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EDITORIAL

'TIS FALSE (AND SAD); 'TIS TRUE (AND SADDER).

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THE discussion that is going on in the public press on both sides of the Atlantic, on the subject of the rising domination of the markets by America, has brought out, in the columns of the American capitalist press, a collection of self-satisfied slogans. One of these is particularly curious by reason of its complexity. It is this.

“The invention and use of our labor saving machinery have been possible only because of the superior efficiency of our workmen.”

This is a complex statement. 'Tis false, and sad it is 'tis false; 'tis true, and sadder yet it is 'tis true.

Despite here and there a seeming exception, improved machinery notoriously eliminates skill. The degree of efficiency increases as one moves backward toward the ever more backward, and it decreases as one moves forward toward the ever more perfect tool. The efficiency requisite for a weaver to run a Northrop loom, for an engineer (?) to run an electric motor engine, for a shoemaker to run a Goodyear machine, for a book-binder to run any of the ingenious machines now being introduced, and that are playing havoc with their trade, etc., etc., is of an infinitely lower grade than the efficiency that their predecessors had to be equipped with in order to ply their several trades. The “superior efficiency,” on the part of his workers, that the American capitalist has in mind, is the “superior dumbness” of his workers, which makes it possible for him to utilize invention and labor-saving machinery in such a way as to undersell his European competitors. It is in this sense that his workmen are “superiorly efficient.” Hence the claim of their “superior efficiency” as artisans is false, and sad it is 'tis false.

On the other hand, it is equally notorious that the American workingman is

quick to detect improved methods of work. His mind is quick at descrying inventions. But equally notorious is the fact that the American workingman who profits by this superior efficiency is a rare bird. The employer, the very gentleman who brags of the “superior efficiency” of his workers, is the one to strip his workers of the fruits of their efficiency. As fast as his worker’s efficiency invents an improvement, the employer appropriates it. The worker’s poverty bars him from redress. The process has gone so far that, as recorded in these columns, there are companies, in whose contracts with their employees, the latter, “in consideration of employment,” surrender in advance all inventions they may make. And the Federal Courts have enforced such contracts, even to the extent of awarding to such an employer the invention of one, who, de facto, had ceased to be an employee, he not having received any wages during the time he was perfecting his invention, but having conceived the idea during his employment. It is, accordingly, unquestionable that the American workmen are gifted with “superior efficiency.” Hence, the claim, in this sense, is true, and, hence, sadder yet it is 'tis true.

The praise, bestowed by the American capitalist upon “his workmen” on the score of their “superior efficiency,” partakes essentially of the nature of the cooling breeze with which the vampire, by gently flapping his wings, seeks to quiet by pleasing the animal whose blood he is sucking.

Transcribed and edited by Robert Bills for the official Web site of the Socialist Labor Party of America.
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