
Labor as a “Commodity”

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For some months past the subject of “tariff reform” or tax reform has been going forward in and out of Congress, and the agitation is likely to continue indefinitely. In this discussion we hear much about the importance of admitting “free of duty” or tax, certain commodities, raw materials, because such a policy would lessen the cost of manufactured goods and enable the United States to compete with other nations in the markets of the world. Such a policy, it is boldly stated, would be of incalculable benefit to the workingmen of the country because, by opening new markets for the products of American factories, the demand for labor would be increased and wages would advance, and as new markets would be found for our surplus products, overproduction would disappear and workingmen would have continual employment.

Those who are watching the debates in Congress, and the discussions going forward in the press of the country, have noticed that labor comes in for special notice, and that great prominence is given the interests of wage-workers. This, to say the least of it, is a cheering indication. It is the recognition of fundamental facts, which advanced thinkers believe will result, ultimately, to the great advantage of workingmen and necessarily to the welfare of the country.

But our purpose at this writing, is not to discuss “tariff reform” nor the importance of extending the free list of imported articles. Such topics may engage our attention at another time. For the present we desire to call the attention of our readers to the fact that in the Congress of the United States, “labor” is designated as a “commodity,” and this is done by a statesman who professes to be the champion of the interests of laboring men. A member of Congress in a speech said:

What is labor? Why is it that capitalists construct mills, purchase materials, and employ laborers to work the same up? It is

because by combining the materials and the labor he produces something for which there is a market and which he can sell at a profit. When he sells the product he sells the *materials and the labor that he has purchased* and sells both at a profit. By combining the materials and labor he has a product for which there is a demand. If there is no demand for his product, if the market has been supplied, he at once closes his factory, stops the purchase of materials, and discharges his employees. *Labor is as much a commodity, selling in the market, as the materials to be worked up.* If there is a great demand for the product, there is a great demand for the materials and for the labor necessary to manufacture it. If the price of materials goes up, wages go up. *If labor is but a commodity selling in the market, its price is regulated solely by supply and demand.* If the demand is great, wages will go up; if it is small, wages will go down. It requires no argument to convince laboring men that in a community where a large number are out of work and seeking employment that wages will be low and work hard to obtain. Competition will force them down to the lowest standard of living in spite of organization. But when there is work for all, when two employers are after one laborer instead of two laborers being after one employer, wages will be high. [*Italics are ours.* —EVD.]

The distinguished gentleman asked “What is labor?” and he answered his interrogatory by saying, “Labor is as much a commodity, selling in the market, as the materials to be worked up.” We confess our inability to fitly characterize such a declaration. It is a sentence in which words are not the signs of correct ideas — or ideas of any sort. It is jargon. Nations have commodities. The United States boasts of an extended list— iron, coal, cotton, lumber, tar, and turpentine — commodities of forest, field, and mine. We import commodities, raw materials, wool, jute, hair, and hides. And now we have the announcement made in Congress, that “labor is a commodity,” as much a commodity as the “materials” workingmen are required to “work up.” If so, manifestly, labor must take its chances with other materials, pig iron and wool, raw hides, and so on to the end of the list. The labor market is like any other market. Has it come to this? The subject is worthy of the severest analysis. The distinguished Congressman asks, “what is labor?” and says “it is as much a commodity as the materials to be worked up.” Is that true? A manufacturer purchases five hundred bales of cotton. It is a commodity. He concludes to store it for a time till the price of goods advance. He insures his “commodity” and closes his factory. His cotton “commodity rests.” It is sheltered

and watched. It neither gets sick nor hungry, it simply waits a favorable change in the market, and then the owner reaps his profits.

Just outside of the factory is “labor,” which the distinguished Congressman, the professed friend of the wage-worker says “is as much a commodity” as the cotton, the “material” and the labor occupy, in the opinion of the Congressman, precisely the same position, and in legislation, are to be treated as identical; and this vaunting statesman, this champion of labor says: “I am willing to answer to that great body of intelligent wage-workers that I have the honor to represent, as to whether I have been true to their interests.” Is it to the interests of wage-workers to be degraded to the level of raw materials? “What is labor?” asks this “representative” of a great “body of intelligent wage-workers,” and he tells them they are as much “commodities” as the “materials they work up.” We ask what is labor? And we tell this half-fledged, illy-informed Congressman, this pseudo statesman, that labor is not a commodity. We tell him that it is not bought and sold in the markets of the United States like the raw materials of commerce. It was so once. In a large section of the United States there was a time when labor was bought and sold. There were labor blocks and labor pens. There were millions invested in labor. But to own labor, to make it a “material,” a chattel, to offer it in the market to be bought and sold as a “commodity, is in the United States of America a thing of the past, and it is not in the power of Congress to degrade labor to a commodity.

