

LETTER XI

On The Information of the Working Classes

In my last letter I urged, brethren, upon your attention the cruelty and injustice of those who would withhold from you your rights, under the pretence that you do not possess the information to use them without injury to yourselves and the community. My proposition is that men very speedily adapt themselves to their position in society; and that their position itself instils into their minds the ideas belonging to it and induces the desire for those acquirements that are demanded by its duties. There are, consequently, no rights claimable by men, in a free country, that ought, upon any pretence of incompetence through ignorance, to be denied to us, brethren, at the present period: but with respect to us, this country, great and wealthy as it is by our ingenuity and labour, is not free, and our position in it is far from being political. The bishop who said that we had nothing to do with the laws but to obey them, uttered, with shameless audacity, a scandalous truth. But let us consider with what we have to do; that is our present concern. Our position is that of abject and complete dependence upon capitalists, who buy us piece-meal by the week, in order to gain a profit by our labour. This is our position in society, and it is abundant in evils, of which one of the greatest is that it contracts our thoughts, debars us from the means of general information, and forces us, without allowing us time for reflection, into those vicious habits of society which are fanned and encouraged by those who live upon the produce of our labour. The invention of machinery, the consequent influx of production, and the diminution of profits, together with the increasing facilities of communication, and the spread of general information, have, within the last few years, roused us to look more attentively to our actual situation in society than was probably ever done before by the producers of wealth in any other part of the world. We have acquired the inestimable arts of reading and writing, those astonishing faculties of receiving, retaining and imparting ideas; and, although the press is yet but very partially our ally, our means of arriving at a knowledge of our true interests are greatly enlarged. The truths that immediately belong to our circumstances are not numerous or intricate; and some of the severest of those truths speak feelingly to us, through the wants and sufferings of our multitudes. It is thus that our position in society forces, of its own accord, instruction upon us; and we cannot perceive the evils that are daily overwhelming thousands of us in wretchedness, and are threatening ourselves with the same fate, without, in some degree, becoming acquainted with their causes, and desiring, at least, to discover some remedies for them.

Your first and most natural step, under the circumstances that oppressed you, was your strikes, which were chiefly intended to prevent your employers from forcing down the rate of your wages. These strikes were very painful, and, though sometimes they were attended with temporary success, they were, upon the whole, very inefficient. In fact, the object of these strikes is to keep up wages, while profits themselves cannot be supported on the part of the masters or capitalists but by those precarious expedients on their part, which, in a former letter, I have termed their glut strikes. You have now had sufficient experience with respect to this mode of proceeding, and you must be convinced that you obtain no advantage in conflicts where your sufferings and those of your families are certain to be great. The profit-mongers can live while all are starving round them; and though their capital could not fail of being sensible of the injuries which your strikes might inflict

upon it, yet the contest would be found, as, indeed, it already has been found, to be unequal; and in all your strikes under your present circumstances, you waste that strength which might have accomplished great benefits had it been exerted with better judgment.

Your position in society, brethren, is one of great difficulty, and there is nothing in the history of past times parallel with the struggle you are called upon to make; for at no times, nor in any country, did the great productive power of labour stand forward to demand its full remuneration as it does at present in this country. The diminution of the merchant's and the dealer's profits by the influx of plenty, has, at various periods, affected very materially the revenues of states, and has been followed by tumultuous factions in various commercial nations. Malthus has brought forward instances of this character, in order to exemplify his notion of a superabundant population. There is no real limit either to population or to production; but, under the system of dependent labour, as we know by our sufferings, the limits to both are very circumscribed. We have, in this country, past both these limits at present; and the contest now going on apparently between profits and wages, is actually a contest against ruin on the part of the capitalists, as much as it is a contest against direct starvation on the part of the working class. The editor of the Times insists that the powers of production are still, and ever must be, beneath the wants of the community, and that you, brethren of the working classes, get more than your share of the whole produce. Will nothing teach this man the plain principles of common sense? Are these pretences, by which the avarice of the few is too satisfied at the expense of the many, refuted as they have been repeatedly, to be on all occasions, when the capitalists wish to give what they consider to be an argumentative crush to their suffering opponents, thrust out against us? If enough is not produced to clothe and feed every man, woman, and child in the United Kingdom, why is not more produced? Why do we ever hear the cry of glut and over-production? Why did that drivelling, official statesman, the late Lord Liverpool, utter his miserable lamentation on the subject of superabundance? Why, because capital is, under the present unnatural system, set at enmity with labour; and swaggering Profit, with his greasy chin and swollen belly, is taught to ill-treat his poor, miserable father, Labour, and give him as many kicks as half pence for his wages. There are two interests in the state where there ought to be but one; and the base editor of the Times is fomenting the differences between them. If these differences are to be continued unaccommodated much longer, there can be no security for the peace of the country.

