruin free tradesmen; he may be sent at the point of a bayonet to do the work of a miner starving and struggling against fearful odds for better conditions; but he is not the man to hate for it. He is practically a slave. Convict labor is only ruinous to free labor because it is slave labor. The convict himself is human, and may even possess many good qualities

and a deep sympathy for struggling workingmen. The power that forces him into the breach to beat them is what deserves the strongest condemnation.

If there must be prisoners, it is much better for the general welfare that they work at something. But when the government allows them to be taken where their forced labor must dangerously interfere in a contest between employer and employes, in which no outsiders have a right to take part, much less a government supposed to protect impartially all classes—a great injustice is done which cannot be too strongly condemned. Convicts should be self-supporting and should be allowed to earn money for their families, but this might be done without injuring free labor.

This common danger—the ever-present army of tramps and criminals, should be carefully considered and dealt with. Cooperation among all the “have naughts” will go far toward setting the problem. Whatever tends to combine the interests and sympathies of the poor, whether employed or not, is desirable. A spirit of protest against the custom of contracting convict labor, should be encouraged. A state is disgraced that will “scab” under the very men it is supposed to protect; the contractor who will use this “cheap” labor is worse than the criminals he employes.

We may thus, until we reach a more just and scientific arrangement of society in which there shall be no armies of idlers parasites and manufactured criminals ameliorate or lessen the wrongs and difficulties under which the real workers suffer in the present. —Labor Press.

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