

ARTICLE IX.

THE TRUE MISSION OF LABOR-UNIONS.

BY PRESIDENT CHARLES WILLIAM ELIOT, LL.D.

[Under the sharp criticism aroused by various informal remarks made by President Eliot reflecting upon some actions of labor-unions, he was moved to present on November 22 a carefully prepared statement of his views to the Colonial Club of Boston. Both from the distinguished reputation of the author and for its intrinsic worth, this must take a permanent place in the literature of the subject. We therefore have pleasure in presenting it entire.—ED.]

I MAKE no apology for speaking on an unusual subject to-night; I mean for me—because labor-unions have been to all of us a very interesting subject during the last six months, and they are quite sure to be more and more interesting as time goes on. I want to speak of labor-unions from the educator's standpoint. What is that standpoint? I belong to a class of men who are employed under humane conditions. University teachers in general are employed under humane conditions, and in that calling I have been both employed and employer—indeed, I combine these functions to-day.

I admit, however, at once, that the point of view of the educator is a peculiar one. He is a man devoted to systematic education, which means devoted to a continuous process intended to transmit the accumulated learning and experience of former generations to the rising generations as they succeed each other, and, therefore, to a process of gradually uplifting the human race, or that particular portion of the race to which he himself belongs. It is natural, therefore, for one whose profession is education to sympa-

thize with other efforts to uplift the race—to make the lot of average mankind more satisfying and happier.

That being the ultimate object of education itself, an educator necessarily sympathizes with other broad efforts to produce the same result that he seeks. Among these must be counted the work of the labor-unions. They heartily believe that their work tends to uplift the laboring classes. They heartily believe that even when they engage in industrial warfare their object is to raise their class, though at a present sacrifice. This belief is their strength.

WORK, THE BASIS OF CIVILIZATION.

It is, however, clear that education is not the primary instrumentality of civilization. The primary instrumentality is work—regular, daily work. On that must be founded all other instrumentalities for uplifting mankind. This clearly appears in the history of our race. No savage people, no nomad tribe, can be lifted into civilization until it adopts as a habit a regular, daily, settled work. The same is true with every individual. It is of no use to try to teach children to read and write if their parents belong to the Stone Age. It is of no use to try to educate the children of a tribe which is nomadic, without settlements, without home.

Education, therefore, is a secondary instrumentality, habitual labor coming first. Hence the importance of humane conditions of employment, of humane conditions of the daily labor by which the millions are supported—the daily labor which forms the groundwork of the civilization of the people.

And now, what are humane conditions of employment? That is a question on which the experience of university men sheds some light. Naturally enough the conditions of university employment are humane in all civilized nations. Indeed, I believe them to be the most humane in

the world. Now, I am going to try to state what I think to be the humane conditions of employment, basing my delineation on my own experience of university employment.

RIGHTS OF LABORERS.

1. The first of these humane conditions I conceive to be a rising wage—that is, a wage which gradually—it need not be rapidly—increases with the laborer's increased experience, attainments and age. This condition means for the laborer hope, expectancy, recognition of merit, and a gradually increasing reward of merit. It seems to me that this rising wage should be regarded as an essential condition of satisfactory employment.

2. The second universally desirable condition is steady employment after adequate probation. I have never seen any hesitation on the part of young men in accepting a reasonable probation, and every intelligent person wants steady work. Yet that method of steady employment after adequate probation can hardly be said to exist in the ordinary industries of the civilized nations. It implies dismissal only for cause—for plainly visible, indisputable cause. It also implies, on the part of the employer, a perfect readiness to deal justly and fairly with complaints.

I believe steady employment to be the sound condition for national human development in all walks of life. It is the steady job which develops fine human character; and on the other hand spasmodic employment is a very unfavorable condition for the development of character. It may seem strange to you even to mention such a reasonable opportunity for the development of character as steady work among conditions of employment. We certainly are not accustomed to that view. But is it not, after all, the only rational view of humane conditions of employment?

3. A third humane condition of employment I hold to be encouragement for the making of a permanent home.

That is just what the university conditions of employment encourage. The making of a permanent home means that the home creator has opportunity to form local attachments, to evince public spirit, and to win for himself a local reputation among his neighbors. Neighborhood reputation is the most rewarding kind of reputation. These aids to the development of character and these sources of happiness the nomad workman loses completely. Therefore a wandering, unattached condition for the laborer is always unhappy and inexpedient, whether we regard the interests of the individual or the interests of society.

