

The Trust— From the Socialist Standpoint

By Daniel De Leon

What is the trust?

The trust is essentially a tool of production. The difference between the trust and the oldest style of privately owned tool, seen now only in museums, is a difference, not of kind, but of degree.

Man is a tool-using animal. The tool adds inches to his stature over nature by increasing the productivity of his labor. The same instinct that led man to fashion the first tool pushes him on to improve it. The more perfect the instrument of production, the more abundant are the fruits of labor. The trend of civilization is to render the product of labor so abundant that the burden of arduous toil, together with want or the fear of want, for the material necessities of life may be lifted from the shoulders and the minds of man, and, thus raised above animal needs, his individuality, his intellectual and moral faculties may have free play. The rungs of the ladder, up which man climbs towards civilization, are the ever more perfect tools of production.

The development of the tool, or instrument of production, is twofold. It gathers power individually; it also gathers power collectively, by concentration.

The tool gathers power individually by keeping lively step with the discoveries of science and the maturing genius of man; the old handloom becomes a steam and Northrop loom; the old agricultural implements become steam plows, reapers and harvesters.

The collective power, however, of the tool is gathered by a bitter experience. In the course of its growth, the tool encounters a serious obstacle, that threatens it with nullification. Its aim, the increase of the store of wealth, is for a time balked. The tool is a weapon against the foe of the race—*poverty*. The wastefulness of competition turns the weapon's edge against itself. Only a long and bitter experience taught the lesson and suggested the remedy—*concentration*. The discovery once made, it points and paves the way to further improvements. First is born the *partnership* of two individuals; then follows the partnership of two or more partnerships—the *corporation*; next appears the partnership of several corporations—the *trust*.

The trust is that doubly developed instrument of production that combines both the highest individual and the highest collective development so far reached. It brings the productivity of human effort up to the highest point so far attained by the individual perfection of the tool. As such, the trust raises man to giant's stature over nature; it is a weapon that makes for civilization.

But this is not the whole truth.

It is not over nature alone that the tool adds inches to the individual; it also adds inches to him over the toolless man. This pregnant socio-economic fact does not from the start manifest itself.

So long as the tool is slight and simple, he who wants it can readily bring it forth by the direct application of his labor to nature, and thereby place himself on a par with whomsoever already is in possession of its equal. But the tool develops. Its development is not from within, like organic matter. The feature of its development is the need and increasing need of other tools, besides increased powers of steam and electricity, to carve it out of nature with, and thus render it more potent by rendering it more fruitful. The tool used in production presently needs two, three, four other tools to bring it forth. Even then its acquisition by individual man, to the end of enabling him to compete with those already in possession of its like, may not be impossible, though the process becomes harder by degrees. When, however, the tool has finally reached that individual perfection of a Northrop loom, a Mergenthaler typesetter, a hydraulic press, a steam plow, reaper and binder, a Westinghouse electric engine, a cotton harvester, etc., and even long before that, none can any longer himself conjure forth its equal out of nature. When to this individual growth is coupled the collective development or concentration implied in the trust, free competition ceases de facto, whatever it may remain in theory.

The trust is the highest form of collective development the tool can reach under the system of private ownership in the machinery of production. But the gigantic powers it wields over nature accrue to those only who hold it; to all others it becomes a scourge. As such, the trust blocks the nation's path on its march to civilization.

Once the tool has reached this stage, it stands transmuted into a social-industrial power that emphasizes the changes which society has been undergoing since the privately owned tool first appeared, especially since the time when it entered upon the period of its rapid development; it carries these changes further, and it forces to the fore a new social problem.

We love to think that the Revolutionary Fathers gave our people political freedom. They did not. The ballot was conditioned upon property qualifications. This simple fact is of deep import in the study of the problem presented by the trust.

