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EDITORIAL

WISDOM, PROVERBIAL AND OTHERWISE.

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AN old proverb (or is it a scriptural quotation?) has it that from the mouths of babes and fools shall man learn wisdom. But there are other ways of learning wisdom, ways in which babes and fools have no part, and in which men who rank as leaders of thought and action figure, men whom the world is taught to regard as the modern reincarnations of the genius of ancient Rome and Medieval Europe, of the Caesars and Shakespeares of old. And these ways are often as unconscious as those of babes and fools, and arise from motives beyond the control of the great men who make them effective in contributing to the world's store of knowledge.

It has long been pointed out by Socialist economists that it is impossible to harmonize the political economy of capital with the claims of the proletariat. There is an irrepressible conflict between the interests of capital and labor that cannot be overcome by altruistic measures, nay, that is aggravated by the failure of such measures even when conscientiously applied.

On a previous occasion, mention was made in these columns of a discussion centering about Andrew Carnegie, and provoked by attacks upon him in a book entitled *The History of the Carnegie Steel Company*, said to be inspired by his great rival and enemy, Henry C. Frick. On that occasion it was shown that this attack was essentially an attack on capitalism, as it opposed the capitalist doctrine that great industries like great epochs are the works of great man, by proving that the great Carnegie Steel Company is a social evolution and would, consequently, have arisen to its present commanding position, even if Carnegie and the vast organization with which his name is associated had never existed. This was shown to be essentially Socialist doctrine, and thus the world learned from the quarrels of these modern Caesarian and Shakespearean reincarnations some things not

learned from the mouths of babes and fools.

Now similarly this attack on Carnegie affords more wisdom when considered in connection with the teachings of Socialist economists regarding the impossibility of harmonizing the political economy of capital with the claims of the proletariat. To quote the author of the history mentioned:

“The great Homestead strike, which forms the most dramatic episode in the history of all the Carnegie enterprises, grew out of conditions without parallel in the industrial history of this or any other country. Superficially, this contest was a commonplace struggle between capital and labor concerning the equitable division of the results of their joint efforts. But behind this was certain moral causes, growing out of the conflict between the idealistic platform theories of Andrew Carnegie and the unsentimental exigencies of business. A brief glance at the attitude toward labor of Carnegie the manufacturer, as contrasted with the academic utterances of Carnegie the philanthropist, is necessary to an understanding of the remoter and more obscure causes of this titanic struggle, which, marked as it was with the ferocity of civil war, caused a shudder to run through the civilized world. Incidentally such a retrospect will show that no successful business can be built on philanthropic aphorisms. Nor can Utopianism be grafted upon an industrial system still rudimentary in its development, without producing fruit of an unexpected and unjudicious variety.”

“The unsentimental exigencies of business” required, for instance, that twelve hour shifts which Captain Jones, the mechanical genius in charge of the Carnegie works, had declared to be entirely “out of the question to expect human flesh and blood to labor,” should take the place of the eight-hour ones in vogue in 1887. Why impose this physical impossibility on the men? Because, to quote the author of the history further, the eight-hour shift “put the Edgar Thomson Works at a disadvantage with competing establishments where two twelve-hour turns were the rule.” In other words, the political economy of capital—competition—and the claims of the proletariat could not be harmonized. What if the men had to work like demons in the twelve-hour shifts? What if, according to Hamlin Garland, whose description of the Carnegie workingmen the author quotes, the men were exhausted and brutalized by their terrific labor? What if the accidents killing and maiming many of their number imposed a fear upon them whose strain was more terrible

than their cruel tasks? What of all of that? “The unsentimental exigencies of business” demanded the eight-hour shift, and got it by summarily squelching the strike growing out of its inauguration, as it did the Homestead strike which followed some years afterwards, and as it did every other strike subsequent to even that memorable battle, until to-day Carnegie pursues at Homestead and elsewhere the bitter anti-trade union policy for which he has become infamous. Truly, a dramatic climax for an altruistic attempt to reconcile the irreconcilable!

In these days, when John Mitchell and others, who are neither babes, fools, nor reincarnated geniuses, but plain labor fakirs, are declaring that the conflict between capital and labor is not irrepressible, it is well to be reminded of “the unsentimental exigencies of business” and the destruction they are bound to cause Utopianism. In these days when the shallow syncretism of John Stuart Mill, as Marx called it, is being revived in the hope of demonstrating that Socialism is not inevitable or necessary, it is well to give ear not only to babes and fools, but to the modern reincarnations of ancient genius, the warring captains of industry, the Carnegies and the Fricks. If this is done the impossibility of reconciling the conflicting interests of capital and labor will become apparent.

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