4. Fourth among humane conditions of employment I put the opportunity to serve generously and proudly the establishment or institution with which the laborer has been connected. That is a high privilege for any human being. It takes him out of himself and gives him a happy motive for fidelity and zeal. You observe that this opportunity cannot be had unless employment is steady and the home permanent. This is a satisfaction which all university men win. It is a delightful part of a university man's life, a privilege to be accounted much higher than large salary or any form of luxurious living. It is one of the deep, permanent satisfactions of human life, and I should not call any conditions of employment humane which made that satisfaction unattainable by the humblest laborer.

5. The fifth right condition of employment is the pension on disability. The civil or industrial pension was almost unknown in our country until within twenty years, so far as I know; it was first introduced as a systematic right by Harvard University, but in the course of the last ten years some large industrial establishments have adopted in good measure this humane condition of employment. It gives security and dignity to the laborer, it gives throughout life relief from one great anxiety; it gives also that public consideration which, in our country, as much as in

any country, goes with a steady job and a self-respecting though humble or unobserved career.

Now these are five conditions of humane employment which I believe to be not theoretical or fanciful, but perfectly capable of realization. They are realized in Harvard University to-day. They are realized in other large services, both in Europe and in this country. But I think we shall have to confess at once that these are not the common conditions of employment in those large American industries which require the services of multitudes of comparatively unskilled laborers.

I venture to say that ten years ago no large American industry recognized these principles throughout its service. That is, no large American industry recognized all of them, or even a majority of them, and yet all of these humane conditions of employment are founded on perfectly well-known physical habits, normal desires, and moral qualities of mankind.

EXISTING EVILS.

To-day the large services in which these principles are adopted are few in number in our country. I remember hearing an eminent railroad president say ten years ago that there was only one rule on which railroad service could be conducted, and that was the rule of instant dismissal. Instant dismissal characterizes many employments to-day. There is a very common form of service known to us all in which, though dismissal is not instant, there may be mutual dismissal at a week's notice. That is the tenure in domestic service all over our country. Now, that condition of employment seems to me inhuman, and I believe that domestic service will never be well organized among us democrats until that fundamental condition of the service is changed.

Another serious difficulty with American employment is that it is spasmodic. In almost all the large services

it is not steady but spasmodic—first a rush, and then an absolute stoppage. Again, in most American industries—not all, I am happy to say—complaints are not listened to, or, if listened to, are made ground for dismissal. That is profoundly unreasonable as a method of administration, and is an abundant source of bitterness and discontent.

Also, there are no pensions except in a few fine services which are beginning to illustrate in our country the proper conditions of employment. Moreover, wages are fluctuating. Now steadiness of wages is an immense object to all wage-earners. Of course, steadiness of wages cannot be secured so long as American legislation continues to cause periodic industrial and financial chills and fevers.

RIGHTFUL SPHERE OF LABOR-UNIONS.

Under such circumstances, then, there have grown up among us—copied in a good measure from Europe—labor-unions. They have grown, have taken on new forms, have become more and more aggressive, and are likely to extend constantly their fields of operation. Against them are arrayed the employers and sometimes the non-union men. Whose fault is this condition of industrial strife? It is clearly the fault of both parties.

But it seems to me that the employers may justly be held more accountable than the employed. On the whole the situation of the employers is generally more comfortable, their education superior, their intelligence greater. Perhaps recent experience should lead me to qualify that last remark.

Under these difficulties, and with these justifications, labor-unions have been organized, and have struggled with more and more success toward their remote goal.

Before I take up the points at which I find labor-unions to be ill-advised, let me admit, as all persons must who have studied their history, that the industrial community

as a whole is under many obligations to the unions. They have as a matter of fact mitigated many evils. They have reduced what used to be the unreasonable number of hours in a day's work. They have improved health conditions in factories and mines, and have procured the legislation which has enforced better health conditions. They have prevented young children from working in factories, and they have emancipated employes in many industries from the company store.

Moreover, they hold in check combined capital, and combined capital is, from the democratic point of view, a formidable oligarchy, and one which the American community is distinctly afraid of. The labor-unions hold that oligarchy in check.

