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Everlasting Murder

Max Baginski

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War or peace – the slaughter continues, for the character of capitalist society is so inexorably murderous that no amount of moralizing can mitigate it.

Horrified we witness the carnival of death, fain to believe that these catastrophes are “accidental,” exceptional, while in reality the destruction of human life, industrial murder because of greed and inhumanity, is an established institution. In a society where profit is paramount and the fate of the toilers a negligible quantity, what other result can be expected than the most cynical indifference to the lives of the workingmen.

The hundred and forty-five victims of the fire at the shirtwaist factory of Blanck & Harris, in Washington Square, New York, have been murdered by capitalism. The helpers and executioners in the massacre were the owners of the scab shop, the officials of the public safety department, the administration of the City of New York, and the government and legislature at Albany. These are the guilty. But as they control the machinery of “justice,” they will acquit themselves. Within a few weeks the terrible crime will be all but forgotten and – the business of murder will continue.

May the terrible tragedy help to clarify our vision. Our grief is profound; may it bear emotions and resolves strong and effectual, worthy of our great sorrow.

With terrible clearness this crime has demonstrated how useless are the laws for the protection of the lives of the toilers. The laws are there; the rules and regulations are there; the highly paid officials are there; only the actual protection is not there. Government and officialdom are necessary, it is said, for the protection of life and property. In truth, they are capable of dooming the starving wretch to a few years' prison for stealing fifteen cents. They are indeed most faithful guardians of property. But when it concerns the effective protection of the workman's life against wholesale capitalist murder, the governmental Providence yawns and sleeps in the bureaus; or pretends to sleep, well knowing that it must not seem too watchful if it wishes to enjoy the sympathy and good will of the wealthy pillars of society. This officialdom is the "stall"¹ that decoys the capitalist victim. It is not its business to make such crimes as the Triangle fire impossible. Its duty is superficially to mask – by its laws, dignity, and authority – the plutocratic greed which is responsible for such holocausts.

In their simple trustfulness the "common people" believe that the governmental Providence is ever on the alert to prevent such accidents; meanwhile this good Providence is concerned mainly in removing the obstacles in the way of plutocratic exploitation and ensuring its own position and aggrandizement.

Heavy is the penalty for this error. Because the toilers believe that the government machinery is designed for their protection, they neglect themselves to take steps to insure their safety. Hence official protection is not only useless; it is positively dangerous, often fatal.

¹ Stall: the assistant of a pickpocket who jostles the passengers in the street-car, or starts a fight to give his partner an opportunity to rob the people.

May this be the first lesson to be learned from the murder of our comrades. And may we also realize that labor possesses the power, by means of united and direct action, forever to put a stop to the wholesale slaughter of capitalist greed. Henceforth let our motto be: Away with the deceptive hope for salvation from “representatives,” politicians, and officeholders. Let us act for ourselves, on the spot: the control of the factories should be in the hands of those who work in them; the means: direct action and the general strike, and *sabotage*, which has accomplished such splendid results in the syndicalist movement of France and Italy.

It is the workers – not the landlords, manufacturers, or bosses; not the city or State authorities – that risk in the factories their health and life. It is therefore they who should also have the right to determine the conditions under which they will work and of taking such precautions as may be necessary to safeguard them, not only on paper, but in reality. Labor would indeed deserve to be charged with immaturity and lack of independent judgment if it will still longer continue to trust its fate to the plutocratic regime and its servants, and be persuaded to abstain from independent direct action. All too long the toilers have felt themselves mere “hands” and subjects. It is time to remember their rights as human beings and to realize their strength to assert these.

The power of labor seems weak only because it is never fully manifested. The workingmen still fail to realize their tremendous possibilities and the great tasks they could accomplish, because they do not dare to act for themselves, without go-betweens, politicians, and arbitration boards. It is these that paralyze independent action on the part of labor and strive to divert its every effort into channels profitable to capitalism.

Not merely fire escapes and safe exits can the workers secure by the exercise of their economic power, through direct action and general stoppage of work. They are also able – though naturally after a hard struggle – entirely to abolish the industrial system of wholesale slaughter and exploitation.

Upon this aim to concentrate our efforts, to work for it in the factories and shops, and finally to achieve this noble purpose be our vow at the grave of our hundred and forty-five murdered fellow workers.

[Baginski writes shortly after the notorious Triangle Shirtwaist Company fire of Saturday, March 25, 1911. 146 people died, mostly young Jewish and Italian immigrant women workers. They died because the doors were locked. Because there were no sprinklers. Because the fire escape tore away from the brick wall. The fire, despite his fears, was not 'all but forgotten' and spurred both fire safety codes and unionisation, particularly of the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union. Over a hundred years on the Grenfell Tower fire reminds us "In a society where profit is paramount and the fate of the toilers a negligible quantity, what other result can be expected than the most cynical indifference to the lives of the workingmen." – though this was killing of working class men and women and children where they lived.]