

# LABOR UNIONS AND CLASS CONSCIOUSNESS

EDITORIAL BY THEODORE ROOSEVELT

MR. P. H. MORRISSEY, formerly head of the Brotherhood of Railroad Trainmen, one of the great labor unions of the country, and now President of the American Railroad Employees and Investors' Association, recently made an address to the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers which sets forth such good doctrine that I wish it were possible to quote it in full. The speech is, in the first place, an emphatic plea for unionism, an insistence upon the benefits that labor unions confer upon the wage-workers, and a further insistence upon the fact that the whole community is thereby benefited, because the community cannot afford not to have the condition of the wage-worker at the highest possible level. I cordially agree with Mr. Morrissey's views in this matter. As he says, the efforts of an individual employee of a great corporation, unassisted, to adjust his wages and working conditions to suit the requirements of our time would be about as effective as the attempt to sweep back the torrents of Niagara with a whisk-broom, and therefore society should encourage the wage-workers to follow their natural bent—the natural bent of mankind—and to associate for their

mutual advantage and common protection.

So far Mr. Morrissey has merely said what all labor union leaders ought to say, and have, as a rule, rightly said. But he continues, after a fashion not too common among labor leaders, by recognizing the duties of the unions to the community just as frankly as he has insisted upon the recognition by the community of the rights of the unions. His text here is that the labor organization that does not deal justly with all, and keep within the law of the land, will sooner or later die of its own folly. The stock accusations against the unions by their leading opponents are, in the first place, that they inevitably tend to lawlessness; and, in the next place, that they tend to stereotype workers into a caste, all of whom are assured equal pay without any regard to their proficiency, and who therefore tend to lose the ambition to show individual efficiency or organized efficiency. Mr. Morrissey speaks on both these points as clearly as any man could wish. He says: "Labor should put itself on record in no uncertain way as being against all forms of lawlessness. A criminal act committed by a misguided or overzealous individual supposedly in the interest of labor is as reprehensible as a similar act would be if committed by an avowed opponent of labor. Labor cannot claim greater liberty under the law than any other group of our citizenship, nor can it be expected to accept less." He continues: "We might consider with propriety whether we are encouraging the members of these organizations to do the best that is within them in the service they give to their employers, and indirectly to the public. There will always be plenty to do in relieving the overburdened, but every intelligent and honest railroad employee should have an ambition to render loyal and efficient service and make good in the task assigned to him."

This doctrine should never be forgotten. No man is fit to live in a democratic community who does not make it a matter of personal pride to do his particular job in the best possible fashion, whether his job be that of a brakeman, a banker, a farmer, a blacksmith, an artist, a scientist, or a writer. In closing his speech, Mr. Morrissey emphatically places himself on

record as against the baleful principle of substituting class for individual selfishness, saying:

I believe it will be accepted as a principle of democracy that the interests of the whole people are greater than those of any class, even its largest class, and that the interests of any class shall predominate only when shown to be identical with the welfare of the mass. Organized labor cannot advance the interests of the worker by holding itself aloof from the other groups which go to make up society. It should be able and prepared to state its principles and defend them anywhere. It cannot, in my judgment, ultimately succeed by preaching the doctrine of hatred, or encouraging labor to withhold its recognition of these great public questions, because, perchance, labor would be associated with some of its enemies, past or present.

I am sure that all the earnest men and women who are sincerely striving to do their duty, individually and collectively, ever better and better, and who recognize that their duty is to help others no less than to insist on their own rights, will welcome the doctrine set forth in Mr. Morrissey's speech; and it is peculiarly a speech that it is a good thing to have made by a prominent labor man. I am so earnest a believer in the labor movement, I so desire it to succeed, that I always feel saddened when it comes short in any way; and especially when it permits opposition to the wolfish greed of that portion of capitalistic society which is conscienceless, to take the form of an equally wolfish and conscienceless greed which, in its turn, demands to be satisfied at the expense of other classes of our citizens.

In a recent admirable article, in the official organ of the California Progressive Republicans, entitled "Who Is Going to Do It?" the writer sets forth the main problem of our time as the effort so to reorganize things that everybody will begin life with a fair opportunity to win happiness and to gain his share of the good that the world provides, so that poverty and unemployment, disease and crime, may be enormously reduced, and so that there may be a real and substantial increase in the comfort and happiness of the average man—not merely the man at the top, but the man in the middle and the man a long way down the line. The article is no mere idealist dream: it is

written by a practical man of affairs (and incidentally I call the attention of some self-styled apostles of the practical to the fact that the California Progressives, the men like Mr. U'Ren, of Oregon, and the Wisconsin Progressives have proved themselves to be eminently practical). There is no anticipation of any immediate realization of a Utopia, but a full understanding that what is needed is a gigantic and complicated scheme of development involving innumerable changes and reforms, and therefore innumerable experiments and mistakes; calling for object-lessons without number, for many sacrifices, for much dull drudgery, and, above all, for work which will not do itself but must be done by somebody who will not be daunted by the drudgery, the difficulty, the cries of the injured, the ravings of cranks, and the warnings of the timid souls who think themselves wise.

The article then goes on to ask where we shall find our leaders, where we shall find the men who will do this work and bring about this change. The writer tells why he does not believe that we can expect the lead to be taken either by the very rich as a class or by the very poor as a class, why he distrusts the Socialists as a party, why he is disheartened that more help does not come from the churches; and then he gives the reasons for his disappointment at the part that organized labor has taken, and is taking, in the movement. He laments the fact that where the union has appeared in politics it has too often been for the gain of its class and not for the general good, because too often it has adopted the baneful suggestion of the Marx Socialists, the doctrine of class consciousness, which means in effect class selfishness. The writer continues:

Bad as selfishness is in the individual, it is infinitely worse when set up as the battle-cry of some one portion of the community shut in by an industrial boundary. It is a crime, and worse than a crime, a blunder; for if the people as a whole come to understand that organized labor's only interest in politics is to win special privilege for itself, they will "lay for it" with a club, and its last state will be worse than its first. By uniting with saloons and the tough element—as in San Francisco—it may have its brief hour of local triumph, but in the long run it will be heavily the loser. However, that is aside from the question, Will it help? To which the answer is: Not while it maintains class selfishness.

Asking who is to do the work, he says in answer: Why, the rest of us; those who do not permit riches to stifle them, nor poverty to deprive them of energy and intelligence, those who work with hands or brain, or both, and yet do not profess a class consciousness on that account; those who are dead in earnest in desiring things better, and yet are not hopelessly tied up to any particular theory; those who are prepared to do to-day's work to-day, whether it be easy or not, or romantic or not, or our own choice or not; those who do not claim to know it all, but are prepared to experiment, and to make some mistakes, and to keep right on in the face of discouragement.

This is fine doctrine, and it is doctrine which should not merely command our assent in the abstract but our active endeavor to make it take practical shape in work. Mr. Morrissey's speech represents just such practical endeavor for good; and I speak of my own knowledge, and because of my associations, when I was President, with Mr. Morrissey when he was at the head of the Brotherhood of Railroad Trainmen, when I say that he then tried to apply in practice what he now so fervently preaches.