

Daniel De Leon

Editorial: The Roles Changed

Time was when the capitalist and the working class locked horns on a social-economic issue, in which the former was right and the latter wrong. It was upon the question of the introduction of machinery. The machine displaced workmen; it eliminated skill and strength, and thereby opened the doors for woman and child labor, and broke up family life; it rendered work more subdivided and monotonous, and thereby intensified the mental and even physical wear and tear of the operative. Smarting from all these personal injuries, inflicted by the machine, the workingmen set their faces against its introduction; machines were broken in many places, and numerous riotous outbreaks ensued. Nevertheless, the machine prevailed. The capitalist class came out on top, the working class succumbed.

To-day the roles have changed. That same class, the individual small producer, the unevoluted quondam bourgeois, or small capitalist, that once fought so strenuously for the introduction of machinery, i.e., for perfected and concentrated implements of production, now stands arrayed against that highest and most perfected form of production of which the capitalist system is capable—the Combine, the Trust; while opposed to it stands to-day the advance guard of that identical class, the working proletariat, that once fought the introduction of machinery, and now hails and promotes its development and fullest application.

The issue is identical, now as it was then. The law of

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economic evolution that dictates the course of mankind drives it towards the goal of emancipating itself from that physical toil that bends the body, and from that harrowing fear of want that stunts the intellect. The stepping-stones to this goal is the machine. Without an abundance, at least a sufficiency, mankind is held to arduous toil. The machine increases the productive powers of labor; what the individual toiler alone could not dream of accomplishing, the machine verifies; it draws men together; brings forth co-operative labor; “frees him,” in the language of Marx{,} “from the fetters of his individuality”¹ that held him down to poverty; with every progress it makes it more and more subjects brute nature to man; until it reaches the point when it has become a veritable cornucopia from which the blessings of economic freedom may be poured down plentifully upon the heads of the people.

The Combine or the Trust is the latest, most perfect machine of which the present social system is capable. Like all previous machines, it concentrates productive power, and thereby increases the capacity of labor to yield its store of wealth.

Whence arises the transposition of interests that we notice to-day? How is the phenomenon to be accounted for of an “Anti-Trust Convention” of small capitalists meeting in Chicago last week, while the advance guard of the working class, represented in New Trade Unionism and the Socialist Labor Party hails the Combine or Trust with pleasure?

The explanation of this phenomenon throws one of the strongest lights upon the separate social missions and objects of the three principal classes that to-day divide society.

The Combine or Trust owning class is the large capitalist class. It is the evolved capitalist class. It stands to-day upon the same ground on which it stood in its unevolved stage. It owns the instruments of production and keeps to itself all the results of the conquests of science. It wishes to perpetuate the present system, a system under which all the progress made by

¹ *Communist Manifesto.*

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mankind towards increasing its store of wealth falls upon the lap of that privileged and oligarchic class exclusively.

The Anti-Trust men are the unevolved capitalists; they have remained where their class once stood when machinery was yet young. The result of this has been that they now occupy towards the evolved capitalists the same position that the working class once occupied towards them. The perfected machinery of production, implied in the Trust, plays havoc with the small capitalists; consequently, they oppose it, they wish to destroy it, and they would burn it up or break it, and would riot in order to do that, the same as their own workingmen once did at the sight of the machine. They are opposed to the progress of civilization.

The third class, the working class, on the contrary, realizing that the more perfect the machine the greater their potentiality for freedom, applaud all concentration; but, seeing that the machine, however perfected, if allowed to remain private property, is struck with the palsy, as far as its capacity to free the people is concerned, demand that it be placed in the hands of the people to be operated for all.

The Trust owners are the social class that would keep to itself for its private use all the progress of civilization.

The middle class, or Anti-Trusters, are the reactionary class that would pull civilization back.

The working proletariat is the only class that would take civilization by the hand and cause it to spread its blessings upon all.

The roles have changed completely. The capitalist class is a drag and a danger to civilization; upon the working proletariat alone the future of mankind depends.

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