The Laborer's Struggle

A Day for Reflection

"The labourer is worthy of his hire."
—Luke 10:7

THIS SCRIPTURE AND ITS accompanying text, "The labourer is worthy of his reward" (I Tim. 5:18), point to the manner in which all workers may expect to receive a wage for their daily labor. This is one of the basic rules that pertain to those who toil in the workplace to earn a living, as well as with those who set out to employ them.

Laws were explicit regarding a day of rest that was to be set aside for all who labored for their daily bread. "Six days shalt thou labour, and do all thy work: But the seventh day is the sabbath of the LORD thy God: in it thou shalt not do any work, thou, nor thy son, nor thy daughter, thy manservant, nor thy maidservant, nor thy cattle, nor thy stranger that is within thy gates." (Exod. 20:9,10) Significance was thus stressed regarding the Sabbath, and God's relationship with it in the affairs of his human family.

IN THE SWEAT OF THY FACE

Since the dawning of human history over six thousand years ago, man has struggled against the reality associated with the death sentence. The harsh realization was soon manifest, "In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground; for out of it wast thou taken: for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return."—Gen. 3:19

Our first parents, Adam and Eve, were disobedient to God and his laws which had been written in the very heart of man, as we read, "They like men [Adam, *Marginal Translation*] have transgressed the covenant: there have they dealt treacherously against me." (Hos. 6:7) The relationship between man and his Creator became severed. The association between those who sought employment and those who employed them also became tested.

SLAVERY

One of the major evidences by which mankind could be reduced to the level of becoming someone else's property was carried out in the form of human slavery. Whether voluntary or involuntary, servitude either to an individual or to the state has long been widely practiced. Some of the major factors that reduced a person to a state of slavery and servitude often included war (Joel 3:6), poverty (II Kings 4:1), or crime (Exod. 22:3). Under Jewish Law, the period of bondage, either for a specified time, or in perpetuity, depended upon whether the person was a Jew or a Gentile. (Lev. 25:44-46) When household servants gave birth, their children began life as slaves. They were usually included as slaves along with those who had been bought with money. (Gen.

17:23) Slaves could also be purchased, as in the case of Joseph who was sold to professional slave traders by his brothers.—Gen. 37:28

LAWS PERTAINING TO SLAVES

There were laws, however, that protected slaves from mistreatment by their masters. (Exod. 21:20,21, 26,27) Certain privileges were granted by equitable masters to slaves under the terms of the Law. "The LORD said unto Moses and Aaron, This is the ordinance of the passover: There shall no stranger eat thereof: But every man's servant that is bought for money, when thou hast circumcised him, then shall he eat thereof." (Exod. 12:43,44) Slaves were exempt from working on the Sabbath Day (Exod. 20:10), and were privileged to eat from the spilled kernels and unpruned vines. (Lev. 25:5,6) Slaves were also permitted to share in the celebration of the Jewish festivals. (Deut. 16:11-14) Those who lived outside of these laws were often subject to violence on all levels, and suffered bondage unjustly at the hands of their taskmasters.

FEUDALSIM

During the Middle Ages, a pyramidal system existed regarding the right of land ownership, with the Crown occupying the top position of the pyramid together with all the rights and privileges attached to it. Landlords were next in line who, in turn, leased out their holdings to peasants who lived on the land to provide a living for their families, and to grow crops or provide other services as payment of rent to the landlords. In some instances, this land was also subdivided by the tenants to other peasants for their occupancy. In any case, the peasant

laborers were positioned at the very bottom layer of the pyramid with little or no privileges and with little hope of ever owning the land.

During this period before the Industrial Revolution, a peasant had to be skilled in many trades. They had to know something about a lot of things to stay above the system and to provide even a subsistence level of living for those who were dependent upon them. The services they were required to provide aside from the payment of rent, which might be in the way of crops or money, could also include a form of religious duty to be offered for the community, or for military service. These peasant workers made up the majority of the agricultural labor force during the period before the Industrial Revolution.

THE GUILD SYSTEM

During the Middle Ages, workers began to unite under a new system of rules that were called 'craft guilds.' By the 11th Century in Europe, associations of merchants began to form for the protection of commerce against the feudal governments that were in power at that time. Those who became members of the guilds were usually divided into categories called masters, apprentices, and journeymen. The masters were the owners of the shops and instructors of the apprentices. The apprentices were thus bound to the masters, and were accepted for a stipulated sum payable to the masters for their training. They received a subsistence wage for several years depending on the type of craft. The journeymen were men who had successfully completed their period of training.

The merchant guilds became very influential and powerful factors in the development of commerce as trade, between peoples from all over Europe, and especially in the area of the Mediterranean and Baltic Sea, was increasing. In England and Germany, merchant guilds exercised enormous power in the growing cities and towns. Some Italian merchant guilds became dominant in their local governments. Commerce was becoming less of a local affair and the guilds in some cases developed into intercity leagues to promote and protect the interests of their trade. Guilds were formed including those that were established for shoemakers, blacksmiths, butchers, weavers and various others.

