On Pilgrimage - April 1951

Dorothy Day

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Summary: When her son-in-law loses his job she ruminates on the plight of the wage earner and conditions of labor, especially in the clothing mills and among farm workers. Recounts stories of grueling labor conditions and inveighs against "our present finance capitalistic system." She is appealing "to our capacity to love and the reformation of our lives. . . " (DDLW #621).

Once upon a time in the early days of St. Francis there was a Mr. Luchesio who was a married man and very rich. He had added field on field and had cornered the grain market and people's bread. He knew how to make money and he piled up his fortune. He had a wife by the name of Bona.

Then suddenly, he heard St. Francis preaching, and he repented of his sins and made up his mind to restore all that he had stolen from the poor, for that is how he had come to look at it then. His reformation was sudden and thorough and when he started to give away all his money, his wife Bona protested, and then he had to convert her. Or maybe St. Francis did the job. They restored their unlawful fortune to the poor, to the peasants and workers on whose labor their fortune was founded. And then Mr. Luchesio wanted to join St. Francis.

Bona was converted but not to this extent. It was here that she put her foot down. So St. Francis, who saw her point, that after all they were one flesh and could not be separated, made up the Third Order to take care of just such situations as these.

And Now Today

This is a beautiful story, and when we are considering the class war that exists now, we must not sin against hope by believing that such a reformation is impossible today. We have not as yet personally seen one, but with God all things are possible, we know. It is hard for the rich to enter Heaven as it is for the camel to go through the eye of the needle, but Our Lord made it clear that with God all things are possible.

These ruminations are due to the fact that my son-in-law lost his job this last month, during Holy Week, together with two other married men and in addition to finding that theirs was not a Christian employer, they do not even have the benefits of Holy Mother the State, since the employer has in some way listed his business, which is indeed a business, as a charitable trust and so does not pay taxes. Nor does he contribute to social security. One family man

with three children has obtained a job for forty dollars a week, twenty miles from his home, to which he commutes every day in a borrowed car. The other two are still out of work.

John Cort's March 30th estimate in the **Commonweal** of the amount needed by a father to support a wife and two children is based on the figures of the Bureau of Labor Statistics. The Bureau's figures show that it costs a manual worker with a wife and two children to survive on "a modest but adequate level of living," $75 a week in Washington and Milwaukee and $70 a week in New York and Boston. These figures sound fantastic, but when one considers that the cost of living has gone up over a hundred percent, one can divide that by half. My son-in-law was getting $65 a week with a wife and four children and another child coming. His employer considered this a just living wage, paid by his charitable trust, which built up its profits on a business which paid such wages.

Biddeford Mills

My pilgrimage during the month of March took me to Maine for a few days to speak in Waterville, Augusta and Portland before groups of women. I had the opportunity to visit friends in Biddeford, where once before I had visited the Pepperill cotton mills and had spoken of the conditions of workers in general before some of our readers. When I quoted Pope Pius XI as saying that "raw materials came out of the factory ennobled and men came out degraded," some of the official of the mills were much offended. They tried to read a criticism of the personal morality of the workers into the statement, which gave one of our readers in Biddeford an opportunity to write letters to the press, which is open in that little city to many of the Catholic Worker positions, presented by our friend.

Women Workers

My son-in-law and his two friends would not have caviled at the wages, but accepted the poverty they entailed because they enjoyed so much the work they were doing. Indeed, they worked overtime before Christmas and afterward during inventory without increased pay (no time and a half for them) and even had to pay for their own dinners. Even though they did not participate in the benefits of the business, they were doing work which did not weary them, in that they were dealing with books, and human beings, and filling human needs.

But the factory workers of New England have quite another story. They have not one unjust employer to deal with, they have a corporation. There was a strike just settled with the Wyandotte mills in Waterville as I left there, and in Biddeford the strike was just avoided. At the present time there is a strike going on in South Carolina in the cotton mills. There, mills moved from the north in order not only to be near the source of supply but also to have cheap labor.

Another Story

"I have worked in the mills for twenty-six years," one woman told me, in a long conversation one afternoon. "I left for a year to try to enter a convent but my health would not permit my remaining. Then I worked in a store for a while but wages were better in the mills so I returned there. My mother went to work in these same mills when she was nine years old and so small she had to stand on a footstool to reach her machine. She worked from six to six. Operations were by hand then and heavy for a child.

"The mills were organized in 1938 finally, after years of opposition. Even now only one-half the textile workers are organized, and union men and women have been run out of company towns in the south.

"But here are the conditions now. My hours are from eleven at night until seven in the morning. That is the married woman's shift, the shift for women with babies. The men do not earn enough so the women go to work. Or maybe there is sickness and trouble and so they have to work. They come home at seven to get breakfast and send the children off to school and then if they have no smaller children they take their rest.

