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EDITORIAL

"EXCHANGE-VALUE" OF LABOR.

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"MUST not prices rise if wages, and thereby the exchange value of labor, rises?" is a question, the persistence with which it returns can be accounted for no way other than with the theory that confused ideas are entertained concerning the term "exchange value of labor-power."

The line of thought pursued by the questioners is this:—

1. The "value" of goods depends upon the amount of socially necessary labor-power {needed} for their production.—Correct!

2. The "price" of goods is the money value that the goods fetch in the market, and that price either falls below, or rises above the value of the goods, according as the supply rises above, or falls below the demand in the market.—Correct, again!

3. Labor-power, being a commodity, is subject to these laws.—Unquestionably correct!

4. Seeing that the value of goods depends upon the amount of labor-power socially necessary to place them in the market, it must follow that, if the value of labor-power rises (as a higher wage indicates) the value of the goods must rise proportionally.—Halt! The conclusion is false. It proceeds from the silent assumption of a false link in the above chain of reasoning.

Labor-power IS a commodity, like yards of calico, and all other commodities; and, being a commodity, it is subject to the laws that regulate the value and price of commodities. It does not, however, from these premises follow that the fate of labor-power is identical with that of any, or of all other commodities, anymore than it follows, from their commodity feature, that the fate of all other commodities is identical. Take, for instance, yards of calico and bananas. Their fate is not identical. Owing to their respective chemical qualities a certain factor enters into the fate of one, bananas, while it is absent from the other, calico. That factor is "perishableness."

The "perishableness" of the banana, the "unperishableness" (in the market sense) of the calico, places the banana in a category, which, although it does not overthrow the law of value and of price, affects its market treatment in marked manner. The sale of the perishable banana must be hastened to a degree that the sale of calico does not require. Similarly a variety of different factors enter into the treatment of many other merchandises—labor-power among them.

What is the particular factor that enters into the treatment of the merchandise labor-power, and that distinguishes it from all others, in the problem under consideration?

The value of calico depends upon the amount of labor-power socially necessary for its production. The smaller the amount of socially necessary labor-power, all the lower the value of calico, and, under normal market conditions, where price and value coincide, all the lower will the price also be.

From this state of things, the conclusions follow:—

1. That a decreased value of calico is accompanied with an increased supply; or, to put it in other words, that the consequence of less labor-power being socially needed to produce a yard of calico is an increased supply of calico.

2. That which lowers the price of calico (in a normal market) is not its increased supply, but the decreased amount of socially necessary labor-power for its production, a fact,—which what Marx pertinently calls "vulgar bourgeois economists" get mixed up in, causing them falsely to ascribe the decline of prices to the increased supply, instead of to the decreased value, which lies at the bottom of the increased supply.

3. That a decline in the value of calico does not necessarily mean a deterioration in the quality of the goods: the calico produced with improved machinery, hence, requiring less socially necessary labor-power, and fetching in the normal market a smaller price, may have the same desirable qualities of the calico, which, being produced with less effective machinery, required a larger amount of socially necessary labor-power, and which fetched, in the normal market, a larger price.

Different is the fate of the merchandise labor-power, in these three respects, and in strong contrast with them.

Differently from all other commodities, the supply of which equalizes demand in the long run, with the commodity labor-power supply steadily tends to increase above demand—a tendency with hardly any let-up, and then transitorily only.

From this state of things the conclusions follow:—

1. That there is no "normal market," except sporadically, for the merchandise labor-power.

2. That the decreasing price (wage) of the merchandise labor-power is due, not to a decreasing "value" of the merchandise, but is due to a resistlessly increasing supply.

3. That the merchandise labor-power is being and has long been chronically paid for below its value.

4. That even if wages were to rise many hundred per cents above what now they are, the merchandise labor-power would still be paid under its value, consequently a rise in wages could not possibly raise the value of goods, any more than the fact of a manufacturer of calico having to pay for the cotton that he at one time stole, would be an economic reason for his calico to rise in value.

Seeing that, as Marx put it, the value of labor-power has, besides a merely physical, a historical or social element, what is called the "value of labor-power" means "standard of living." The standard of living of the wage slave in America has taken a header down from what it once was. How long downward the header is, and how steadily the downward course proceeds, may be figured from the steadily increasing congestion of wealth in the hands of the exploiter and the steadily deepening poverty stricken condition of the exploited.

Science is worthless unless practically applied. The practical application of the scientific principles above laid down is the conclusion that the hard conditions Labor is found in in this country unerringly point to the absence of sound economic organization, and to the field being occupied by a buffer for capitalism—the Gompers-Mitchell-Stone Civic-Federationized and Militia-of-Christized style of "Unionism," which hamstrings it mentally and physically—physically, so that it can not raise its wages without the capitalist's recouping himself by raising prices; and mentally, so that, when these recoupments are made, and the capitalist press pronounces the act the result of "an economic law as unvarying as the law of gravitation," the way the Seattle *Post Intelligencer* is now doing, the average wage slave bows in confusion and impotence, and slides into all manner of by-ways and side-ways of despair and abjectedness.

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