

THE MINIMUM WAGE *

MR. WILSON has distinctly stated in his speech of acceptance that he does not regard the Democratic platform as a programme. We Progressives are more fortunate. For we regard our platform as a very practical programme, and we intend to put it into effect if the people give us the power.

Mr. Wilson, while expressing general approval of the Progressive platform, has made specific mention only of those parts which he condemns. Among the things which he condemns is our minimum-wage plank.

As reported, he states that he opposes this plank because he thinks that employers, if such a law were enacted, would reduce the wages of all their employees to the minimum prescribed by law. Such a fear is so groundless that I do not believe it would be expressed by any man who has studied the conditions of life and work at first-hand among the workers. The objection is purely academic; it is formed in the schoolroom; it will not have any weight with men who know what life actually is. Those employers who now pay their lowest-paid employees a starvation wage prove by that very fact that they are paying to all their employees the very least that they can get them to take. They have already brought them down as far as possible; if it were possible for them to reduce the wages of their higher-paid employees, they would do so. It is a wholly needless apprehension that they have let any wages stay up

* *The Outlook*, September 28, 1912. This editorial repeats in substance Mr. Roosevelt's speech at Spokane, Wash., on September 9.

by an oversight and would reduce them to a minimum only in case the minimum for the poorest paid were raised by law above the starvation point.

The minimum-wage plank is peculiarly in harmony with the general spirit of the Progressive platform. The portions of that platform dealing with social and industrial justice are meant especially to help the men and women who are wage-workers in industrial pursuits. The promises of the platform are specific and reasonable. They are promises which can be kept, and which will be kept if power is given to the Progressives. We stand, in the nation and in the several States, for the abolition of child labor; for the reduction of hours of labor for women in industry to eight a day; for workmen's compensation laws; for laws guarding the health of workers in factories, and protecting them against accidents to life and limb; for laws securing proper conditions of life to wage-workers; for laws providing that in continuous industry there shall be one day's rest in seven, and three eight-hour shifts a day; and for a law establishing a minimum wage for women workers. No proposals such as these are to be found in the platforms of either of the old parties; and no such platform, we believe, would be or could be enacted into law by either of the old parties.

The Progressive proposal regarding a minimum wage is not an ultraradical one. It is both modest and conservative. We do not at the moment take up the question of a minimum wage generally; we know that in all matters like this it is necessary to proceed slowly so that we may test each experiment, and then, if the test is successful, proceed further along the same line. The men and women who framed this plank and who advocate it have studied the conditions of life and labor

among girls and women in industry and know the dreadful suffering and misery, know the crime and vice, that are produced by a wage that is insufficient to enable the girl or woman to keep body and soul together in surroundings of ordinary decency. Any man who goes to the night session of such a court as the Jefferson Market Women's Night Court in New York City, and who follows up some of the cases brought before that court, will soon learn for himself just what misery and immorality are produced among women when they receive less than a living wage. We are faced with the actual fact of doing away with heart-breaking misery which now exists in the concrete, and we are not to be frightened from our purpose by suggestions of a purely academic kind, however well meant they may be, as to highly improbable possibilities. We intend to put a stop to the misery which now actually exists, and we believe that the minimum-wage plank is a humane, practical, and effective method of attacking that misery.

We shall sedulously safeguard the rights of property and protect it from all injustice. But we hold with Lincoln that labor deserves higher consideration than capital. Therefore we hold that labor has a right to the means of life—that there must be a living wage. I doubt whether the protection of the workers from the evils of overwork, unemployment, sweat-shop wages, and child labor will really enhance the cost of production; but, in any event, I would rather see the cost of production enhanced than see it kept low by underpaid labor, physically and morally unhealthy and socially unstable. For, as the great scientist Huxley has pointed out, a society based on such labor, whatever temporary success it obtains, must in the end fall, through hideous misery and degradation, to utter ruin.

I believe that Mr. Wilson, whose sincerity of conviction in this matter I do not for a moment question, and the other worthy and respectable men who in the name of conservatism oppose the minimum-wage plank, are misled by the fact that they get their information from study of the laws laid down by political economists who wrote when all social and industrial conditions were utterly different from what they have now become. Under present industrial conditions, to leave wages in all cases to free competition must sometimes mean that under the pressure of the competition the freedom left to the laborer is only the freedom to starve outright or else to starve slowly by accepting a wage insufficient to sustain life as it should be sustained. We in this democracy must shackle force and cunning and fraud alike, and we must not permit the weak to remain at the mercy of the strong who are also brutal.

The men and women who are broken by the hard strain of modern industry, and are driven lower and ever lower until they accept wages which will not allow them to be decently fed and clothed or comfortably housed, cannot render to the community the services which should be demanded of all American citizens. Idleness is a curse and hard, reasonable work a blessing. But wearing overwork, long continued, destroys the body and the soul, and underpayment will achieve the same end and more rapidly.

It is bad enough to exploit men, but it is inhuman to exploit women in such fashion as to force them to sell their labor power at a wage which reduces them to a condition incompatible with the public welfare. I am not at the present time going beyond what the platform of the Progressive party has announced; whether ultimately we shall or shall not do so is for the future

to decide. But most emphatically I am standing for the announcements in that platform, and in my judgment one of the best things in it is the declaration for a minimum wage for women workers.