

TRADE SOCIETIES AND STRIKES:

THEIR GOOD AND EVIL INFLUENCES ON THE MEMBERS OF
TRADES UNIONS, AND ON SOCIETY AT LARGE.

1242

MACHINERY;

1243

ITS INFLUENCES ON WORK AND WAGES.

AND

CO-OPERATIVE SOCIETIES,

PRODUCTIVE AND DISTRIBUTIVE,

PAST, PRESENT, AND FUTURE.



BY JOHN WATTS, PH.D.

MANCHESTER:

JOHN HEYWOOD, DEANS GATE AND BRAZEN NOSE STREET.

LONDON: F. PITMAN.

PRICE SIXPENCE.

Trade Societies and Strikes.

“There is a limit to the legitimate interference of collective opinion with individual independence ; and to find that limit, and maintain it under encroachment, is as indispensable to a good condition of human affairs, as protection against political despotism.”—*John Stuart Mill*.

THE events of the last year or two have directed special attention to the constitutions, objects, modes of operation, and results of Trade Societies; and it is very important for the interests both of employers and workmen, to decide, if possible, how far these combinations are useful, and how far, if at all, injurious, as regards the public welfare.

At present the working man looks upon his trade society as the only charter which secures to him a decent amount of liberty, a fair day's wage for a fair day's work; and his power of appeal to the society against ill-usage by the foreman or the master, is his highest privilege. The laws of the society come into operation where the laws of the land make no provision; and to his thinking there are various kinds of misconduct which magistrates have no power to correct, which cannot be defined as misdemeanours according to law, but in which the society will take up the workman's quarrel, champion his cause, and enforce their own penalties.

Are the laws of the land defective as regards the interests subsisting between the employers and the employed, or do workmen seek for a position, by combination, which neither law nor equity will uphold? These are serious questions, deserving the fullest consideration by all persons concerned; for upon their rational solution depends the operation of an enlightened public opinion, which will either confirm existing arrangements or inaugurate alterations and improvements.

Most things in the world are made up of mingled good and evil; and it only accords with man's progressive nature that our various institutions should from time to time need to be accommodated to altered circumstances; but it is a good faith which asserts that things only continue to exist by virtue of the good which is in them, and that there is even "a soul of good in things evil." So we shall be prepared to find that trade societies are not an exception to the general rule; and our object in this essay will be to discriminate between the useful and the injurious, and to point out, so far as we are able, the best means for improvement. But we must first inquire what are the constitutions and what the objects of these societies, and what the means by which such objects are sought to be accomplished?

A trade society is a combination of workmen all following the same kind of employment, for the protection of wages, *i.e.*, to secure the same rate of wages, and that rate of not less than a stated amount, for all workmen in the trade, or branch of trade, in question. This is sought to be effected by the adoption of rules in which every member of the society is pledged not to accept less than the society's list rate of wages, and not to work more than a stated number of hours for a day, except on condition of payment (generally at an extra rate) for overtime. In the better paid trades, rules are also adopted to 'regulate' the proportion of apprentices to skilled workmen in any shop, and to prevent the employment of men who have not served an apprentice-

ship to the trade. Generally, the rules are printed and circulated, but occasionally rules are adopted and acted upon which do not appear in the printed list. A breach of any of these rules by a workman subjects him to a fine, or to exclusion from the society; and a breach by an employer subjects him to a strike by his workmen.

The conditions of membership are, payment of a weekly or monthly subscription of a given amount, and observance of the rules. The individual advantages offered are, a weekly allowance whilst out of employ, and in some societies a further allowance for travelling expenses whilst in search of work from town to town.

Many societies have also subscriptions to sickness, disability, annuity or superannuation, accident, and burial funds; in some societies the burial fund applies not merely to the member, but is also available on the death of the wife of a member.

We have here stated the prominent objects of trade societies, and some of their modes of operation; and we have now to ask are these objects good? Do they promote the welfare of society at large? for that must be the ultimate test of all smaller associations;—they must either be subsidiary to and promotive of the general good, or they must give way to improved institutions. The one object which is common to all trade societies is protection of wages; and on that subject political economy says that the price of labour, like that of any other commodity, must be dependent on the supply of, and the demand for it; and we find, practically, that although working men often try to evade the action of this principle, their very evasion is confirmatory of its truth and power; for when a trade society supports men who are out of work, rather than allow them to go in at less than the ordinary wages, what do they but artificially lessen the supply of the commodity (labour) in order to keep up its price, just as a great capitalist occasionally buys up the whole of some one article in