

## THE "GENERAL STRIKE" AS A LABOUR WEAPON.

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[Read February 16th, 1912.]

It may as well be avowed at the outset that this paper is written more for the purpose of eliciting the views of the members of the Statistical Society on a subject of the utmost interest and importance, than with any design of making a serious contribution to the literature of a very difficult and complicated subject. Labour problems are continually coming up for solution in every civilised country, and, on account of their close connection with politics, are usually discussed with all the unnecessary vehemence, the personal animosity, and the wilful or unconscious misrepresentation, that seem to be inseparable from political controversy. The atmosphere of Parliament or the hustings is not favourable to the adequate consideration or proper decision of problems so intricate and many-sided. It may be well, therefore, that these questions should, before falling into the political maelstrom, receive the philosophic and dispassionate judgment of such a society as this, most of whose members will be given credit for a lack of partisanship and a desire for the welfare, both of the public and the individual.

The special point to which your attention will be directed this evening is the comparatively novel use of the "general" or "sympathetic" strike as a means of compelling a settlement of disputes between employers and employed. The practice appears to have arisen in the Latin countries of Western Europe, notably in France and Italy, and to have gradually spread to these shores. The procedure adopted is familiar to all from recent experiences and need not be described in detail. In its essentials it is an effort to enforce a settlement of partial or local industrial disputes by spreading the area of contention and involving eventually so many interests that the whole commercial and industrial world is practically brought to a standstill.

## THE UNSKILLED WORKER AND THE GENERAL STRIKE.

The policy of the "general strike" differs in several important respects from that of trade unionism properly

so called. In the first place the classes of workmen, among whom a "general strike" has been advocated, or by whom it has been put in force, are usually quite different from those who formed the older unions. The latter were, for the most part, skilled workmen and their combinations were organised as much for provident purposes as for industrial warfare; the former are mainly unskilled, easily replaceable workmen, and their unions seem to be intended chiefly for militant methods, and very little, if at all, for mutual assistance in any other way. Now probably few would deny to any class of workmen the power to obtain better terms for its labour by any legal method, particularly to a class which is, generally speaking, so poorly paid and lives such a precarious existence as the unskilled or only slightly skilled workers of our cities. An illustration may be given from near home. In the 1901 Census of Dublin over 17,000 persons returned their occupation as "Labourer," and 5,000 more as "Messenger" or "Porter," both unskilled callings. The great majority of persons of this class support themselves and even bring up families on a wage ranging from 12s. to 20s. a week. This figure, of course, implies living in a one-room tenement at 2s. or 2s. 6d. a week, with all its attendant dirt, discomfort and disease. It also means that there is no margin for saving or for provision against emergencies, and accordingly sickness or unemployment involves the family in a state of debt and disaster, from which no recovery is possible for months. The wolf is always at the door. There was no exaggeration in the statement made by the late Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman that the people of this class live perpetually on the verge of hunger. Mr. Rowntree, who examined the lives of this type of workman in an English city, asserted, as a result of his investigations, that the unskilled labourer's wages were not sufficient to provide proper food for himself, his wife and his children. The working class weekly budgets, which he published, are remarkable documents. They show that in the labouring household only 10s. a week can be spent on food for the family (which usually comprises two adults and three or more growing children). When this sum is divided up it works out at 2s. a week per head for food, or about 3½d. a day. The one-room tenement dwellers of Dublin, who may roughly be taken to be identical with the "unskilled worker" class, number at least 16,000 families, or about 80,000 individuals, a good quarter of our city population. The same is true of other large cities, both Irish and English, especially ports and distributing centres. Here is a field for the social reformer, and also, unfortunately, for the demagogue, and it has yet to be seen which of the

two will be entrusted with the solution of the difficult problem of setting this class more firmly on its feet and more secure against misfortune. The Old Age Pensions and Insurance Acts are one way of dealing with the matter, the "general strike" is another, and, to my mind, a much more dangerous and less effectual way, though, for reasons to be stated, it is undeniably attractive to the workman, as offering him a hope of an immediate amelioration in his condition.

