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EDITORIAL

THAT “THIN SIDE OF THE WEDGE.”

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IT is most significant that in all the howls that have gone up from the camps of Labor, so-called, and of Reform, so-called, at the recent court decision annulling the “**prevailing rate of wages**” clause, not once has the real, the pregnant, the striking lesson taught by the event been even remotely adverted to. The howls have confined themselves to the old, worn-out, beaten paths of “hollering” in the air.

Who has not heard the phrase, hurled at the Socialists, that the wise policy to pursue is, not to present the Labor Movement’s full demands, the “broad side of the wedge,” but to “get there” by degrees, by insinuating the “thin side of the wedge” first? What this “thin edge of the wedge” theory amounts and leads to,—that is the real lesson that he who is capable of learning should draw from the fate of the “prevailing rate of wages” clause.

The craving for higher wages is general; it is natural with the Working Class, as natural as that a fish tends to the water. This naturalness, and the deep significance thereof, are perceived and understood by the class-conscious workingman, by the Socialists; to both facts, however, the class-unconscious workingman is blind. Accordingly, the class-unconscious workingman, proceeding from his fallacious premises, looks puzzled at the steady rout that accompanies his every endeavor to satisfy the cravings of his class: Wages decline steadily; his earnings steadily shrink; despite his increased productivity, his share, both absolute and relative, grows less; all his “victories” to the contrary notwithstanding, the end of the song to him is that he finds himself standing at an ever lower rung on the ladder of social well-being.

In his puzzled and chagrined mood, the class-unconscious workingman becomes irritable. Despite himself, his class instincts assert themselves, driving him to occasional “unpleasant” utterances. At that moment he becomes the object of the kind solicitude of the “Reformer” and of the Labor Lieutenant of his fleecers, the

Capitalist Class. The former, because he is a freak, the latter, because he is a fraud, seeks to cool down the angry workingman with allurements that promise success. One of these is to favor a law that shall prescribe better conditions for Government employees. In this way originated the "prevailing rate of wages" clause for municipal employees. The class-conscious workingmen, the Socialists, opposed the proposition in that shape. They established the principle that any demand for better conditions on the part of Labor was essentially a revolutionary demand, and that, being such,—apart from the folly of expecting the enforcement of it by a capitalist government—, such demands could never prevail, they could not even lead a step forward, except upon lines that took in the whole Working Class. Accordingly, the position of the class-conscious workingmen, of the Socialists, was that demands for higher wages, lower hours, etc., should be made for the whole Working Class; public health, public safety, public policy demanding that the employment of workingmen anywhere by whomsoever, Government or private capitalist, below certain wages or above certain hours, be made a criminal offence. Thus planted, the demand would have been sound and dignified; above all, it would have tended to effect that solidification of the Working Class without which even temporary relief, let alone its emancipation, is impossible.

Fraud and Freak bristled up at the Socialist position. The one for one reason, the other for another, neither dared deny the correctness of the Socialist contention "in general"; but both in chorus condemned the Socialist tactics of putting forward the "broad side of {the} wedge"; the wise policy, they contended, was to start with the "thin side of the wedge"; to "get there" by degrees, to first get a law for municipal employees. The fallacious, tho' plausible, theory prevailed. The law was enacted for municipal employees. And what is the result? The Courts knocked out the law and clearly placed their decision upon the ground that "it was not claimed that the statute has any relation to public health or any of the other objects within the scope of the police power." Thus a principle, that could have held its own, was scuttled by its own advocates: to them principle was the "broad side" of the wedge, and had to be eschewed; they chose the "thin side," that is, a fraction, and thereby rendered the "broad side" ridiculous and marked it "Ichabod." As far as all the agitation for this law is concerned, it was wasted. The law is dead, and the workers back of it are not an inch forward.

Along with the cant-phrase anent the "thin side of the wedge," there is most commonly heard that other cant-phrase about its being "easier to catch flies with

molasses than with vinegar." The two are twins. Being essentially revolutionary, the Labor demands of the Working Class require MEN for their achievement, not FLIES, or trash. As a Labor Movement, carried on the shoulders of trash is despicable, and is regularly flattened out by the flails of Time, so likewise are broken with clock-work regularity the ill-set bones of whatever purports to be a Labor Movement, that conceals its program, that thereby caricatures its underlying principle, and that is doltish enough to imagine that a Revolution can be achieved piece-meal, thin side of the wedge forward.

Revolutions are born like children,—head foremost. Woe unto him who misappreciates this scientific fact; woe unto those who allow themselves to be duped by such!

This is what the fate of the "prevailing rate of wages" clause teaches—to those who have eyes to see and ears to hear.

Transcribed and edited by Robert Bills for the official Web site of the Socialist Labor Party of America.
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