

Capital and Labor: Parasites and Hosts (August 1, 1903)

Galusha A. Grow,¹ the aged politician and ex-speaker of Congress, is seriously disturbed about the “conflict between capital and labor,” and is giving the closing days of his life to the solution of this vexed problem. In his public service Mr. Grow is credited with having been a clean and honorable man and it is a fitting climax to such a career that he should devote his last hours and his latest efforts to the cause of industrial peace.

But the trouble with Mr. Grow, like so many others of his advanced years, is that he lives in the past; he deals with conditions that have long since ceased to exist, seeming utterly oblivious of the industrial revolution which has wrought havoc with things as they were, and as he still sees them, and which is still in full swing and will not cease until industrial peace, the fruit of industrial freedom, has been conquered and the terms “capitalist” and “laborer,” as we now understand them, lose their meaning as they merge in one and the same person and every human being is at once capitalist and worker, employer and employed, as a unit of the socialist commonwealth.

In his recent article on “The Shortcomings of Arbitration,”² Mr. Grow very properly concludes that there is little hope for progress in that direction. And then, getting mixed in his terms, he falls into a succession of errors from which even his idealized “Public Opinion” cannot rescue him. Says he:

There can be no war or even conflict between capital and labor when their real interests are rightly understood and fully appreciated. They are mutually dependent on each other, and *neither can accomplish any great results without the other*. Of what use is labor, beyond the supplying of mere physical wants by the cultivation of the soil, without capital to furnish transportation to market for the products of labors as well as for the development of industries? And of what use would capital be without labor? In the world’s commerce the locomotive is of no use without cars filled with the products of labor, and such cars would be of no use without capital to build the railroad and buy the locomotive.

The grievances of labor in free elective governments like ours are to be removed in the same way as other grievances are removed — *by an appeal to the intelligent judgment of public opinion*. In free elective governments — with free speech, free press, and universal ballot — there can be no excuse for a resort to lawless violence. No matter what the grievance complained of may be, a resort to lawless violence is an attack on the rights of every law-abiding citizen and upon organized society itself, and if successful it would be *the first step in the road that leads to anarchy and national ruin*.

Between “capital and labor,” rightly understood, or wrongly understood, or not understood at all, there never was and never will be any conflict. Capital, except as to undeveloped natural resources, is the product of labor. There is no war between the worker and the machine. He made it and uses it, and now his very life and freedom depend upon it, but he does not own it, and this is where the “war” begins. He has no quarrel with the machine but he is very decidedly in “conflict” with the capitalist who claims ownership of the machine and pockets what the worker and the machine produce.

The conflict, therefore, is not between labor and capital, but between labor and capitalists, a class who grow rich and defiant through their exploitation of the working class under the wage system.

It is true, as Mr. Grow says that labor and capital “are mutually dependent on each other,” but it is not true that workingmen and capitalists [must] sustain such mutual relations.

Workingmen could get along, and a thousand times better than at present, without the brood of capitalists to absorb their products, but the capitalists would perish from the earth but for the labor of the working class that sustains them.

Will Mr. Grow contend that William Waldorf Astor is a necessary factor, or any factor at all, in the production of wealth?

Mr. Astor is a highly developed capitalist and it would be interesting to know in what way laborers are dependent upon him and other parasites that suck their lifeblood and yield absolutely nothing in return.

Is the leech essential to the life and health of the horse? Are they “mutually dependent on each other?”

Does Rockefeller produce a drop of oil, or Carnegie an ounce of steel, or Hill and inch of transportation? Were they and all their class to resign,

would the spinal cord of these great enterprises be severed and humanity paralyzed?

Mr. Grow will have no difficulty in recalling the fact that only a few years ago there were thousands of “slave owners” in this boasted land of freedom, and that for two full centuries and a half they and their slaves were “mutually dependent on each other.” That was the law and gospel of the land and he who disputed it was mobbed like Lovejoy or hanged like John Brown. These slave owners not only robbed their Negroes of the fruit of their labor, but held them in sovereign contempt, while they constituted the aristocracy of the land.

They never dreamed that their slaves would one day be their political equals. Perish the ignoble, idiotic thought! They were the elect of the earth. They would rule forever — but they didn’t.

The black slaves are getting along without their former plantation masters, and in the next great upheaval all the slaves of the earth, white and black and brown and red and yellow, will abolish their industrial masters and stand forth the sovereign citizens of the world.

This is the mission of the socialist movement and if Mr. Grow were informed as to its historic connection and relation he would cease wasting his time and energy in the vain task of harmonizing antagonistic forces that are inexorably in conflict, working out the supreme problems of civilization.

The class struggle is the boundary line between man and beast — the glory of the human race and the sure promise of its final redemption.

Between workingmen and capitalists there is conflict to extinction, war to the death.

The intervals of peace, or, rather the cessation of hostility, are but the breathing spells for the renewal of the conflict.

The smaller capitalists are doomed to destruction and their bloated conquerors, fully developed, become social parasites that will be abolished with the system that spawned them.

The owners of American railroads have nothing to do with their operation. They simply absorb their vast profits. They also bribe legislators, corrupt courts, and debauch politics. If the entire lot of them were to take a balloon for some other planet they would never be missed. The trains would all run as usual.

The capital only is needed — the capitalists, as such, can go and will go — the sooner the better for all concerned, themselves included.

We are emerging from the darkness and moving grandly toward the dawn, as Carlyle said, “from competition in individualism to individuality in cooperation, from war and despotism in any form to peace and liberty.”

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¹ Galusha A. Grow (1823-1907) of Pennsylvania was first elected to Congress in 1850, switching parties in 1856 in protest of President Franklin Pierce’s signing of the Kansas-Nebraska Act. Grow is remembered for his role in an 1858 fight on the floor of the House of Representatives, during which he was physically attacked by Laurence M. Keitt, a reactionary Democrat from South Carolina. While serving as speaker of the House, the radical Republican Grow was defeated in a bid for re-election in 1862. He did not return to Congress until 1894.

² “The Shortcomings of Arbitration” was a short syndicated piece published in various newspapers in July 1893.