

OUR INDUSTRIAL PROBLEMS.

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The Australian social system, like that of other countries, has not been deliberately designed to do the work expected of it. It is a machine which was inherited and has been patched and altered and adapted to serve in a more or less effective way the economic needs of the people who live under it. If it works badly in one direction, a new patch is put on or an alteration of some sort is made, and even if the defect in question is removed—which is not always the case—the very remedy itself is liable to make trouble in some other part of the mechanism. If, therefore, we choose to continue the use of such an implement, we must expect, and be ready to put up with, the inconveniences of industrial unrest, unemployment and curtailed production. If we object to these things we must by hard thought and hard work produce a better machine. There is no royal road to industrial stability.

No doubt but few members of the working class have seriously attempted to analyse the root causes of their troubles, but they see around them the results and understand something of the potentialities of modern science and invention in providing a living for humanity. Yet they are still dogged by the same old disabilities. The average working man labours hard all his life, (those who have spent the strength of their years in hard manual toil know the value of the cheap pipes about slacking and "go slow") but he finds himself little better off than his predecessors, excepting for the cold comfort that he can look forward to an old-age pension when the time comes that he can do no more. He is told by budding economists and reactionary politicians that if he would only produce more there would be more to distribute but he has some inkling of the fact that the statement has a catch in it.

And the catch lies in the wastefulness of
The Competitive System.

So paradoxical and vicious is its constitution that there needs must be an appalling amount of waste merely in order to make it work at all. If there have been no calamities, no wars or earthquakes or fires or famines, goods of all sorts accumulate, the market is glutted and unemployment and poverty increase, not because of scarcity but because of plenty. Such a result should be sufficient to condemn the system, but it is, by its supporters, regarded as being in accordance with the fitness of things. One of the most striking instances of this is to be found in the usual attitude towards the seasonal recurrence of the estimates for the forthcoming wheat crops in various countries. If the weather has been unpropitious, and there is likely to be a shortage in Argentina, Canada, the U.S.A. or elsewhere our farmers are supposed to have, (in fact they really have), cause to rejoice. If the season has been good, and Nature has showered her benefits on the world, then there is likely to be depression and misery.

And the details of the working of the system are of a piece with its general principles. The energy and substance of the community is wasted by, (1) the overlapping of trades which are in themselves useful, and the consequent creation of much unnecessary labour in the rivalries of competing firms; (2) by unemployment among the poor and idleness among the rich; (3) by occupations which merely serve the pleasures and amusements of the idle rich, and (4) by large numbers of unnecessary middlemen, the great horde of hangers-on and parasites, the gambling fraternity and the rest who make a living without ever doing anything to increase the production of useful articles. Every one of these necessarily helps to reduce the standard of living to a point far below what it should be. Yet self-sufficient persons, belonging to one or other of these categories are quick enough to point out to the worker his defects.

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