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EDITORIAL

THE GRAND RETREAT.

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THE 5 to 20 per cent. wage reduction imposed upon no less a number than 168,000 employes of the Steel Trust, jointly with the 17 per cent. reduction of 30,000 employes of the Frick Company in the coke regions, is an event of such magnitude that it should cause all but the most lightheaded to pause, and, pausing{,} overhaul their notions.

In the first place, the census reports are bursting with the long figures of the increased wealth of the nation, and personal observation, as well as reports from other sources, bear out the fact in the manifestations of swelling affluence indulged in by the capitalist class. One of the regulation snags is now struck in production, and what is the result? Without in the least curtailing their luxuries, the employing class savagely curtails the already but too meager share of Organized Labor! And does Organized Labor submit? This leads directly to the second and pivotal question. The question starts a swarm of vagaries and also of deceptions, below which the truth lies concealed.

Trades Unionism pure and simple asserts through its officers and journals that it raises wages. This is known for a catch-penny falsehood. It does not need the above instances of reductions to refute it. The census figures, backed by other reports and observations, disprove the statement. Here and there, due to exceptional causes, as happened with the Parks Union, wages are raised by the organization. But the incidents are transient. In due process of time these wages too go down and join the general downward level.

“Oh,” exclaim at such junctures, another set, the superficial reasoners from partial premises, “to hell with the Unions! You see they lie. They do not raise wages. They cannot even prevent their decline!” The labor fakir lies, no doubt, when he pretends that the pure and simple Union raises wages. But those who, in sight of such reductions as these, cry out “To hell with the Union!” but give, however involuntarily, aid and comfort to the fakir lie. They aid the lie in that they shut their eyes to a fact which the rank and file instinctively feels and the fakir exploits.

That fact is that although the Union cannot raise wages, although it cannot even resist reductions, nevertheless, were it not for the Union the reductions would not be from 5 to 20 per cent., or 17 per cent., but would be of 50 per cent. and more. In other words, were it not for the Union, which acts like a brake upon lowering wages, wages would drop with a thud to the level of the actual market price of labor in the world's labor market—a level such as is established by the towering excess of the supply over the shrinking demand, that improved privately owned machinery brings about. This fact, consciously or unconsciously, the rank and file feels in its bones, and this is the hard fact that the labor fakir exploits to the undoing of the working class.

The pure and simple trades Union is to the Labor Movement what the rear guard is to a retreating army. Like the rear guard, which cannot defeat the pursuing enemy and can only cover the retreat of the defeated, the pure and simple Union can not raise wages, least of all overthrow the capitalist and emancipate the working class; but again, like the rear guard, which prevents the utter rout and destruction of the retreating army, the pure and simple Union prevents the sudden rout of Labor, the immediate demoralization of wages.

It is a burning question, this question of Unionism. Its nature is such as to present the seemingly most conflicting facts. It requires for its handling the coolest judgment, least affected by hobbyism, flippancy, or resentment. It must be grappled with, intelligently and relentlessly, and solved. Its strength and its weakness, what it can and what it can not do must be understood,—the former, to draw from it all that is in it; the latter, to supplement it, and buttress it up with what it needs. How burning the question is the Labor Movement owes thanks to the capitalist class for bringing home to it by means of these latest, most savage and most glaring reductions.

Under the aegis of the pure and simple Union rear-guard, the Labor Movement is a grand retreat, slowly, but surely, toward cooliedom.

Transcribed and edited by Robert Bills for the official Web site of the Socialist Labor Party of America.
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