

LETTER IX

On The Real Object of United Labor

Was the UNION of which you, brethren, have lain the foundation, perfectly understood, its success would be secure, and the happiness which is its object would very speedily be attainable. Its strength, however, is necessarily dependant upon its extent, and it can be perfect only when it shall have become universal. Its basis is Christianity, pure Christianity; and he that does not “love his neighbour as himself,” —he who prefers in the slightest degree his own individual gain to the general welfare, is at most a Unionist in name: he is far, very far, from being a Unionist in heart.

In my present letter, brethren, I am about to follow up the design which I commenced in my earlier addresses to you; in which I endeavored to show you that labour is at the present period in its transition state between hireling labour—in which the life of a man is sold piecemeal, by the day or the week, at or below the market price, and associated labour—in which men will, and must, act together for the mutual benefit of the whole body of the association. I showed you that this transition was the inevitable consequence of the plenty which man, by the exercise of his talents and industry, is found capable of producing. Plenty is perpetually passing the limit of profit, by what the wise men of M'Culloch's school call over-production, and is checked by what we have a right to call the masters' strike; but which they themselves, with a shake of their empty noddles, and a stroke or two on their full bellies, call a glut. Their remedy, my worthy brethren, for this, to their profit-mongering system, ruinous influx of plenty, is the turning you off for a time, to starve in winter with your families, by the side of a fireless grate; and then, as the surplus produce (what a term the political economists have dared to make use of, amidst a half-naked people who can read!)—as this surplus produce begins to find vent in the market, they gradually recall you to your toil, at the lowest wages, which your long period of suffering amidst your famishing children has induced you to be glad to accept. Oh! These dreadful strikes of the capitalists! I have been a witness of them in various places. In the large manufacturing towns of the north they are truly horrible. The recent slaughter at Lyons presents to the agonized sensibilities of the human heart something more suddenly and instantaneously atrocious. But conceive for a moment the silent yet certain ravages which disease and famine make among thousands who are told that the market for their labour is closed, and that they can no longer sell the weeks and days of their lives for the coarsest food or for the humblest rags for themselves and their children. Some of the master-manufacturers used to advise you to raise funds for your support during these stagnations of your labour; and there were among them a few conscientious persons who were humane enough to subscribe to such funds; but you soon became aware that after every one of these glut-strikes of the capitalists, your wages were reduced lower and lower, while the capitalists themselves, with the cry that the profits would not rise to what they had previously been, insisted upon having you (enslaved by day or week purchase) at a less and less price.

Under such circumstances, the profit-mongering system is continued only by forcing down, by every possible means, the wages of labour; and in effecting this it is again met by an increase of pauperism and the poor's-rate. Your numbers, brethren, are very great; the majority of you exist upon the extreme brink of want; your sufferings are often severe, and too many of you are ignorant and imprudent ; hence it happens that, not-

withstanding your murmurs and your partial strikes, your wages are easily kept down; and if, in your present important struggle, you had no other object but to get a higher payment by the day or week for your labour, your success would only be in certain trades where the profits of your employers were extraordinarily high, and it would be of very short duration. You may possibly obtain, here and there, a greater share of such profits; but profits of every sort are declining, and the poor's-rate is everywhere increasing, and those among you (I hope there are few such) who are actuated by a selfish desire of sharing with their masters in the luxuries which their present profits obtain for them, must also expect to share in their fate.

The question for the liberal-minded producers of plenty, now, for the first time since Adam, in UNION with one another, is not whether such or such a set of producers shall participate more largely with the capitalists in their profits; but whether, since it is now easily demonstrable, and has been repeatedly demonstrated, that more commodities, conducive to the sustenance, the comfort and luxury of man, can be produced with facility in this country, or brought into it by commerce, than all its inhabitants can consume; the question is, I say, whether there are not means to modify the existing system, so as to approximate at least to that by which the abundance produced shall be more generally and more equally enjoyed?