### POSITION OF THE TRANSPORT TRADES.

Though unskilled or semi-skilled hands are, despite the growth of machinery, still employed in large numbers in the processes of production, it is probably true that they are not so prominent in this branch as they are in that of distribution, particularly in the gigantic and multifarious organisation of transport. The observant men, who come to the front in the councils of labour, have not failed to perceive that modern civilisation depends for its very existence on the free and unhampered working of a vast and complicated transport system. Every city depends for its very existence on the country carts, the trains and steamers, which bring its food and the raw materials for its industries. In the vital matter of food alone it is probable that a week's complete cessation of external supplies would produce an absolute famine. Thus the unskilled workers held apparently the key of the situation. If they, as a body, withheld their labour from the great transport systems, and could prevent anyone else from taking their place, they could stop the whole machinery of civilisation and produce such a paralysis as would make their employers glad to buy off their opposition on any terms. The policy has accordingly been put in force from time to time, both in this country and in Great Britain, but it may be doubted whether it has been particularly successful. The carters here were defeated, as also the railwaymen. The railwaymen in England, though they succeeded in obtaining Government intervention, can hardly be said to have gained the points at issue. The sailors, however, were victorious, though in their case it must be remembered that a seaman, unlike a carter, docker, or railway porter, is to a great extent a skilled hand, and cannot be replaced at short notice.

### CAUSES OF FAILURE OF GENERAL STRIKES.

The causes of these failures were largely inherent in the nature of the policy adopted. The "general strike" would seem to be a double-edged weapon, likely to do as

much harm to those who wield it as to those at whom its blows are aimed. The paralysis of municipal and national trade has been partially and temporarily achieved, but the strikers have rarely been victorious, have certainly never been able to dictate their terms. In the first place the strike has never been "general" in the true sense of the word. Some systems managed to keep the whole of their men at work, and others, though there were numerous defections among their staff, still kept together a nucleus of non-strikers. There are almost always local and personal causes at work sufficient to produce this result. For instance, old servants of the railway companies do not wish to jeopardize their pensions, and married men hesitate to expose their families to privation. Thus the system of transportation, though crippled, was still able to perform its functions, even in an uncertain and irregular manner.

Furthermore, unless the unattainable ideal of a complete, universal, and simultaneous cessation of labour can be realised, it will always be possible for the threatened organisations to adopt alternative methods of working, just as a river, when its usual course is damned up, will eventually make another channel for itself. Thus, if the railway between Cork and Dublin is impeded, the traffic may come round by sea, or again it may come by land through the medium of a motor service. In fact a motor passenger service to Cork was established for a time during the late railway strike.

Again, it must be remembered that the suffering which a stoppage of the transport system must produce would inevitably fall immediately and with double effect on the striking workers themselves. If a man is hard pressed to live and support a wife and family on 20s. a week with the transport system working freely and with commodities at normal prices, how can he do so on 10s a week strike pay, with the transport system in confusion and commodities at famine prices? Even the continuance of the strike pay, meagre as it is, is dubious, for most of the unions which adopt the "general strike" as part of their policy are financially weak, and could not continue to pay the large body of men whose absence from work would be required to make a general strike effective. An industrial war of this character, unlike the obstinate and long-continued strike of the skilled workers, is usually of brief duration.

#### ATTENDANT DISTURBANCE AND INCONVENIENCE.

Still, though the struggle has been short, it has almost always been fierce and bitter. The supply of unskilled

labour being so abundant throughout the United Kingdom, the employers naturally resorted to importation to fill the places of their own men who had "gone out." Naturally, too, these men were regarded by the strikers as traitors to their own class, and their coming frequently led to scenes of the wildest disorder. Another and a less excusable feature of these "general strikes" has been the planned and deliberate damage of the employer's property, the *sabotage*, of which so much has been heard in connection with the French railway strike.

The civil authority is called in to protect threatened property, but finds itself confronted with a very difficult, almost insuperable, task. From the very nature of their functions, the great agencies of transport and distribution must possess a great amount of valuable property scattered here and there over a wide area. They are not like the typical unit of production, the factory, which is definitely localised and can be guarded by a single small stationary force. Take, for instance, the Great Southern and Western Railway main line alone, with its 180 miles of costly steel rails, its thirty or forty stations, its two or three hundred bridges and viaducts, its innumerable points and signal boxes. How is such a vast mass to be protected at every vulnerable point, and how are its conveyances to be guarded while in motion? I believe competent military opinion holds that, to secure a railway from hostile attack, 100 soldiers are required for every mile of rails. On that basis the garrison of Ireland would not be nearly sufficient to protect even the four main lines. Or again, in the case of a strike of carters, it will require an enormous force of police to provide adequate escort for each item of the traffic of a great mercantile city. It is not unfair to say that violence, or, at all events, threats of violence and damage to property have been the almost invariable concomitants of the "general strike" wherever it has occurred, and it is sometimes thought that this policy is designed by its authors, not so much to compel the employers to an agreement, as to create, by starvation of the markets and tumult in the streets, such alarm in the minds of national and municipal governments as will force them to intervene and impose a peace which, in these days of democratic rule, is pretty sure to contain some concession to the labour side of the dispute. Rarely, if ever, has a general strike resulted in the admission of defeat by the employers; but it has often ended in conferences called by the State or some other third party.