It has been the monstrous curse of the world, of all ages, to degrade labor to the level of a commodity, a material, a chattel, to be bought and sold, and the price of it regulated in the market as any “materials to be worked up.” It has been thought, it has been affirmed, that in the United States of America, the time had come, when labor had been redeemed — emancipated, from the dishonor, the disgrace and humiliation of a “commodity,” to be bought at private sale, or at auction, as commodities are disposed of, but according to the declarations of a latter day statesman, a man who puts himself forward as a student of political economy, who under all circumstances is to secure the workingman’s vote, labor occupies the same level as “any commodity selling in the market, as much a material as anything to be “worked up.” If this is true, if it has in it one element of truth, then labor has not moved a step in advance since the slaves of the Pharaohs built the pyramids. Labor is still a chattel, a “commodity,” a raw material to be “worked up.” It is an article of com-

merce. It belongs to the nations that produce it. It may be shipped and consigned, imported and exported, and that this is the idea of certain corporations is easily demonstrated. But it is not the American idea. It is not the conception of men who are capable of comprehending the logic of events, of facts, of reason, or of righteousness. To class men, who announce as a fact, that labor is a "commodity," as much so as guano, as hair and hides, is to do violence to common sense. It makes the term "commodity," everlastingly odious.

What is a commodity? It is something tangible, palpable and substantial. It can be handled — analyzed — resolved into component parts. It can be put into barrels or bales, or it can be shipped in bulk. Is labor the same; is it "as much a commodity as the materials to be worked up." Can the distinguished congressman, who degrades labor to a "commodity" analyze it? Can he analyze fire or light? If the distinguished Congressman whose remarks we discuss should call upon the head chemist and request him to analyze any commodity known to commerce, he would be listened to respectfully, and the task would be performed, but if he were to ask the chemist to analyze labor, he would be regarded as a person who ought to be in an insane asylum rather than in congress. If the chemist were disposed to test the hallucination which had taken possession of the Congressman, he might tell him to bring on his "labor commodity," and the Congressman would doubtless introduce one of the "great body of intelligent wage-workers" he has the "honor to represent." There stands the Congressman and beside him the "commodity," "as much a commodity selling in the market" as pig-iron or any other "material to be worked up." The chemist possibly tells the congressman that he "is a crank." If the Congressman insists upon having his labor commodity analyzed, it is not difficult to guess what would be the result. In the first place it is rational to conjecture that the "commodity" itself, or himself, or herself would object. It might result in a warm discussion. The "intelligent wage-worker" might say "to analyze labor you analyze me. Here I am, body, life, soul, spirit, skill, thought, ambition, aspiration, and imagination. Here I am, created a little lower than God Himself, the original worker, laborer and creator," and addressing the congressman, says, "do you rank me with a commodity?" "That is just what he does," says the chemist. "I am to extract the labor from you, cut you up into chunks, pound them and grind them, subject them to intense heat to find 'labor,' the 'commodity,' that is like any other commodity that sells in the market, that must go up or down, accord-

ing to ‘supply and demand.’ If the supply is small, then labor, wage-workers, will be fat, well fed, well clothed, happy and contented, the ‘commodity’ will be in demand, otherwise the ‘commodity’ will be idle, it will be clothed in rags, it will be hungry and starve and die, or it will commit crime and go to prison, or have its neck broken with a halter. I confess, I cannot get the labor out of the laborer — out of the ‘intelligent wage-worker,’ and the Congressman must dispose of his ‘commodity’ elsewhere. My apparatus is not constructed to analyze labor, it is a commodity unknown to modern chemistry or ancient alchemy.”

According to this modern statesman, this American servant of the people, this would be savant, this avant courier of the wage-workers’ millennium, labor is a commodity like any raw material known to commerce or to manufacturers, and its doom is irrevocably fixed. Labor means the laborer, and we are told that labor must take its chances with other commodities, and that in spite of organization wages will be high or low as supply and demand may determine. If this is true, God pity the laborer in the United States of America. There is no help for him, reduced to a “commodity,” degraded to a chattel. Wage-workers, with bowed heads may contemplate the inevitable. Their condition is worse, far worse than that of the beasts of the field.

Does the Congressman whose words we have quoted, represent the American idea? Do wage-workers say amen? The American idea is, that in organization and federation legislation can be had that will promote the interests of wage-workers. It is not the American idea that labor is a commodity. It is rapidly becoming the American idea that to give all employment the hours for labor shall be reduced. The wage-workers of the United States are the strength and glory of the nation, and when any one in Congress of the United States degrades labor to a “commodity,” classes it with raw materials, a blunder of the most vicious character is committed, and it behooves workingmen in casting their ballots, to guard against elevating men to positions of power and influence who regard labor as much of a commodity as any raw material, and who proclaim, that the organization of workingmen for their protection is in vain.

Edited by Tim Davenport

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