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Trade Unionism the Only Hope

Lizzie M. Holmes

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IT SHOULD be self-evident that in trade unionism the toiler finds his only hope and security while we live under the commercial system which reigns today. Sugar coat it as we may, labor is today a commodity, and the capitalist goes into the market and buys it as cheaply as it can be purchased. So there seems to be no limit to the lowering of wages were there no preventing forces. Men's very necessities compel them to compete with one another until the very lowest possible living price is reached. The fact that a man has a wife and several children does not always urge him on to demand higher wages in order to support them. He is, indeed, – more helpless than the single man. He dare not be idle; his family will starve, and so he is compelled to beg for a chance to work at any price; consequently the single man is often discharged to make room for the married man whose family's needs drive him to work for less

The one man who refuses to work unless he is better paid can accomplish but little, but a hundred men doing the same thing at the same time can bring about wonderful results. The force they wield is something that must be reckoned with. Combination is

the workingman's only weapon against the encroachments of well-entrenched capital.

The struggles between the two forces have been many and bitter. Great suffering, deep enmities, hunger, despair have resulted from these combats, and because of this it is said trade unions are wrong and should be destroyed. But struggles are never pleasant things. Must we then supinely submit to any wrong that is offered us? It is often a choice between *peace at any price* and *"the hell of war."* *Who would purchase quiet at the price of liberty? Not the modern, civilized, aspiring workingman who is America's best citizen.*

Combination for self-defense and security is the first lesson of the freed wage-earner. It has not been an easy lesson. The primitive type of man could hunt and fish as an individual; could even build a shelter alone and prepare the skins of animals for clothing. Association was not then so much a necessity in times of peace as a pleasure. Danger from wild animals, human enemies, the rage of the elements urged them to combine for self-defense, but in peaceful, productive labor each man could work and protect himself alone. But then, no one disputed his right to all he produced; if any one did, it was equivalent to a declaration of war. As labor became more complicated, requiring more tools and more complex arrangements, laborers became diversified and classes sprang up. Combination for mutual security and defense became a necessity. The trade union or guild is a very ancient affair, and even yet the lesson is not universally learned.

The combination of many trade unions into one organization for the good of all is a more modern movement, and one that has made progress with some difficulty. Many obstacles have been in a manner overcome by the American Federation of Labor in this country, and the task has been a most gigantic one. In the last twenty-five years the change has been marvelous. We have had to deal with laborers from every country on the globe, speaking all languages, possessing thousands of varying prejudices, customs, tastes, and superstitions; they have been stupidly selfish, stub-

bornly selfish, piggishly selfish, blindly selfish, and through that very selfishness have stood in their own way; and they have been more or less steeped in ignorance and servility. But such have been caught, taught, trained, pulled, and pushed into something like order, and the first principles of mutual combination for the interest of all has seeped into their understandings. Today the workingmen of America are generally intelligent and well informed. They are far from being perfect and from really comprehending their own rights; they have not thoroughly imbibed the principle of loyalty to one another, and they are not cool and calm and suave and polite at all times, as are some employers even while deceiving and wronging them.

Every workingman knows something about the "union," and he knows that he must hold some relation to it, either that of mutual support or of direct antagonism; and every worker, from the humblest to the highest in position, is better off for the existence of the "union." The poorest toiler receives more for his labor than he would have done but for the *union*. He may have denounced the trade organizations with scorn; he may have called them *tyrannical* and declared his independence of them by *working where and when and how he pleased;* but, nevertheless, *he has profited by them, and but for their hardly-earned victories he would be no better situated than the Chinese coolie, working 10 hours a day for two cents.*

The most noticeable strides have been made in the ranks of women workers. Twenty-five years ago women had just emerged from the seclusion and work of home. Following the trend of production from the spinning wheel and hand loom, the kitchen bake oven and the homely needle, to the great, fast-speeding wheels of factories and mills, woman developed from the home maker and worker to the wageearner. She became part of an army, and her work was but bits of a great whole; and yet she seemed for a long time ignorant of the great outward movement and of its importance.

Today the wage-working women of all the large cities are well organized. They are better paid and health conditions are better looked after than of yore, and in case of personal wrong the woman has not a losing battle to fight alone—a great and powerful body stands behind her to protect. Children, too, are looked after and, in a measure, kept out of the mills and shops until they are somewhat matured. Of course there are many wrongs and dire evils yet, but the good work is going on. The principles of co-operation are generally recognized as beneficial, and a wider spirit of unselfishness is permeating the ranks of working people. While realizing the necessity of energetic work in the future, we have great reason to congratulate ourselves on what has already been accomplished.