
The American University and the Labor Problem

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Strictly speaking, the American university is doing little, if anything, toward solving the “great labor problem” and the reason why, if sought, is found in the fact that neither the American nor the European universities were founded for any purpose directly or remotely connected with the solution of any labor problem, great or small. Such is the history of European universities and in the founding of American universities history may be said to have repeated itself.

In replying to the interrogatories addressed to me by the Editor-in-Chief of *The Adelbert* [Charles W. Naumann], “Is the American university doing its share in solving the great Labor Problem? If not, where is it lacking and what suggestions would you make for its improvement in that direction?” hypercriticism of the American university is not required and yet, facts should be courageously stated regardless of consequences.

As a general proposition, universities are aristocratic institutions. This is preeminently true of European universities, and to make matters still worse they were from the date of inception hedged about with ecclesiastic prerogatives and bigotries which, *nolens volens*, created a class of superior beings as separate and distinct from labor as if the lines defining their limits had been rivers of fire.

That American universities, as in the case of Harvard and Yale, should have inherited the defects of European institutions is of easy and satisfactory explanation. The French, English, and German universities were creations of kings and popes and within their sacred precincts no labor problem was ever considered except to find the most effective methods of enslaving the masses, and how effectively this work has gone forward in Europe for the past 600 years the merest novice in investigation may find abundant proof; indeed, exclu-

siveness is the distinguishing characteristic of the ancient and modern university and no amount of learned sophistication can obscure the fact. It was true of the Lyceum when Aristotle taught, when Grecian philosophy was in its meridian glory, and the academy of Plato was not invaded except by the favored few and it is as true now as then, that a university education is reserved for those who have money to purchase it, and the fact that universities confer degrees is in itself a power employed for constituting a species of nobility which, however well deserved in certain cases, considered from an educational point of view as rewards for merit, always served the purpose of creating an aristocracy of DDs, LLDs, etc., often as obnoxiously exclusive as a titled nobility created by kings.

The graduates of universities with their diplomas and degrees, boasting of their *Alma Maters*, as a rule, regard themselves, as compared with the "common people," of superior old, and this fact is scarcely less conspicuous in America than in Europe. The rule is stated: there are numerous exceptions, but observation verifies the proposition and that such defects and infirmities are largely the result of inheritance, few will be found to question the averment.

Referring directly to the interrogatory "Is the American university doing its share in solving the great Labor Problem?" after grouping all the facts the reply must be in the negative; but just what is meant by the "great labor problem" is susceptible of so many and such varied conclusions that the difficulties evoked are well calculated to involve discussion in ceaseless entanglements. Labor in the United States is confronted with numerous problems and which one should be designated as the "great labor problem" be must of necessity left to the judgment of those who are interested in such questions.

There are those who are constantly championing the hypothesis that there exists something in the nature of an irrepressible conflict between labor and capital and that to harmonize the belligerents constitutes the solution of the "great labor problem" and the error, for such it is, so permeates discussion that confusion becomes worse founded as the debate proceeds and necessarily so, because the premise is a myth — the truth being that capital and labor, instead of occupying a hostile attitude towards each other, enjoy the most peaceful relationship. This must of necessity be the condition, since the truth is axiomatic that labor, and only labor, creates capital. But when it is stated that a conflict exists between laborers and capitalists, a problem is presented worthy of the attention of the American university. It so

happens, however, that the university, to use a figure of speech, is itself a capitalist and has never had anything in common with labor, and, therefore, is not doing its “share,” whatever that may be, in solving any labor problem.

In this there is nothing peculiar to the American university, the facts standing out as prominently in the history of all universities.

What, in this connection, could be more interesting than to know what labor problem has been solved by any of the great universities of Europe? To be more particular and pertinent, because of language inheritance, what labor problems have the great historical and wealthy universities of England solved? For more than 600 years the Cambridge and Oxford universities have flourished, and if either of them have solved any great labor problem for the benefit of the toilers of England, the facts should be stated. A correspondent for a Chicago paper, writing recently from London, after recapitulating numerous and aggravating afflictions of labor in England says, “The result is that England has upon her hands an enormous pauperized population and the government is seriously embarrassed by continuing demands for relief.”

