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EDITORIAL

VAN CLEAVE ON THE BROCKEN.

By DANIEL DE LEON

THE labor unions of the country have been caught at their wickedness again. Listen: “Labor unions have virtually killed the apprenticeship system in many of our great industries, and entirely killed it in others”!

Did this statement proceed elsewhere than from the accurate and totally disinterested pen of Mr. James W. Van Cleave, President of the National Manufacturers’ Association and officer of the Civic Federation, we might be inclined to doubt it. From these sources it is irreproachable. Let us see.

In the boot and shoe industry there occurred between 1890 and 1900 an increase of 18.3 per cent. in the value of products. This increase is shown by the census figures to be the result of a 22.2 per cent. increase in the value of machinery used. True, an increase of 6.9 per cent. in {the} number of wage earners is also shown, but this is offset by a 2.5 per cent. decrease in wages—the increase in workers was made at the expense of skill and high pay, rendered unnecessary by the IMPROVED MACHINE.

In carriage and wagons a 23.9 per cent. increase in machinery made possible an increase of 6.1 per cent. in value of products; and allowed at the same time a decrease of 2.7 per cent. in the number of wage earners. Not only that, but along with the reduction of wage earners went a reduction {in} the wages of those that were left, to the extent of 8.7 per cent.—High wages, and skill, and hence apprenticeship or training also, were here again knocked out by the IMPROVED MACHINE.

In this industry, to quote the U.S. Census Report of 1900, “very few skilled workmen are any longer needed; the machinery utilized in this industry has been developed to such an extent that wagons formerly manufactured by skilled workmen, who commanded high wages, were made in 1900 by comparatively

unskilled men.”—Thus in the very documents of the capitalists themselves, it is shown that skill, training, were knocked out by the IMPROVED MACHINE.

To take one more instance, that of the industry of tanning of leather, to quote from the same report, “by reason of improved machinery, there has been a constantly decreasing demand for skilled workmen. Women and girls are now performing the work formerly done by men. In 1890, a ‘shaver,’ who had to serve an apprenticeship of several years before he became a skilled workman, received as high as \$6 a day at hand work. In 1900 he had been quite generally supplanted by the ‘handy man,’ who did the same work by machinery, accomplished four times as much, and received perhaps a third of the pay.” So that by an increase of 86.7 per cent. in value of machinery, 18.5 per cent. more products were turned out by an increased force of 22.9 per cent. more workers—who worked at a sum of wages only 6.3 per cent. more than the old total.—Here once more, and strikingly so, were skill and training and apprenticeship knocked out by the IMPROVED MACHINE.

Apart from the absurdity of 2,000,000 organized workers, all there are in the country, being able to determine conditions for 29,287,070, the working population of the country, Van Cleave’s statement is hopelessly false. Apprenticeship was killed, “virtually” and “entirely,” by the IMPROVED MACHINE.

Who introduced those machines—the labor unions? No; the Van Cleaves! Who killed the apprenticeship system? The Van Cleaves!

There is in the Swiss Alps a peak, called the Brocken, from which the traveler sees, reflected on a column of mist, his own shadow, distorted, aping and grotesquing his own actions till they assume a truly frightsome aspect, appearing to be a demon menacing the beholder. Van Cleave, who attributes to the labor unions the very deeds of his own class, the manufacturing capitalists, is on the Brocken.

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

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