The argument commonly used in justification of the organization of laborers in unions is a sound one—capital is effectively combined in certain industries, and therefore laborers must effectively combine in these industries. That argument is unanswerable. The great combinations of capital are very formidable to unskilled laborers—much more formidable than to the average man in the community at large, and they are sufficiently formidable to us all.

I think, too, that we all believe that the labor-union is going to last. The facilities for uniting multitudes of men in one organization, for communicating on the instant with all branches of the organization, for bringing masses of men together for a common purpose, have increased wonderfully even within the last ten years.

These facilities the labor leaders know how to use as well as the financiers do; and we may be quite sure that the labor-union, with these new facilities, is going to manifest more and more power in flush times; in dull times it subsides. The telephone itself provides an invaluable facility for these great combinations of men. Indeed, it has become the favorite tool of ward politicians, speculators, and

walking delegates, for it has the great convenience that it leaves no record.

MISDIRECTED EFFORTS OF LABOR-UNIONS.

In view of this situation it is manifestly important to discuss frankly and publicly any labor-union doctrines or practices which seem dangerous to society or hurtful to the men who adopt them.

A few weeks ago I mentioned in an extemporaneous address in Boston, some of the evils which seemed to me to be fostered by the doctrines of labor-unions. The first of those evils is the close limit put on the number of apprentices in shops, or factories, or mines. This seems to me, and I think to every American teacher, a strange interference with a fundamental democratic doctrine. It was Napoleon who gave it a very compact expression—'Every career is open to talent.' Now, that is a fundamental, American doctrine, one that we all thought every one of us heartily believed in. The labor-union undertakes to close the trade which it represents from young Americans.

It prescribes, for example, to a great printing-office, where hundreds of men are employed, that only an insignificant number of apprentices shall be allowed. I have read many constitutions of trade-unions, and I have never failed to find in them this disposition to limit education for the trade. It seems to be the common labor-union doctrine that the youth are to be kept out of the trade. It is the exclusion of the newcomer for the protection of the old hand.

I need not point out how inconsistent this is with all practices in higher education. A group of eminent lawyers, for instance, devote themselves to educating young lawyers. A group of dentists devote themselves, at pecuniary sacrifice, to training as many young dentists as they can get together, with the result that the young men im-

mediately begin to compete in practice with their teachers. All through the higher education runs this conception of using a talent for teaching, to increase the number of men well taught. It is the same spirit which makes the physician or surgeon always give to the community any medical or surgical discovery he may have made.

It is the disposition among liberally educated men to provide every facility for entrance to the learned and scientific professions. The spirit of the educated class is to further to the utmost every process of education which admits to the class, while the spirit of the labor-union seems to be the exclusive spirit. It tries to protect the possessor of a trade against the new aspirant.

2. Another pernicious doctrine held by many unions is the doctrine of limiting the output, or day's product, of the individual laborer. This doctrine seems to be based upon the opinion that there is a definite amount of demand for the product of any industry, and if that demand is satisfied by a portion of the laborers in that industry, there must be another portion who get no work—who can get no work. If a hundred thousand laborers satisfy the demand, when one hundred and fifty thousand are in the trade, the remaining fifty thousand will starve. Generosity teaches that the hundred thousand laborers should not satisfy that demand—but should work slowly—say at two-thirds of their natural speed, so that the fifty thousand may have a chance to share the demand. The claim of the union is that the limitation of output has a generous motive—the motive of permitting those that would otherwise be unemployed to share in the fixed demand.

I need not point out that the theory of a fixed demand is in the highest degree improbable; at any rate, it cannot be computed or demonstrated. It is an assumption that it is impossible to prove.

But, on the other hand, it is obvious that the effect on

the individual labor of habitually working at a rate below his natural capacity must be thoroughly pernicious. What alert, ambitious man but desires to make his daily output as large as possible, no matter what his calling? What must be the effect on the individual laborer of endeavoring day after day, and year after year, to do less than he might do in the appointed hours of labor? Must it not be degrading? Must it not gradually undermine his own capacity for production? Will he not become, year by year, a feeble and less useful man? The proper ambition for the laborer in any calling is to produce as much as possible, or a quality as high as possible; and no other purpose will foster the development of the best workmen or the best men.