#### STATE OF PUBLIC FEELING.

Another force with which the policy of the general strike has to contend is the rising anger and impatience

of the public with those who, to gain their own ends, put the whole community to loss, inconvenience and, in many cases, positive suffering. Since the principle of the "sympathetic strike," which is practically a device for turning any small local dispute in any trade into a universal strike of all trades, has been carried into action, no citizen can tell from day to day at what hour or moment his city may not be in a state of siege. He may be personally a non-combatant and a neutral, yet he has to suffer as much as, if not more than, the protagonists themselves. He would not be human if he did not resent such treatment, and such incidents as the formation of volunteer police show that his indignation is taking tangible form. It is likely, too, that on subsequent occasions of a general strike volunteers will be found to come forward to guard and carry on the public utilities. I believe there was an instance of this at Liverpool, where even such an unpleasant, if necessary, task as street scavenging was performed by voluntary helpers.

What then are the facts of the position as outlined hitherto? A numerous, unskilled, poorly-paid and hard-living class dissatisfied with its condition and striving to improve its state by means of methods uncertain of success, extremely damaging to the community generally and tinged throughout with violence of speech and action. It is a dangerous situation, resembling in some important particulars France before the Revolution and Ireland before the Land War. What is the solution? The problem, as our President said in his opening address, is one calling for the best statesmanship, the widest knowledge and the keenest foresight in the nation. It will appear presumptuous for me to put forward opinions on such a difficult subject. Still everyone in such a society as this is entitled to his say, and some of our members, from their experience and position, may be considered as authorities on the subject. As a basis for discussion I would make the following remarks.

#### COMMERCE NOT A FITTING BATTLEGROUND.

Disturbance of the public peace and much suffering of innocent neutrals are caused by universal strikes of the kind we have lately seen. The general commerce of a city or a nation is not a fitting battleground for contending industrial parties. The State would prevent private war, no matter on how small a scale it was conducted. Should it not also take steps to put an end to industrial war, now that it has come to be waged in such a way as inevitably to injure the whole community? If two citizens of Dublin attempted to fight a duel in College

Green, they would be arrested, punished, probably with some severity, and told that in future they must bring their differences to be settled before a court of law. Yet the policy of the "general strike," and equally, of course, the "lock out," make the trade of a whole city a scene of contention for weeks and weeks, whereas the duellists would only have stopped a single thoroughfare for ten minutes. I do not wish to apportion blame to either side in these industrial disputes. The workman may legitimately consider that he has a grievance, when he finds that modern industrial organisation, despite its many splendid achievements, stints some of its workers even of a bare subsistence. Again it may be assumed that the employer is seldom the avaricious tyrant he appears to the labour imagination, nor is the labour leader the reckless incendiary he is often represented to be. They are all in a tangle of circumstance, which must some of these days be unravelled. Yet, for the sake of the public welfare, the general strike must, like the explosive bullet and other ingenious but reprehensible engines of war, be banished from civilised existence. How is it to be driven out? By the same method that private war was prevented, by compulsory arbitration, by the enforcement of law as a substitute for the rude sanction of the stronger arm. War in every form is a relic of barbarism; private war is unknown in properly governed countries; another century may see the last of international war, though pride, courage, and patriotism combine to keep it alive. Should not industrial war vanish with this generation? I think it should and must.

#### CONCILIATION COURTS A POSSIBLE REMEDY.

Some of the Colonies have already shown the way by the establishment of conciliation courts, to which industrial disputants are obliged to have recourse. The trend of legislation here is in the same direction, though we have as yet progressed no further than to the setting up of conciliation boards, whose findings either side is free to accept or not as it chooses. Many trades have no permanent arbitrating authority to which appeal may be made. Even where arbitration is provided for, it is always optional, not compulsory. Where would the peace of Dublin be if a citizen could decide a personal dispute either by formal process of law or by going and cudgelling his opponent till he abandoned the point at issue? Yet this is the state of things in the industrial world to-day. The courts, which would be set up, would, like the voluntary boards, which they would supersede, take into account in making their awards such factors as

the state of each trade, its prosperity or otherwise, the pressure of external competition, the cost of living, price of necessaries, local circumstances, etc. Provision could be made for a periodical review of their decisions in view of altered circumstances, which might arise from time to time. The majority of employers would, I think, find that the establishment of industrial security by such courts would be a benefit outweighing in the end their losses from any increase of wages the courts might order. The workmen, too, though they would in all probability be recalcitrant for a time and might be disappointed with the first awards, would eventually, if the courts showed the equity, ability, and impartiality, which would be desirable, lay aside their suspicion and hostility, and gradually form a habit of appealing to a judicial tribunal instead of to the rude and uncertain arbitrament of the strike.

