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EDITORIAL

IN THE FIELD OF LABOR.

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WITH the recession of “prosperity” a decided change has come over the relations existing between employer and employee. During “prosperity” the inherent antagonism in these relations was comparatively subdued. The greater demand for labor gave the working class an opportunity to secure nominally higher wages. The capitalists, rather than suffer a loss of trade, considered it wise to grant such an increase, and relied upon the increased trade, cost of living, and intensification of labor to recoup themselves, which they did. This lull, this subsidence, in the conflict of interests between employer and employe was mainly secured through the agency of arbitration, with and without strikes.

The moment “prosperity” began to wane—in the beginning of 1903—however, a decided change in the attitude of both sides was evident. Under the necessity of reducing prices and entering into foreign competition, compelled by a decrease in home demand, amounting to a panic, the capitalists began to curtail production and render thousands of workmen idle. Shutdowns, strikes and lockouts increased in number, adding armies to the unemployed. Extensive wage reductions followed. The Parry Association sprang into prominence with its program of hostility to labor organizations, while large industrial corporations not affiliated with it pursued the same policy. On all sides the subdued antagonism between capital and labor has given way to open antagonism, and the class struggle now rages in all its bitterness and intensity.

The methods of combat employed by the capitalists in this antagonism are two fold, first, there is an outspoken declaration in favor of non-unionism and all that it implies. The statement of principles of the Shingle Manufacturers’ Association is typical of this attitude. The following three clauses of this statement illustrates it well:

“We, as members of the Shingle Manufacturers’ Association, declare the following to be our principles, which shall govern us in our relations to our employees for 1904.

“To secure for ourselves and our employees fair treatment and freedom consistent with the constitution of the United States and protected by its laws. To oppose restriction of output, sympathetic strikes, lockouts and boycott. To prevent interference with any person seeking to work and earn a living.

“Since we, as manufacturers, are responsible for the quality of our manufactured product, we must at all times be free to employ such workmen as in our judgment produce the best results, and to determine the most satisfactory methods by which that work shall be performed. While disavowing any intention to interfere with proper functions of labor organizations, we will not admit of any interference with the management of our business.”

Second there is the declaration in favor of arbitration. This declaration is declared a pretense to enforce this same non-unionism in a different manner. For instance, the litho. employers in offering arbitration to their employees are plainly actuated by a desire to bring up the questions of open shop, restriction of apprentices, wages, piece work, etc., as is evinced by their threats of a lockout, their demand for unqualified arbitration, and the answer they make to the representatives of the employees that all these questions are, most assuredly, questions for future arbitration. Again, in the building trades, the arbitration proceedings are plainly a cloak under which it is proposed to introduce, if possible, all those features of exploitation more detrimental to the working class than those in existence at present. While seemingly different outwardly, both these methods are essentially the same, in that they are openly antagonistic to labor’s interests, and are being fought as such.

The hostile relations of capitalist and laborer—whether subdued or openly antagonistic—will continue as long as labor power—that is, the laborer—is bought and sold according to the law of supply and demand. When demand is good, the relations will be comparatively subdued; but when it is bad they will be openly antagonistic. The employers realize that, with business comparatively dull and thousands upon thousands of workmen idle, the present is their real opportunity, just as “prosperity” furnished a nominal opportunity to the employee. The moral is

obvious: Labor must endeavor to cease being a merchandise. It must, in order to end this class struggle, in which it is always the loser, abolish the system of production for profit, or capitalism, and inaugurate the system of production for use, or Socialism, in which the merchandise character of labor will disappear as chattel slavery disappeared in capitalism.

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

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