What then, Brethren, does the information which we have recently acquired direct us to do? The labourers, the producers of the plenty and wealth of the nation, are nothing, absolutely nothing, in the social or the political scale of the nation, until they are independent. Offer them Universal Suffrage tomorrow! They would refuse it. "What!" they would exclaim, "do we want with a suffrage, which could not, on our own parts, be exercised for the benefit of our own cause! Why should we be marched up to the hustings to vote according to the direction of an employer, who has probably sold our votes, either for meal or for malt, to some one with whom we have no common interest or feeling? No, we must secure our independence; let who will make the laws. We want no laws to step in between capital and labour, between profits and wages. All we ask for is non interference on the part of state power. Let there be no more meddling between capital and labour than in the matrimonial quarrels between husband and wife. Capital, a proud sort of dame, is very fond of the aristocracy, imitates their vices, and follows their fashions; while her honest husband, hard-handed and heavy-browed Labour, must, it seems, provide for her extravagant whims, and then starve at home! But leave them alone.

Honest Labour, who was for a long time dull and ill at his ease, is now roused to a sense of his condition, and he will set his house to rights, since he has in earnest set about it, without any appeals to parliament!"

Our business, brethren, is gradually, by our unity, and by contributions entirely within ourselves, to elevate ourselves into the rank which belongs to us, by producing for ourselves; by maintaining a full power over our produce; and by taking care that, in its distribution, it is equally beneficial to all. To effect this we must be both firm and frugal. We must encourage the growth of capital among ourselves, and we must establish works of all sorts, particularly those that are subservient to the convenience and comfort, rather than the excess and luxury, of human beings of sensibility and rational faculties. No government would ever be mad enough to interfere with the regulations we must make in order to promote our own welfare, and to give strength and stability to that prosperity, which, as it is the result of our labour, ought undoubtedly to be conducive to our happiness. Undoubtedly our unity, and its consequence to society at large, must ultimately, and at no very distant period, produce a very material effect upon the government itself. Associated labour must necessarily give liberty and independence to those who are now enslaved; and at length the political importance of the great productive body, in its state of freedom, will become paramount to that of any other class in the state. But we do not look to political influence as the means of any change in our condition. That change must be, on our parts, completely social. Its results, in both a moral and a political point of view, will undoubtedly be immense; but our immediate purpose is to settle the differences existing between Capital and Labour, between profits and wages; and in this settlement, as I have already observed, we must have no legislative interference.

The times are favourable to our efforts. The Whig government is too distracted with the conservative principle of the church and its court patrons,—while the progressive spirit of Radicalism insists upon an unremitting course of reform—that it has neither time nor inclination to interfere between us and the capitalists. Let ministers and the parliament settle the church question as they please, we have no concern in it. The plenty produceable by our efforts, the quantity of comfort which must be consequent upon the proper distribution of that plenty, the strength, moral and political, which must be the natural result of such a state of things,—these, brethren, these are subjects to which the intrigues of courts, and the insolent effrontery of church property, with the agitations and prevarications of puzzled ministers of state, are ridiculous farces. It is lamentable indeed that political power should be in the hands of such beings; but so divided are the poor creatures called statesmen upon the affair of church plunder, as well as upon questions relative to the other plunder to which they pretend to have vested rights, that there is, in fact, very little efficient political power at present to be found among them. The time is open for us to take our measures, in peace and with resolution, without much danger of being disturbed in our proceedings by ministerial or legislative enactments. In the mean time the capitalists, particularly the small ones, will begin to perceive the wisdom of coalescing with us, and of bringing their funds into partnership with our labour, upon those terms which I mentioned in one of my earliest letters, namely, that every 2,000 L. should be reckoned equivalent to the labour of one man. The diminution of profit, with the continual demands of wages on the one hand, and of the poors' rate (notwithstanding the new-bill) on the other, will either bring the smaller capitalists very shortly to their senses, or to their ruin. It is their interest to give over the extravagant hopes of making fortunes by profits! Oh! the horrors of fortune-making, where the success of one is surrounded by the misery of thousands; while competition, more merciless than war, stalks through populous streets, in which starving multitudes exist only by excess

of toil. The men of small capital are eager to follow the unfeeling minister; but as they follow, how many of them sink exhausted amidst the perishing crowds that beset its way! Will they not be warned? Will they never seek their own happiness in the happiness of their fellow-creatures? Will they not join the CONSOLIDATED UNIONS OF ASSOCIATED LABOUR?

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