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EDITORIAL

IS THERE ANY EXCEPTIONAL SIGNIFICANCE IN THE STEEL STRIKE?

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IT is natural to be struck by tragic incidents, and moralize upon them. The incidents, so common, of workingmen committing suicide for want of work; of mothers disposing of themselves and their little ones for want of bread; of heart-rending scenes, where robust fathers tear themselves from their homes and enlist in the army as their only resource {recourse?}—these and many more instances of wide-spread and deep-reaching want, contrasted with simultaneous manifestations of wanton luxury in the ruling class, are naturally picked up as symptoms, forerunners of an impending social crash. They surely are that. Nevertheless there are things happening of much less lurid color, that, closely considered, point to the existence of a social under-tow infinitely more significant than any other of the many tragic events that quickly catch the eye. Such an event is the present Steel Strike.

What is up? A resistance to threatened wage reductions? No. A demand to enforce higher wages? Again, no. A revolt against some capitalist outrage? Yet, again, no. The struggle is to “unionize” mills not controlled by the Amalgamated Association. Here, accordingly, we have a total absence of the three motives that generally account for the voluntary suffering of a strike inflicted by workingmen upon themselves. Any one of those three motives have repeatedly given the labor fakir leader a welcome pretext for calling out the men. The grievances of labor against the employer, permanently in existence under the capitalist system, have rarely, if ever, been sufficient to furnish the fakir with his opportunity. He always had to abide his chance: either wait for a cut-down, or some shocking outrage, to set up a demand for higher wages; only then had he a chance. The lure of an increase of earnings, in nine cases out of ten, would act as a center around which all other grievances would crystallize; and the fakir would then make his haul. How, then, comes it that Shaffer has succeeded in pulling out so respectable a number of men, without these hitherto essentials? This is the point.

The theory, quite plausible, and not at all unlikely, of Mark Hanna being Shaffer’s

backer does not answer this particular question. However powerful a capitalist's influence may be over his labor lieutenant, it is not powerful enough to percolate through that gentleman, down to the rank and file in quantity sufficiently "convincing" to cause large numbers to throw up their work, without the mirage of higher wages to blind them. That this is what has happened renders this strike truly significant. The answer is that the discontent has sunk so deep and spread so wide, that that recklessness, which marks despair long smothered, has not only cast roots in the land but is bearing fruit.

The steel strikers reckon not what there is in it for them. These men have not been trained in the thoughtful school of New Trade Unionism, known in this country as the Socialist Trade and Labor Alliance. The idea of suffering privations, without the prospect of immediate returns, is not an idea that pure and simple Unionism inculcates: near-sighted as it is, it can inculcate only near-sighted ideas. These men have been misdirected and their judgments so warped that a Socialist Labor Party address, urging them to vote the S.L.P. ticket, even if it could not yet win, and thereby start the ball that would place them in possession of the government, where they could strike off the shackles of their slavery and become co-partners in all the mills {of} the country and co-enjoyers of all the wealth produced would have evoked their derision. "The good to be had is too far off that way," they would have said, and they would have turned in search of some elusive and illusionary little thing NOW. That they should now respond to a call to throw themselves out of work, for the purpose, not of securing an immediate advance, but of "unionizing" other shops, and in that round-about way strike again at some future time for the ultimate purpose of raising their wages was too involved a process of reasoning for them. When the mind becomes capable of such synthesis, it is not likely to stop midway; it would have speedily moved on, thrown the slimy Parson Shaffer overboard, together with his retinue of the Organized Scabbery, and manfully joined the ranks of the S.T. & L.A. and the S.L.P. They were not yet ripe for that. Their present action betrays smoldering desperation merely.

When desperation has bred recklessness among the masses, the spark may at any time leap from the embers and start a social conflagration.