Shall we, whose heads and hands have made this mighty kingdom what it is,—shall we, who have invented and put into action the inexhaustible powers of production,—shall we sit down hopelessly, and see a government waste the wealth we create, and idle lords and ladies enjoy it, while we are compelled to sell ourselves for the miserable price we can wring out of the fists of the avaricious profit-mongering capitalists? Surely not! What we can produce we can certainly distribute. The obstacles in the way of our effecting this justice to ourselves are indeed monstrous; they are the growth of ages; there are ignorance and tyranny, bloodshed and extortion, in their composition! But only observe what your patience, your un-reposing labour, your astonishing skill and ingenuity, have accomplished for the benefit of others, and then ask yourselves, if, with the same powers of mind, the same exertion of patient perseverance, you cannot remove these disgraceful impediments to your just power over the work of your own hands, over what is more justly your own, and what you have more right to do what you please with, than his grace of Newcastle boasted he possessed over the lands at Newark, which he and his forefathers have long held at a nominal rent of the crown? Yes, brethren, you have an undoubted right to do what you will with your own, and you cannot be long in discovering the means by which you may exercise that right.

The circumstances of the times are in your favour. Those for whom, under the present unnatural and injurious system, you are compelled to labour, are as much puzzled about the division and distribution of their spoil, as you can possibly be respecting the means to obtain your natural power over the division and enjoyment of that which is so indubitably your own. The system of competition extends to those who are in possession of the wealth which you produce; and though they are united to keep you in your hireling state, they are at war with each other. As they have had the government at their own direction, and have looked upon it as a source of power and emolument, they have rendered it the bone of contention among themselves, and the parties into which they are split; have in their turns so much abused its powers, that they dread it while it is in the possession of each other. It was to this dread of one another that we owe the Reform Bill, a bill which, if as yet it has been the means of much deception, and of no real advantage whatever, has at last manifested the weakness, the duplicity, and the folly of its framers. But we must contrive to turn this Reform Bill to some use.

We must have our meetings both public and private to shorten the duration of the present parliament, and to influence the election of the next. The House of Commons must be our own; it must represent the productive interest. The landowners and the capitalists, the rent-mongers and the profit-mongers, are sufficiently represented by the House of Lords. Let the opulent manufacturers, the bankers, and all the men of monied interest find seats in the upper house if they can, either personally or by representation. Perhaps the descendants of the Norman cut-throats and murderers, who came in with Bill the Bastard,¹⁶ may turn up their noses at the idea of the upstarts, as they call the proud profit-gentry, taking their seats in an assembly so dignified ; but they must reconcile themselves to the change. Our business, brethren, is, by every exertion in our power, (and we can do much if we act in union,) to obtain a preponderance in the House of Commons; and when we have done that, force and fraud may have the House of Incurables to themselves, with as many bishops as they may be willing to keep out of their decayed rents and diminished profits, or as they may think serviceable to their most holy cause.

Yes, brethren, we ought frequently to meet and discuss together such measures as may be necessary to disseminate the truths on which our Union and its expectations are founded, and to devise the means of founding manufactories, cultivating land, building ships, establishing trades, opening communications from the Unionists of one part of the kingdom with another, and transacting business, by exchanging produce for produce, on our own account with the industrious and skilful people of other countries. These are at first sight great plans, some of you will say. The greater they are, the more important is it that we should take them into our own hands, and place the management of them with those only who may be wholly responsible to ourselves. Are we less competent to such tasks than those whom we now see bustling, intriguing, and committing all the vicious follies that disgrace the land? Is it more difficult to act simply and honestly, as we in union shall and must do, than to act with greedy duplicity and cunning? No, brethren, we only want a beginning, and the world will soon find that it is actually more easy to make men happy, than it is to render them miserable. Do not the oppressors complain as well as the oppressed? Has not the impious cry gone forth, that it is the lot of man, ordained by the great good God himself, to be wretched, hopelessly wretched? It is indeed, a law of nature that the selfish shall share the unhappiness they create; but it is equally a law of nature that benevolent union shall at once create happiness and enjoy it.

It is not possible, at first, to render our designs so extensive as our wishes, but we are able to make commencements of no very limited importance. We must begin with founding manufactories and trades; we must open shops, and deal entirely with one another; and we shall afterwards proceed to the building of ships, and to both the cultivation and importation of corn. I do not say that Unions for keeping up wages are not at present highly necessary, but they do not tend to the ultimate views of the unionist. They are temporary preventives or alleviations of evils; they will not cure the great disease under which so many thousands of the most honest, the most industrious, the most wealth-creating of the human species are yearly, monthly, aye, sometimes daily, perishing!

SENEX.

¹⁶ A reference to William the Conqueror and the Norman conquest of England in 1066. This event was often used by radical writers to construct a myth of a nascent Saxon democracy overthrown by foreign invasion and the subsequent oppression of the indigenous population.