I object, therefore, utterly to the limited output for the individual, because it fights against the best instincts of the best laborers. It also, of course, diminishes the productiveness of the entire community, and tends to make the whole community indifferent and ineffective.

But you may say it is not the laborers only that endeavor to limit the output. Very true; the employers are equal sinners in this respect. They, too, undertake to limit the output, for no reason except to keep up prices. We have, unfortunately, been taught in this country that a high level of prices is always an advantage. Sometimes it is and sometimes it is not. I suppose that there never was a falser economic doctrine preached than that low prices make cheap men. Cheap necessities of life are invariably an advantage to the population.

Now, the limiting of output by the employers, of course, diminishes the total wealth of the people, and has no justification whatever. I exaggerate, perhaps; it has some justification when artificial legislation has limited the market.

3. A third doctrine of labor-unions, which seems to me to fight against the true developing principles in human

nature, is the doctrine of the uniform wage. This uniform wage works in two ways. In the first place, it prevents the capable laborer from earning as much as he might, which is not only a misfortune to him, but a misfortune to society; and, secondly, it is cruel to the inferior workman. The labor-union establishes a uniform wage at as high a level as it can, and in every trade there will be many workmen who really are incapable of earning that wage; that is, they cannot satisfy the employer in the unionized shop. He finds that he is paying some of his men a wage that they can earn, and others a wage that they cannot earn. How does he protect himself? He gets rid, whenever he can, of the laborer that cannot earn the wage fixed by the union, and in the spasmodic condition of American industries he has many opportunities of getting rid of the inferior workman.

The consequence is that the inferior workman cannot earn in a year any adequate wage, since he is often unemployed. This is one of the greatest cruelties of labor-unions. The inferior workman, if permitted to work for lower wages, might be steadily employed. They cannot be steadily employed when a wage must be paid to them which they cannot earn.

There is of course another aspect of the uniform wage. In times of pressure, which occur frequently in all American industries, many men are taken on at the union wage who cannot earn it, and the employer suffers very serious loss in the process. This, however, is a totally different aspect of the same false method. The uniform wage, in short, works badly in all directions. It is a discouragement to the capable workmen, it is a cruelty toward the less capable, and from time to time it inflicts great injury on the employer.

4. I come now to a fourth objection to the labor-union, its teaching in regard to the use of violence during

a strike. This is a doctrine which is not always avowed. In fact, one of the most serious objections to the public utterances of labor leaders is that they endeavor to conceal the violence which is actually resorted to. They even deny in guarded language, that there is any violence. In their denials they use the phrase "overt act," for instance, meaning thereby a public crime, like killing or blowing up a house.

Now what is the fact with regard to the use of violence when unskilled laborers strike? I say unskilled laborers, because the unions of highly skilled laborers have another means of resistance. They can rely, many a time, upon the fact that there is no large supply of laborers skilled in their trade, and they are therefore not obliged to resort to violence, or at least they may avoid a resort to violence.

But that is not at all true of the union of unskilled laborers. To enforce a strike they really have no other weapon but violence, and they all know it, and their leaders know it. They resort invariably to violence within a few hours, and every considerable strike in our country for five years past—yes, for ten years past—has been accompanied by violence.

The reason for this lamentable fact is that violence is inevitable. Such strikers have no other weapons. I suppose most of us have seen this with our own eyes. When a strike occurs on a street railway, for example, there are always hundreds of men who want to take the places of the men who have struck. There is but one way of preventing them from doing so, namely, by violently making it too dangerous for them. There was a short strike in Boston a few months ago of the Teamsters' Union, and I suppose many of us here present saw the violence resorted to within a day. This was a comparatively unskilled industry, and those men had no other way to deal with the institution. If they could not prevent men from

taking their places by violence, their strike was defeated and their places were lost.

These are but illustrations of a universal fact. Now what is the theory on which, in labor-unions, violence is justified? It is justified. I heard the theory ingeniously stated at the recent meeting of the Economic Club of Boston, and I think I can give it to you accurately. The laborer who has worked in a factory or shop for years or even months only, has acquired an equitable right in that factory which is not discharged by the weekly payment of his wages. He has made a part of the reputation of that factory and the reputation of its product. He has created a part of the good-will of that factory. This claim is substantial, and it is not discharged by paying him weekly wages. He joins his fellows in declaring that for a time they do not purpose to continue to work in that factory on the conditions which prevail at the moment. He then sees a man taking his place. Now, that man is possessing himself of that equitable claim on the factory of the right in equity which the former laborer has acquired, and which he ought not to lose by going on a strike. The incoming man is a thief and a robber, and he can be dealt with as one deals with a burglar in one's house. The scab, or strike-breaker, is a burglar, and if ever violence is justified between man and man violence is justifiable between the union man who has gone on a strike and the scab who takes his place.

