
Anti-Poverty

by Eugene V. Debs

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An English university man, a citizen of London, Dr. Stanton Colt, recently delivered a lecture before the Ethical Society of St. Louis, the subject being "Life Among the Poor and Lowly." It appears that there is an organization known as the "University Settlement," a little colony of university men who are studying the conditions of the labor problem and of the poor. In the course of his lecture, Dr. Colt said:

The problem of poverty today is as critical an issue as the problem of slavery before the war. There is a special obligation on all people of wealth and leisure to attempt to solve it. It never can be solved by the hard, overworked laboring classes alone. They haven't the time or the means of acquiring a knowledge of the problem in all its bearings. It must be studied out just as Wendell Phillips, William Lloyd Garrison, and hundreds of others studied the anti-slavery question. But it is no easy matter for men of education and wealth to get into actual touch of the needs and aspirations of the working people. The working people have suspicions against any one of the capitalistic class. The recognized working leaders have a monopoly of the working movement, and they mean to keep it. It would only require a few years of earnest and intelligent devotion on the part of any educated man of wealth in order to secure for himself general confidence.

We surmise that Dr. Colt is a wealthy university Englishman, who has concluded to do missionary work among the poor of America, finding nothing to do in that line at home, for instance, in London. It will be observed that Dr. Colt is of the opinion that the labor problem will never be solved by the laboring classes of America, and that if solved at all it must be done by "educated men of wealth."

Well, England has thousands of university men of wealth, they have dominated labor affairs for centuries, and it would be interesting

to have Dr. Colt tell us in what particular educated men of wealth have solved any labor problem in England, or anywhere else in the world.

Dr. Colt places the labor problem and the African slavery problem on a par. In this he exhibits himself anything else but a student of the subject he discusses. In England there has been some advance made in ameliorating the conditions of labor, but not by educated men of wealth, not by university men, but by workingmen themselves in defiance of educated men of wealth. University learning and labor were never in alliance in England or in America. And what is unspeakably shameful in history is, that as soon as some workingman, by hook or by crook, becomes a man of wealth, he becomes, as a general proposition, a contemptible snob. As a result, whatever is done, or is hoped to be done in the way of solving labor problems, must be done by labor, and in America the outlook is far from being hopeless.

It is a great mistake to suppose that the labor problem and the old negro slave problem have anything in common, they are not parallel problems. In the United States neither white men nor black men are chattels, they are not bought and sold at auction. And while there are educated men of wealth, university men, who seek to degrade workingmen, workingmen, thank God, may, if they will, teach the "capitalistic class" that while any friendly act on their part will be acceptable, they will not be permitted forever to block the way labor maps out to solve problems in its own interests.

It is well said by Dr. Colt that "the working people have suspicions against any one of the capitalistic class." Why such suspicions? It is easy of explanation. The reason is found in the ceaseless hostility of the capitalistic class toward the working class. It is shown when an effort is made to advance wages. It is shown when the proposition is to reduce the hours of work, the two important questions which relate to the solution of the labor problem. Advance wages to a scale of honorable living, and reduce the hours of toil, until mind and body may have time for rest, and the labor problem will be practically solved.

Dr. Colt says:

The special means which should be taken up and instilled among the working people by men of leisure are (1) sanitary and domestic questions; (2) sick benefit societies based upon sound Insurance principles; (3) cooperative stores for the distribution of all the commodities of life, so that the profits of the petty retail

dealer may accrue to the consumers themselves; (4) trades unions which should be organized universally among unskilled labor, and among women who work for wages, In order to keep wages up to the proper standard, secure shorter hours of work, etc.; (5) the organization of the leisure hours of workingmen for innocent and refining recreation, and for intellectual improvement. These measures afford a definite and conservative policy for men and women of leisure to carry out. They attack the evils of poverty from five different points of view and each one affords a specific remedy for specific evils. They afford more than a mere palliation for the present conditions of poverty, pauperism, crime, Intemperance and kindred evils.

The foregoing is well enough in its way, but the propositions are not new. Workingmen long since formulated and began acting upon them, and in numerous instances have carried them into practical operation.

Dr. Colt's mission should be to a class of capitalistic employers whose policy is to rob labor and thereby degrade labor; facts which labor fully comprehends, and the purpose of labor is to change the program. When labor obtains fair wages, all "sanitary and domestic questions" will be settled without the aid of university men. Sick benefits were long since provided for by organizations of labor. "Co-operative stores" have not been overlooked by workingmen, and as for "trades unions," the country is full of them. It may be that Dr. Colt has a mission, but we are persuaded if such is the case, it is not to workingmen in America; and we are convinced, if he is the philanthropist he professes to be, that he could find employment for his talents in London in rescuing thousands from starvation, filth, and degradation.

Edited by Tim Davenport

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