Then the tool of production was slight; it was easily acquired; and, consequently, property was the ready reward of industry. At such a time the role played by property was not yet manifest; indeed, it escaped the Revolutionary Fathers, except the two wisest and most far-seeing of them all—Franklin and Madison. At that time, accordingly, economic issues were absent from our party platforms; the people divided on issues essentially political. With the turning of the century a change comes over the surface; economic questions force themselves more and more to the front; they were prominent during the Jackson

administrations; they became dominant in the Harrison-Van Buren campaign; today they are the all-absorbing topic. This change in the physiognomy of our politics has followed closely, and has been brought on by the development of the tool under the system of private ownership.

Competition is predicated upon the capacity of competitors to sell equally cheap; this capacity depends upon the power to produce with equal abundance, and this, in turn, is in direct ratio to the development of the tool. With the approach and appearance in the country's industrial arena of a tool, privately owned and so far developed that its creation by those without it was no longer feasible, these ceased to be qualified for the competitive warfare, and the commonweal began to be differentiated into three hostile social classes:

First, the proletariat—the wholly toolless class, who, no longer able to exercise their labor function without access to tools not owned by themselves, are reduced to the level of merchandise, and compelled to sell their labor power in the labor market for a living;

Second, the middle class—the class who, though armed with tools sufficiently powerful to exclude the toolless class, find it harder and harder to hold their own in competition with the more powerful and ever-perfecting tools held by the class above; and,

Third, the capitalist class—the class who, possessed of the prerequisites for successful competition, can shift work from their own to the shoulders of the proletariat; can live in idleness upon “profits”—i.e., upon the difference between what their employees produce and the “wages” paid to them—i.e., the market price of labor; and can, with their more abundant and cheaper production, undersell the class below and reduce it to the grade of proletarians.

These class distinctions—proletarian dependence, deepening misery and increasing numbers; middle-class precariousness of existence, declining powers and ruin; capitalist idleness, swelling affluence and masterhood—together with the class conflicts into which capitalism casts society, long remained veiled. The trust rends the veil. The several views held on the trust are mainly the classconscious expressions of the three hostile economic classes into which capitalist society is divided, and which are shaken into classconsciousness by the relentless logic of capitalist development manifested in the appearance of the trust.

The capitalist class seeks to uphold the trust in order to maintain its own class supremacy. Its spokesmen tire not truthfully to point out the inevitableness of concentration in productive powers, together with the advantages that flow therefrom in increased production and cheapness; they conceal, however, the blood that stains the trail of the trust, or even deny the existence of such by inundating the country with rosy statistics, gotten up to order, on the condition of the people. But—“*Meliora probant, deteriora sequuntur.*”*

The middle class, tho itself ready to profit by the dependence of the toolless proletariat, is up in arms against the trust, whose superior power is crushing it. It chooses to see only the ravages wrought by the trust; it inveighs against “monopoly,” while it upholds “capital”; igno-

rant of the economico-juridic contradiction implied in such a position, it clamors for the overthrow of the “monster,” or, at least, for the clipping of its wings; and lawyers who are not jurists, together with economists who are not scientists, encourage the folly with their twaddle.

Lastly, goaded into mental activity by the smarts it suffers from the capitalist, and untrammelled by the class interests of the middle class, the classconscious proletariat is pushed beyond both the conservatism of the former and the reactionary posture of the latter. Its class interests reveal to it the two leading features of the trust; the development by concentration of the tool, which makes for progress, and its system of private ownership, which blocks progress; its class interests make it aware of the contradiction, and direct it to save the good and permanent feature by stripping it of the evil and temporary one. The classconscious proletariat pushes the evolutionary movement onward by straining for the public ownership of the trust.

The ladder, up which mankind has been climbing toward civilization, the ever more powerful tool of production, is the storm center around which the modern social storm rages.

The capitalist class seeks to keep it for its own exclusive use.

The middle class seeks to break it down, thereby throwing civilization back.

The proletariat seeks to preserve it and improve it, and to open it to all.

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*They prove better things, but worse follows.—DDL