The argument is plausible, but has a fatal weak spot. It claims a right in the factory or business which depends on continuous operation, and also claims the right to discontinue the business or shut up the factory.

This doctrine I believe to be a dangerous one, and one that combats all American principles with regard to freedom in labor. I find that the principle that an American has a right to sell his labor at whatever price he chooses

to fix is earnestly disputed. Indeed, it is said that no American has a right to sell his labor at any price without considering the effects of his sale on associated laborers in the same trade or business. The right to earn bread for his family by whatever opportunity presents itself is denied. He must not earn bread for his family without considering the effects which his taking the price he is willing to accept may have on thousands of other men who are not willing to accept that price.

This doctrine cuts deep, and the American people have got to consider and reconsider this contest of opinion. It is a serious contest of opinions with regard to personal liberty.

The sort of violence which the labor-unions justify is various, and there has been a great development in the variety of violence within the last ten years. The inevitable violence now takes the form, first, of a few serious outrages on persons and on property. As we have lately seen in Cambridge, it does not take many outrages to alarm a considerable population. Three or four assaults, three or four killings, a few blown-up houses, will terrorize a large community. But these operations need not be numerous, they need not be frequent.

The more effective method, when combined with these assaults and outrages, is the method of boycott. I have not time to describe the varieties of the boycott. Suffice it to say that the boycott, in a community where the union men are in power, penetrates every nook and corner of society. Every shop, every office, every professional man's employment, is assailable and is assailed.

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But it does not stop there in a community where the union has a large majority. The police, the courts, and the newspapers can all be controlled. They have been repeatedly, and they are to-day in some localities. We have to look forward to the absolute defeat both of the grand jury and of the jury in communities where the unions are in power. You see how much ground that covers—the police, the courts, and the newspapers. The community at large is thus deprived of information, and the community on the spot is deprived of the ordinary protection of the courts and the officers of the courts.

One step remains to be taken in communities where the labor-unions are in command, namely, the control of the militia. We shall probably see during the next few years strenuous efforts, direct and indirect, on the part of the unions to control the militia. There are two ways of controlling it; the method adopted in the case of the Grand Jury will serve—fill the local militia with union men, but legislation may also be resorted to; and, thirdly, the boycott will be effective to this end, unless the American public learns how to disarm the boycott.

The formidableness of the boycott, except in a region where the union men are in a clear majority, is a singular phenomenon in American society. The total number of laborers organized in unions of the United States cannot possibly be placed higher than two million. Colonel Wright, head of the Labor Bureau, says that he cannot place it higher than one million, seven hundred thousand. It is therefore conceivable that the more numerous non-union men, or the American public at large, should learn how to control or defeat the boycott. It needs to be defeated. It is a cruel, cowardly interference with the right of all the people.

REMEDIAL MEASURES.

I see that I have not time to mention some matters which I had in mind to speak of. I dislike very much to dwell upon evils in society without alluding to the possible cures for those evils. Discussion of evils seems to me seldom expedient, unless it leads to the discussion of remedies. Now, there are certain hopeful prognostications for industrial peace.

In the first place, whenever either party to the combat gives a demonstration of unreasonableness and folly, that party promotes the adoption of policies which are more rational, and we had that demonstration during the past five months to perfection from both sides.

When we reflect upon it, does it not seem wonderful that at the end of this strife about mining anthracite, which in bitterness exceeded the bitterness of many wars, in which measures were proposed and attempted to be executed which in actual warfare people generally abstain from—as, for instance, the endeavor of miners to force out of the mines the engineers who kept the mines free from water, while throughout the Transvaal War, surely a bitter strife and a prolonged one, that operation was never resorted to, or even proposed by either party,—is it not wonderful, I say, that at the end of five months of this extraordinary turmoil, this infliction of perfectly unnecessary losses upon the entire community, and especially on both combatants, we should arrive at a solution which might just as well have been arrived at before the strife began?