THE HANSEATIC LEAGUE

One of the most notable of these guilds during this period was the Hanseatic League of Northern Europe. It was begun by German and Scandinavian seafaring merchants in various cities, seeking to extend and protect their trade. At that time, there was no international body to regulate tariffs and trade, and few ports with regulatory authorities to manage their use. The merchants bonded together to establish tariff agreements that provided a common defense, and to insure the safety of the various ports. It extended its influence and eventually covered the entire North Sea area and the Baltic Sea regions; and also stretched hundreds of miles inland along major rivers, such as the Rhine and Volga Rivers.

The Hanseatic League dominated trade in northern Europe for over 300 years. With the rise of nationalism in the West, trade regulations became increasingly subject to royal and national law. During the

15th and 16th Centuries, the guilds in some instances were reduced to a level of subservience. With the appearance of the capitalists and the entrepreneurs, who adapted themselves to the demands of a new age of exploration and expansion, the guild system came to an end.

The feudal landlords sold their surpluses to the merchants who were associated with the Hanseatic League. The landlords forbade the peasant workers to trade directly with the merchants that would have greatly benefited both the peasants and the merchants. The common laborer had little opportunity to better himself or his position.

THE COTTAGE INDUSTRY

The Cottage Industry, or the Domestic System, flourished in many parts of Europe before the Industrial Revolution. During this time, the manufacture of goods was done in the home. Most of the workers belonged to the class of farm laborers known as cotters, and carried out the work in their cottages.

Merchants would purchase raw materials, such as wool from sheep owners, have it spun into yarn by farmer's wives, and then take it to country weavers to be made into textiles. Country weavers could manufacture cloth more cheaply than city craftsmen because they had part of their living from their gardens or small farms. Merchants would then collect the cloth and give it out again to finishers and dyers. The merchants thus controlled the manufacture of cloth from start to finish. Similar methods of organizing and controlling the manufacturing process were also found in other industries, such as in the production of nails, cutlery, leather goods and many others.

The Cottage Industry had certain advantages. It gave merchants a supply of manufactured goods at a low price, and enabled him to order the particular kinds of items that he needed for his markets. It also provided employment for every member of a craft worker's family, and gave jobs to skilled workers who would otherwise not be able to establish a business for themselves.

THE FACTORY SYSTEM

With the invention of a variety of new machinery, and the availability of new resources in the textile industry in England during the mid 1700's, the Cottage Industry came to an end. The displaced labor force thus moved into central locations where the manufacturing of goods took place. This movement involved a mass migration from the previous rural-based economy to one in which employment was available in the overcrowded and squalid cities.

The factory system revolutionized the productive capacity, especially in the textile industry, because of a very large and cheap labor force. The emphasis was on mass production, and men were no longer treated as men but as a commodity by which they could be bought and sold on the open market. In all walks of life, whether peasant, noble, artisan or captain of industry, everyone was affected by the revolution in industry. It totally changed society throughout the industrialized world.

EXPLOITATION OF CHILDREN

During this time, the children of the families who had moved to the crowded cities had their work situation changed abruptly. At home in the rural areas, children would have become accustomed to

long hours of hard work on their family farms, but in the cities these same children were forced to work longer and harder in the factories. They were overworked, underpaid, received harsh treatment, and experienced a greater likelihood of increased sickness and injury.

To survive in even the lowest level of poverty, families had to have every able member of the family go to work. This led to the high rise in child labor in the factories. Children as young as six years old were required to work 12-14 hours with only minimal breaks. They were expected to operate large, heavy, and very dangerous machinery with little or no consideration for their safety. Many accidents occurred, seriously injuring or killing very young children.

THE FACTORY ACT

The first step to improve these appalling conditions took place in 1833, when Parliament passed the Factory Act which limited the amount of hours children of certain ages would be allowed to work. Specifically, the Act provided that children 9-13 years of age were only to work 8 hours a day. Those who were 14-18 could not work more than 12 hours a day, and children under 9 years were not allowed to work at all. It was also decided that children were to attend school no less than two hours per day. An important part of the Factory Act provided for the government to appoint officials to insure the act was carried out and complied with.

INDUSTRIALIZATION OF AMERICA

The reconstruction years following the Civil War, and until the beginning of World War I, was

known as the Gilded Age in America. It was marked by seemingly boundless economic expansion and the emergence of a new and powerful nation that propelled industry and trade. America had always been seen as a continent of opportunity for the capitalist, as well as for the poor immigrant. The rapid transformation from an agricultural and mercantile economy to industrialization presented unprecedented opportunities for speculators and entrepreneurs.