Let nobody say that the relation of employers and employed is an economic problem to be settled by the working of economic laws without the intervention of a third party. Political economy is not an exact science. That variable and provoking element called human nature cuts athwart all its rules, and frequently hinders, sometimes altogether prevents their proper working. The poor man, because he is poor and cannot hold out for a price, is a bad bargainer and often fails to obtain an adequate reward for his labour. Otherwise how can the existence of sweating be explained? On the other hand, the rich man, if he chooses (though it must be admitted that many do not choose) can, by reason of his strong financial position, drive the hardest of hard bargains. Again, competition presses hard on many employers and forces them to cut down wages to the minimum.

#### ANALOGY OF LAND COMMISSION.

But really there is not much need to argue this question on the basis of economics. It used to be said that the relation of landlord and tenant was an economic question to be settled by economic factors. Yet we have seen, under the pressure of special local circumstances, a judicial tribunal set up in this country to fix rents and to intervene in other ways in this purely economic question. The Land Commission was hailed at its inception as embodying a cynical disregard of economics, yet it seems to have justified itself by results. It has been popular with tenants, and not unpopular even with landlords. Since its establishment there has been no great outbreak of agrarian disturbance. In fact the analogy of present disputes over labour with past disputes over land is worth



pursuing. The methods of attack and defence are much the same, and the solution may come along similar lines. In the case of land, the trend has been first to State arbitration, then to a wide scheme of purchase under State auspices. If labour questions are to pass through the same phases, we should see first the establishment of conciliation courts, then the acquisition by the worker of the means of production. Of course, the complete personal individual possession natural to small agricultural ownership will not be possible in the case of factories, in which perhaps hundreds of men are engaged, but some form of co-operative production, most likely in the shape of State or municipal industries, may be adopted eventually. It is an interesting, if somewhat disturbing, prospect.

### NEED FOR INQUIRY.

But it is to be hoped that the labour question will not have to wait as long for its final decision as that to which it has been compared. The Devon Commission of 1844 laid bare the fundamental causes of agrarian trouble in Ireland, yet the settlement was sixty years in coming, and much blood had flowed, and the seed of bitter and deep-rooted antagonisms had been sown in the meantime. Can we not deal with the present difficulties more speedily and in a better spirit? In this connection the coming of labour representatives to our State and municipal councils is to be welcomed, for they, more than any others, should be able to expound the labour point of view, exhibit the labour grievance, and indicate how labour would regard the proposed remedies. Yet it would be well for all who are likely to be concerned with the work of government to study deeply and in all its bearings the problem of urban poverty and the methods by which it is to be relieved. The matter is not disposed of by ascribing all the evils of strikes to "agitators" and "roughs," though these, no doubt, play a part in times of popular ferment. There is something else behind it all, something which we must get at, something which we must investigate and consider if we wish our country to be happy, peaceful, and prosperous. Here in Dublin there are 80,000 people, a quarter of our entire city population, living on the margin of hunger. Could not a society like this sympathetically and in a manner free from patronage and meddlesomeness, inquire into the causes of their condition, and, as a result of that inquiry, suggest possible remedies? Improved housing, technical education, temperance, thrift, organised and judicious charity, each of these might do much. But I maintain that we have not yet grasped in its entirety the many-sided problem which the grinding

poverty, the unskilled labour, the industrial unrest of a city like Dublin presents, and until we do, we are working in the dark and ineffectively.

#### SUBJECTS FOR INVESTIGATION.

Perhaps you will say it would be better to help the poor in some practical fashion that to go around among them asking questions and taking notes. No doubt that is true, still there is reason to believe that help applied with only an imperfect knowledge of the facts is often ineffective and is sometimes even demoralising. The subjects connected with the state of the Dublin poor, which seem most urgently to call for inquiry are (1) wages, both in their normal amount and their variations as affected by broken time, (2) the prevalence and causes of unemployment, (3) dietary, and its adequacy or otherwise for the support of human beings, adult and infant, (4) state of housing and sanitation, (5) liability to sickness and rate of mortality, (6) effects of popular vices, such as gambling and drunkenness, (7) working of existing relief organisations, public and private, amount distributed in charity, possible overlapping of charities or practice of imposture by persons relieved, etc. It would be a tremendous field to cover, but the beneficial results would be sufficient to compensate for the labour involved.