This is a demonstration, I think, of a gross lack of intelligence in both parties to the strife.

The way I got into the discussion of the subject before us was that in an educational address last October I mentioned this lack of intelligence as demonstrated in the anthracite coal strike as evidence that the American schools have not succeeded in doing their work. I don't know

how one could have a stronger demonstration. At the end of five months an Arbitration Commission was appointed—certainly no better than the two parties could have selected at the beginning—and now we hear that even the services of this commission are to be dispensed with.

Such irrational conduct on both sides should teach the public that this sort of industrial strife is stupid, and therefore to be avoided by more intelligent policies and efforts. It teaches that it is better to confer at the start, rather than to fight first, and confer after the battle.

Are there not already in existence organized methods of avoiding these destructive contests? I believe there are already in existence several good examples of prearranged agreements to arbitrate. I have seen two or three of these within the last few weeks—one especially, which seems to me highly promising, because for fourteen years it had prevented strikes in the American newspaper offices concerned.

This agreement is one made in advance by both parties to possible conflicts; it describes clearly under what conditions arbitration shall be resorted to: first, conciliation shall be tried, by which is meant conferences between the two conflicting parties without the intervention of any one else; next, local arbitration shall be tried; and, thirdly, arbitration directed by a national or international alliance of unions in the trade concerned. The conditions under which the arbitrators are chosen are agreed upon beforehand. The things which shall not be arbitrated are expressly excluded, and the things which shall be arbitrated are defined.

It is interesting to note that this agreement between the publishers of the American newspapers and the unions with which they have to deal—for they deal with several unions—is an agreement between an incorporated association and unions that are not incorporated, and yet this

agreement has been kept for fourteen years and has been successful in preventing strikes.

The incorporation of unions is, of course, very desirable, because arbitration between one body which is incorporated and another body which is not incorporated is not perfectly fair. A penalty can be enforced against one, and not against the other. But all the labor-unions and all the labor leaders as far as I know, are opposed to incorporation. They dread the action of the courts. They have had many quarrels with the courts, and have often been defeated in them, and they have a natural dread of litigation.

These well-kept agreements between incorporated bodies on the one hand and unincorporated labor-unions on the other are all the more interesting because they may prove to be the means of gradually bringing about the incorporation of unions, when by experience under these present agreements the unions learn to trust to a contract. When that trust has once been created, the unions may cease to fear a contract enforced by the ordinary legal methods.

Lastly, I think there are many signs in important manufactures that labor-unions can, by good judgment and good feeling, make themselves a convenience to corporations engaged in industrial work. I have lately had conversations with some large employers of labor who perceive the convenience, in large industries, of being able to procure the assured delivery at a fixed price of any required number of laborers on a contract covering a year or five years.

It is interesting to perceive that in a democracy the urgencies of great business seem to tend already to methods which have been developed in the course of centuries in old China, where such a thing as democracy has never been known. The Chinese method is the delivery of any required number of laborers by a company for a fixed price. In some respects there is a curious resemblance between

the common Chinese method and the method toward which the labor-union tends. The union laborer of the future, once involved by the thousand, may be hardly freer than the Chinese laborer, who is delivered to order by the thousand at an agreed price. All the more important is it that joining the union should be completely voluntary.

I, of course, believe that we Americans are likely to find our way through these difficulties. The first thing we need is to learn exactly what the difficulties are, and here it must be confessed that there are obstacles. Both parties to industrial strife generally distrust publicity. That was curiously exemplified in the coal strike. The strike began without the American people being informed by either party of the reasons for fighting. To be sure, they were subsequently published, but after the strike was on.

It is a general fact that corporations wish to conceal their methods of doing business, and that labor-unions also wish to conceal their reasons for demanding more pay or less work. Therefore, the means of procuring publicity in regard to such matters ought to be diligently sought by the American people as a whole. We have many means of publicity. The local newspaper will not serve us. The great metropolitan newspaper might; the magazines might; legislative commissions might. They do not always, but they might. It is for the American people to seek thorough information on all these industrial struggles and to spread abroad among the people sound notions concerning their causes and their results. Then, I think, we may all hope that we shall find a way through these formidable social dangers.