

Reflections On Work - March 1947

By Dorothy Day

The Catholic Worker, March 1947, 2, 4.

Summary: Focuses on worker ownership and calls for workers to fight for the means of production, to shun working for the war effort, for priests to come out of their rectories to help the poor, and for all to start the struggle for reform of the social order and against charity growing cold. Repeats the need to be one with the poor and to resist the present social order. (DDLW #452).

This issue of work, of property, of the social order, is so big an issue that it is hard to deal with it, to make our readers understand, even to make our own lay apostles understand. When we joined in the past with workers in a strike, or wrote about strikes, contributed to the resources of workers by running a soup kitchen as in the seamen's strike, by talking about such issues as wages and hours, many of our own did not understand why we went into these issues. I believe we must be on all fronts, must work on all fronts. We must begin somewhere. We cannot leap back a mile in retracing our steps but go back a step at a time to that point where there can be a *restoration of property*. How can the worker get back to the ownership of property unless he has a wage which will enable him eventually to become an owner; a wage sufficient to let him save not only for education of the children, for sickness, for old age, but for ownership. And ownership not only of homes but of *the means of production*, which does not necessarily mean large factories.

Worker Ownership

I believe that in the constitutions of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers and the International Ladies Garment Workers there is a clause which points to one of their aims: the ownership by the worker of the means of production – a truly Catholic aim and one which has been achieved by many in the garment industry. The whole industry, as an article by an ACTU writer points out, is made up of many small owners, and the resulting relationship of worker and owner is a human one.

Why are we afraid of being called medievalists, and refuse the long-range program of ownership, even if it means overturning the whole industrial capitalistic system? Why are we afraid of the word peasant? The Southern Agrarians use the term yeoman as a more accepted title.

Apostolate of the Laity

We will have to go back to before the Reformation to return to the idea of apostolate of the laity. There is more anti-laicism than anti-clericalism in the

country today, I am sure.

Thank God most of our priests are the sons of working men, the rector of a seminary said to me once. That is very true. But it is so easy to get out of the habit of poverty, of charity, of hospitality. St. John had to keep pleading, “my children, love one another.” And in the first chapter of the Apocalypse there is the sad statement that charity had grown cold. There is always a losing of early fervor, of early charity, of early understanding. It is hard to remain as little children, and be unsuspicious, to clean the heart of all bitterness, to keep the loving spirit.

No Leadership

It is also true that these sons of working men have not thought out these issues, and they have not had the leadership that the workers have had in Karl Marx, in his analysis of the social order, and his condemnation of it. They have accepted this social order; they have not questioned it. They have said, “The poor you will always have with you.” They have said, “Seek first the kingdom of heaven.” Their great strength was also their weakness. Their conviction of heaven was so strong that they did not think this world worth bothering about. But what of their brothers – are they not worth bothering about? How can we see our brother hungry and say, “Go be thou filled” and not give to him? Charity is not enough. If he has been robbed, restoration must be made to him. God put man on this earth to work for his bread, but what if there is no work? He has been defrauded of his work, of his labor, and of the fruits of his labor. He has neither work nor property and his state is bad indeed.

Expenditure for War

There is work now. Much of our national expenditure by the government is for war, past and present. Much of this work, this labor, is not good work, constructive work, but work for preparedness, or dealing with pensions or hospitals, etc. It is not even in building homes that have been destroyed by war, let alone homes here in this country where we did not have that destruction. Slums are still with us. Many houses have been torn down, more than have been put up. Farms have been consolidated and produce less than if they were all small farms; soil has been depleted, national resources have been wasted. And are we to sit by and see man, and God’s good earth, so ruined and degraded, and then be told, “Do not bother about these things, seek first the kingdom of heaven?”

Not Nihilism

Julian Pleasants of Notre Dame, in writing me about the first article *The Church and Work*, has said that he has found a curious parallel between Canon Cardijn's passivism in relation to the social order and Fr. Hugo's in regard to war. He seems to believe that Fr. Hugo counseled "super-natural nihilism," doing nothing. I would say that Fr. Hugo certainly believes a cause worth *dying for*, and to die for a cause, to suffer for a cause, to go to jail for a cause, to offer the tremendous resistance of spiritual weapons, is certainly not nihilism, a doing nothing.

A withdrawal from the social order, and the draining away of others with you is not doing nothing, and Julian Pleasants recognizes this. It is putting up a very stiff resistance, and suffering greatly to do so. A withdrawal from a war economy, not only from the army but from what was called the *war effort*, demands moral stamina; an endurance of suffering and deprivation.