WORKERS UNITE

The working people of America, however, have had to unite in bitter struggle to achieve whatever gains they have made. Organized labor has played a central role in the elevation of the American standard of living, and the dignity of the working class. The benefits which unions have negotiated for their members are widespread and are also enjoyed by millions who were not part of the labor movement.

Labor won the right to representation using the collective bargaining process in their struggle against bias, discrimination, and the power of the capitalists who would have reduced the skilled labor force to beggary. They had the government and even the army at hand to put down the demands and strikes of the working class. Much blood has been shed in the American labor force's struggle. We now take for granted such hard-won benefits as the eight-hour working day, vacations with pay, holidays, pensions, health and welfare protection, grievance and arbitration procedures. It was organized labor that fought for equal opportunities for women, equal rights for blacks, and other minorities. They also won the right for public education for every child.

LABOR DAY

The origin of the Labor Day celebration in America can be traced back to the Knights of Labor. They organized a parade in honor of the labor movement's struggle for rights which took place in Providence, Rhode Island, on August 23, 1882, with over a thousand workers taking part. Then again in New York City on September 5, 1882, a larger parade was assembled in which there were over 10,000 workers who joined in the parade. The street parade exhibited to the general public the strength and 'esprit de corps' of the trade and labor organizations. This was then followed by a festival for the recreation of the workers and their families. Speeches by prominent men and women emphasized the economic and civic significance of the holiday.

One of the key figures in the early labor movement in America was Peter McGuire, general secretary of the Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners. He was a cofounder of the American Federation of Labor, and was one of the principal speakers at both the Providence and New York celebrations. McGuire was also active in the New York City Central Labor Union. In 1887, President Grover Cleveland, a supporter of the Knights of Labor, used the power of his office to proclaim the official date for the Labor Day celebration to be the first Monday in September. The vital force of the labor movement has added tremendously to the highest standard of living and the greatest industrial production that the world has ever known. It has served to bring us all closer to the realization of our inherent dignity. It is thus that Americans pay tribute and respect during this Labor Day weekend to the country's labor force.

THE FUTURE RECONSTRUCTION WORK

The working class has achieved much in the way of better working conditions and benefits. However, in connection with the meaning of our featured text, 'The labourer is worthy of his hire,' Luke's words cannot be compared to the grand work that will take place under the administration of Christ's kingdom here on earth. At that time, mankind will be set free from the bondage of sin and death, and will together share in the greatest reconstruction work the world will ever know. During that time, justice, equity, and the inherent rights of man will be administered on behalf of the whole human family. Mankind will willingly share their labor to help clean up their despoiled surroundings, for "The earth is also polluted by its inhabitants, for they transgressed laws, violated statutes, broke the everlasting covenant."—Isa. 24:5, *New American Standard Bible*

During his ministry among the Lord's people, the Apostle Paul put into perspective the fact that man is responsible for working for his own livelihood. He said, "Yourselves know how ye ought to follow us: for we behaved not ourselves disorderly among you; Neither did we eat any man's bread for nought; but wrought with labour and travail night and day, that we might not be chargeable to any of you." (II Thess. 3:7,8) In today's society, there are some who believe that the world owes them a living, and they may take advantage of others. This attitude will not be tolerated during Christ's kingdom.

WONDERFUL PROMISES

The psalmist wrote concerning the promises of God, "Blessed is every one that feareth the LORD;

that walketh in his ways. For thou shalt eat the labour of thine hands: happy shalt thou be, and it shall be well with thee." (Ps. 128:1,2) The Prophet Ezekiel describes the restored earth as being like the Garden of Eden. "The desolate land shall be tilled, whereas it lay desolate in the sight of all that passed by. And they shall say, This land that was desolate is become like the garden of Eden; and the waste and desolate and ruined cities are become fenced, and are inhabited."—Ezek. 36:34,35

The glorified church, together with the earthly representatives of Christ's kingdom, will provide the tranquil and peaceful scene described by the Prophet Micah when he wrote, "They shall sit every man under his vine and under his fig tree; and none shall make them afraid: for the mouth of the LORD of hosts hath spoken it." (Mic. 4:4) The church, as the Mediator of a new and better covenant, will bless all the families of the earth.

"THEY SHALL NOT LABOR IN VAIN"

The cleaning up, beautifying, and rebuilding work is wonderfully portrayed by Isaiah. "They shall build houses, and inhabit them; and they shall plant vineyards, and eat the fruit of them. They shall not build, and another inhabit; they shall not plant, and another eat, . . . They shall not labour in vain, nor bring forth for trouble; for they are the seed of the blessed of the LORD." (Isa. 65:21-23) Man, together with his neighbor, will work towards a common purpose and goal. They will also share in their desire to learn Truth and righteousness under the administration of the kingdom. They shall no longer 'plant, and another eat,' neither shall they anymore 'labour in vain.' ■