WAGES

Working people live on wages, which are obtained in their places of employment. Some workers own government bonds or company shares and derive income from these and from other sources. But all sources other than wages form a very small part of the average worker's income. Mainly the workers live on wages and any changes that occur in the amount of wages have a definite bearing on their conditions of life.

The wages which they receive represent a portion of the wealth they produce. This portion takes the form of money and is given to them by the owners of the places where they work in return for the use by the owners of their ability to work for specified periods of time.

This is a condition of existence common to all workers, not less to those who wear white collars and receive salaries than to those who wear overalls and receive pay envelopes. The boy leaving school at the age of 16 or 17 searches at once for an employer. There is nothing else he can do. His father does not own a "place of business." Neither do his relatives or his friends. Nor is there any way in which he can start a business of his own. There are exceptions, it is true, but in general the youngster leaves school and works all his useful life for some other person and lives through the years on wages.

So wages are very important to him and if unemployment causes his wages to stop, or if they become reduced or are not increased in times of rising prices, then he faces troublous times.

Yet the worker does not give to wages the thought and consideration which their importance obviously urges. That is because he is subjected to mental conditioning. He picks up his newspaper in the evening, to find that world affairs are detailed and analyzed without reference to wages. He turns on the radio or television and gets lengthy periods of sports, popular music, plays and other things but not wages. Perhaps he goes to a movie house, to see a love story, a mystery, a western or some other type of film, in which the characters all seem to live in some manner that precludes the existence of wages. On Sunday he takes himself to church to become removed to heights so lofty that the very thought of wages could only be disturbing if not blasphemous. There is a stigma attached to wages. The subject is dull and boring. Wages are not to be discussed except to reveal that they are an incontestable condition of existence for workers, but must be taken in modest sums.

How could the matter of wages be treated otherwise? All the main sources of information and entertainment are owned by the capitalist class, and these gentry are hardly likely to allow them to be used to call sympathetic attention to the wages question or to be critical of the system of wages payment. They like the wages system and they like wages to be low. It is from this state of affairs that their privileges and luxuries emerge. And they know that the more the minds of the workers are directed into channels remote from wages the less attention will they give to wages, and this can react only to the benefit of the employers.

But in spite of these diversionary activities, which attain a great deal of success in keeping the workers passive, they do give attention to the question of wages. The pressures resulting from their status as wage workers, particularly the constant readiness of the employers to use every opportunity to lower their level of existence, compels activity in their own interest, even though this activity is all too reluctant and lacking in depth.

Over the years working people throughout the world have employed a variety of methods in the hope of improving their living conditions. They have petitioned parliament, supported candidates for office, organized political parties. They have paraded in the streets, erected barricades and fought against police. But most important, they have organized in trade unions, which have provided them with their most effective weapon, the strike.

The trade union exists to protect and improve wages and working conditions. It engages in a number of other activities most of which are worthless, sometimes harmful. Because its members are not politically informed, it often allows itself to be used as a stepping stone to office by aspiring politicians. Indifference and apathy amongst its members sometimes lead to racketeering, cases of this kind recently being played up prominently in the daily press. But when all these things are taken into account, the real worth of the trade union must not be overlooked.

It seldom happens that a worker by himself can approach an employer and obtain an increase in wages. Workers in certain specialized types of employment may be able to do this, but not the average worker. He would be more likely to find himself on the street searching for another employer. Workers may influence their wages and working conditions only by collective effort and only by being in the position to stop working if their demands are not met. The ability to withhold their services is a weapon in their possession. It is the only final logic known to employers. Without it wages tend to sink below subsistence level. With it a substantial check can often be placed on the encroachments of the employers and improvements both in wages and working conditions can be made.

The strike is not a sure means of victory for workers in dispute with employers. There are many cases on record of workers being compelled to return to work without gains, sometimes with losses. Strikes should not be employed recklessly but should be entered into with caution, particularly during times when production falls off and there are growing numbers of unemployed. And it should not be thought that victory can be gained only by means of the strike. Sometimes more can be gained simply by the threat of a strike. Workers must bear all these things in mind if they are to make the most effective use of the trade union and the power which it gives them.

But above all, the workers, besides making the greatest possible use of the trade union, must also come to recognize that even at their best the unions cannot bring permanent security or end poverty. These aims cannot be gained within the limits of capitalist society. When the workers have raised their sights high enough to envisage a society where there can be no conflict over wages and where each will contribute to the production of wealth according to his ability and receive from the produce according to his needs, they are thinking of a goal that can be gained only after they have become organized into a political organization having for its object the introduction of Socialism. Such an organization is the Socialist Party.

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