Sell Your Soul

During my last speaking trip to and from the Rural Life Conference, I visited some of our families, some of the young men who have married and started the heroic job of raising children under this present regime. One of those families who suffered from refusal to participate in the war effort, lived for a time on one of our farms and there were times when food was scarce indeed. The trapping of a deer for food, the begging from the parish for milk, the staying in bed from hunger – these are some of the things they had to tell of. To combat the social order when one has a family is a grim thing indeed. But the point is this: life in the cities under our present housing and working and feeding conditions is often as bad. Unless you consent to sell your soul.

At this point, of course, I can hear howls rising up at my lack of charity in accusing people of selling their souls in war and peace. I am merely stating two things. Pious XI has said that the workers of the world are lost to the church. Most of the intellectual and spiritual leaders, whom God will hold responsible for His poor, for His workers, for His little ones, are not seeing the problem as a whole, nor helping the workers. They are *in honor*, and so, as the psalmist says, *without understanding*. When you are rich, you are not close to the poor. People may be poor as individuals, yet collectively rich. They may think they are poor, live frugal, self-denying lives, and yet be surrounded by riches, which they own collectively. They possess the power and security which goes with it. The Trappist may be poor individually, and yet the order may be rich. In the stories of the Paradise of the Fathers, the collective work of the monks produced such wealth that they could not find enough poor to partake of it. And it is interesting to remember – that it was the result of their own work and deprivation that this wealth was produced; it was not the conscience money of a James J. Hill or a Charlie Schwab, who in fear of hell were trying to restore money robbed from the poor, from the worker. (On the one hand, the capitalist-industrialist,

the robber baron weeps that if he paid a living wage industry would go broke and all the workers would be out of jobs. On the other hand they have such huge surpluses of property and money and goods, and the worker remains in his pauper, proletariat, destitute state.)

One With The Poor

To be one with the poor, to share with the poor, to be one of the poor. It would be so healthy and so wise and so holy a thing to do, that the devil puts every obstacle possible in the way. One is always being taken in! If one expects the poor to be also holy, one is sadly mistaken. But what affrontery to expect this. How many sneers have been flung our way because we have advocated holy poverty (not destitution). Why are you trying to get the worker out of his poverty if you believe it to be holy, they will say. But we are trying to get him out of his destitution. One can have a home, tools, a certain amount of security, and still be poor.

How often we have heard of *whining beggars; poor but honest parents*. One might more correctly say, rich but honest. But no, if one has wealth, one is supposed to be in good repute. It is so unbelievable that any one who is rich can be called a thief, dishonest, and in a way a murderer, and none pays any attention any more. Our Senate investigations show that. It is just too unbelievable! Or perhaps it is taken for granted and cynically condoned.

On the other hand, the poor! All the workers want is more wages and less work, it is said. Of course. That is as far as they can think at present. They have no time to think, let alone take care of their souls. And who is teaching them to think?

Charity Grown Cold

Charity has grown cold, because the priest is removed in his fine rectory from the people. It is not necessary to cite instances. They can be multiplied by the thousand. The young priest soon becomes embittered and tells stories about how he is taken in. There was a terrible letter about beggars in *America*, the Jesuit weekly, last winter, complaining of their dishonesty. A Franciscan wrote it. There was a masterpiece of a letter in answer from John Cogley, one of the editors of *Today*, in Chicago, who pointed out that the poor were poor in everything these days, in honor, in virtue, in all attractiveness. It is indeed hard to see Christ in the undeserving poor, in His most degraded guise. We admit that there will always be the poor, the wastrel, the drunk, the sinner. But Christ came to save them. He loved them. We just insist that there do not need to be so many of them, the degraded, the twisted, the warped, the miserable ones, employed and unemployed.

Start the Struggle

The young priest who keeps his faith in his fellows, who begins to see the work to be done in the social order, may be discouraged at the magnitude of the task in the face of the apathy of the day. But I would say to him, work, study, pray, start the struggle although there seems small chance of success. You have nothing to lose but your chains, as the Marxist says.

Nothing to Lose

In Belloc's *Characters of the Reformation*, he speaks of how Pascal is the one who gave that faulty presentation of faith: you have nothing to lose by believing. If there is no resurrection, and you have lived with faith, you have been better off anyway. If there is, you have gained all. The Little Flower comforted herself this way in the dark night of the soul. And I say too, the struggle is upon us, the handwriting is on the wall. We have nothing to lose. We must fight to overcome this social order, and it is collapsing anyway. We must try to get out of this system, because we are going to lose our jobs anyway. If war comes and employment keeps up, again I say, be not passive pacifists, but withdraw from the war industry which keeps war going, and die for your faith. We women, children, and civilians are going to die anyway, so let us die with the proper motive, of dying for our faith in peace, for our belief in our fellows. And so I say too, we are going to be poor anyway. We are going to be unemployed anyway, because if we do not have war, it will be a depression, so let us begin our revolt now.