What is true of England is equally true of the United States, for notwithstanding we have Harvard and Yale and perhaps a hundred more American universities. We also have “an enormous pauperized population” and if these universities have solved any labor problem, the present is happily opportune to herald the fact.

If the American university has failed in doing its share in solving the “great labor problem,” no laborious research is required to find a plausible reason for its shortcomings, and recent humiliating incidents transpiring in the operation of the University of Chicago become sufficiently explanatory to satisfy the most exacting. The dismissal of Professor Bemis proclaims the fact that the American university is not equipped to solve labor problems, but is arrogantly hostile to labor and further proof of its opposition to labor, if demanded, is found in President Harper’s explanation of the dismissal of Professor Bemis in which he is reported to have said substantially that to “express friendship for working men is well enough, *but we get our money from the other side.*”¹

¹ **Edward Webster Bemis** (1860-1930) was an Associate Professor of Political Economy at the University of Chicago that was forced out of his position for his progressive political and economic views in 1895 by the administration of President **William Rainey Harper** (1856-1906).

The American university is not seeking to solve labor problems because the performance of such work would require the arraignment of the capitalistic class from which it "gets its money," and the capitalistic class solves all labor problems by crating environments which pauperize labor, and reduce it to vassalage.

Suggestions for the improvement of the "American university" made by anyone identified with labor, though responding to a request to offer hints in that direction, would be regarded by university presidents, professors, and graduates as impertinences, plebeian rudeness, born of ignorance and audacity, and yet it so happens that every advance step taken to solve labor problems, bearing the stamp of common sense and justice, has been made by men within the ranks of labor and not by men wearing university titles and equipped with the advantages their *Alma Maters* could confer.

But such statements are not put forth to indicate intentional culpability on the part of the American university. It was not founded nor endowed for solving labor problems and its curriculum never includes studies specially designed to aid in the performance of such tasks, and any improvement in that direction would involve such radical changes as would disturb their foundations.

The American university if it would do any share in solving the "great labor problem" would be required to attack the corrupting power of money wielded by corporations, trusts, and syndicates, as also the American aristocracy, whether built upon coal oil or cod-fish, watered stocks, banks, bullion, or boodles. This, as in the case of the Chicago institution, it would not do because it is from such sources that it gets its money. It would be required to employ professors to lecture upon the degrading influences of starvation wages, which darken 10,000 American homes. It would be confronted with the exiling power of labor-saving machinery, which is filling the land with armies of enforced idlers which thoughtful men regard as dangerous and threatening to the perpetuity of our republican institutions. It would have to array itself against a corrupt judiciary and hold it up as a target for the maledictions of liberty-loving Americans.

If it is held that the "American university" is solving labor problems by diffusing throughout the land the blessings of a "higher education," including football and other athletic tournaments, as also displays of pyrotechnic oratory, it may be said that ancient Greece and Rome indulged in such classic pastimes and after a few hundred

years reached a condition of desuetude, without solving any labor problem whatever.

Gladstone, the “grand old man,” the justly renowned English statesman and scholar, and graduate of Oxford, whose knowledge of Greek is so profound that he could, if required, rival Demosthenes as a Grecian orator, may have during his brilliant career solved some labor problem for which his name will be held in grateful remembrance by English workingmen, but if such is the case the fact is yet to be chronicled. And Daniel Webster, a graduate of Dartmouth University, the great expounder of the Constitution, found out by university processes of reasoning that “government is founded on property” — a heresy advocated by the American university.

If the American university would have any “share” in solving labor problems, a change in its policy will be required. It will have to renounce all allegiances which separate it from the great body of the people and permit its colleges, if need be, to become the tombs of its errors, whether inherited or adopted, that it may in its teachings represent the American democracy rather than the American aristocracy.

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Edited with footnotes by Tim Davenport

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