"During those long night hours there is no time to rest. There is no sitting. They run. The law forces them to take a half an hour lunch period but men do not get that. They work the straight eight hours through, eating while they work. (That movie of Charlie Chaplin of the factory and of the feeding machine was not far wrong.)

"I myself am a carder. Mine is the second operation. The first is opening the bales and picking the cotton. If the man has not done his job right, I suffer, and if I do not do my job right, the next one suffers. It takes thirty cans of cotton to make six carded cans, and those cans are heavy, bigger than milk cans. The machines are longer than pianos and you feed in the back and empty in the front.

"I operate seven machines–I used to operate five. It used to be eighteen cans of feed cotton an hour and now it is 33 cans, every hour and ten minutes. This overload threw out thirty people. When they gear the machines to run twenty-four hours, it means you keep running, you cannot stop for knots. When you complain they tell you can get twelve people to take your place. They tell you, too, that the machine costs $3,000, and is irreplaceable.

"Of the ten girls who work with me there are only three who are not under doctor's care since the overload was put on us. When we worked twelve hours a day it was not this speed up. Then when the machines were running smooth you had a chance to do a little crocheting, a snatch of reading. Not now.

"My pay is $48.80 weekly, and I take home $41.17 after they take out old-age benefit, tax and union dues. The dues are 50 cents a week. Anyone can learn my job in a week, so, of course, we could be replaced. I was off two days last week with flu and my gross pay was $32.94.

"During the week three women fainted at their machines, it was so hot and steamy, as it has to be in a cotton mill.

"The weaver has 50 looms who used to have 40. You can't stop, otherwise all is tangles. There may be a drinking fountain ten feet away and you can't get to it. Our drinking fountain was

out of commission for two months last summer and we had to drink coke. They tried to get it fixed but nobody would come.

"It gets so the workers will listen to anyone who offers them relief. But I don't know of any Communists in Biddeford."

My friend contributed her experience to our conversation. She used to inspect sheeting and whereas she inspected 700 narrow yards a day fifteen years ago, now the standard is 5,280 yards of wide every day.

Later in the day we talked to Alexander Anastasoff, a Bulgarian whose family had lived three generations in this country. He said that there were 600,000 textile workers organized in the United States, and that represented only half of the people in this industry.

On the one hand insecurity of employment in a job the men liked, and the immediate destitution which unemployment brings. And on the other, the security which a union brings in a job which is monotonous and deadly to an extreme, and yet where new inventions in the way of machines and the overload is putting an increased number of people out of work. What gains were made, have been made by the unions. We do not have the child labor and hours are shorter, but we do have women still working at hours that are generally called the "graveyard shift."

This month there were a series of stories in the New York Times on the migrant workers of the southwest, of the million peons on cotton and citrus plantations, recruited from Mexicans who come over the border illegally each year and are paid starvation wages while the owners of these gigantic "farms" amass great profits. How much land does a man need? What is property? Property is theft, Proudhon said and he is right. Property has become theft in the United States, when the family man is unable to maintain his family and put aside for their education, or buy property, or part ownership in the work so that there can come about a deproletarizing of the worker as Pius XI asked. This is our present finance capitalistic system. This is our American Way against which we are protesting and will protest with every breath we draw, and in all we write.

"We are trying to make that kind of society where it will be easier to be good," Peter used to say simply.

"A certain amount of goods is necessary for a man to lead a good life," St. Thomas said.

But the poor migrant worker I talked to last year as I visited him and his family (two of them ill with pneumonia) in his tent on the tiny plot of mud said grimly, "There is a Spanish saying, God chokes you but He does not throttle you." That is, the load is heavy. Suffering is acute. But somehow, one survives.

The poor we will always have with us, but God did not intend this amount of poverty, not this stifling, choking, anxious, poverty that goes with insecurity and homelessness.

As I write of these things, I am appealing, as Conrad says, to "that part of our nature which because of the warlike conditions of existence, is necessarily kept out of sight within the more resisting and hard qualities . . ."

I am appealing to our capacity for love and the reformation of our lives, forgiveness of our fellows and trust in our spiritual weapons, "to our capacity for delight and wonder, to the

sense of mystery surrounding our lives; to our sense of pity, and beauty, and pain; to the latent feeling of fellowship with all creation–to the subtle but invincible conviction of solidarity in dreams, in joy, in sorrow, in aspirations, in illusions, in hope, in fear, which binds men to each other, which binds together all humanity–the dead to the living and the living to the unborn."

I am trying to voice the sufferings of all, the aspirations of all, and thereby, I hope, strengthening our hearts to endure.