

THE PEOPLE

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LOOKING BACKWARD

By Daniel De Leon

Workingmen, you hear on all sides—and not infrequently from the very mouths of your own leaders—that the condition of labor has been greatly improved in this century by mechanical invention and the opening of new country. And as you see every where the undeniable evidences of an enormous production steadily increasing the very men among you who struggle for existence in the deepest misery are readily made to believe that their class as a whole, if not their unlucky selves, derives some benefits from the prodigious achievements of capitalism in the field of industry. So much more food, they say, is produced and must be consumed, that the masses are of necessity better fed than they were fifty years ago; so much more raiment is turned out by machinery that they must be better clothed; so many more houses are built that they must have better homes.

Now make a note of this.

A comparison of production in 1840 and 1890 shows that in the matter of food, which is the chief necessary of life, the masses of the American people are on a lower plane of comfort than they were fifty years ago. The best showing that is made is in the production of cereals, which has increased fivefold while the population has only quadrupled: but if the quantity of grain exported is duly deducted from the total crop, it is found that the domestic consumption of breadstuffs per capita has remained substantially the same. On the other hand, a large decline has taken place in the consumption of meat. The number of cattle increased 15 per cent. less than population, and much of the cattle of the present day, raised on ranches, weighs less and is of inferior quality as compared with the farm cattle of 1840. Besides, a considerable quantity of meat is now exported, thereby reducing the available supply for domestic consumption. Again, the rate of increase of population in the last fifty years has been twice as great as that of sheep and swine, so that the per capita consumption of mutton and pork is now one half of what it was in 1840.

As to clothing, the cheapest sort—that which the workingmen and women must perforce wear—does not compare in strength and durability with the fabrics of previous generations. It has been recently shown in these columns that in woollen goods the increase of adulteration had been greater than the increase of product; that the apparent cheapness of cloth was the result, not of abundance, but of degraded processes of manufacture, and that, upon the whole, men and women had to give as much labor now as previously in exchange for a quantity of clothing from which they could get the same amount of wear and comfort.

Of the homes of working people what need be said? Where are they? The country homes of 1840 may for the most part have been log cabins, but they belonged to those who lived in them. In manufacturing towns some regard was paid to decency and fair lodgings, and pleasant cottages were provided for the operatives. To-day, tenantry and wage-labor constitute a majority of the agricultural workers, many of whom are tramps a portion of the year; while in great cities the tenement house abomination breeds physical disease and moral pestilence.

Hear some hypocrite declare and some fool repeat that we are advocating a return to the conditions of 1840. Do we? Of course not. We simply demand conditions in 1890 that will show, instead of retrogression, an advance in the welfare of the working classes corresponding to the progress of machinery and the increased possibilities of production.

This much, however, cannot be obtained under the present economic system. A constantly smaller production of the necessaries of life by and for the masses on the one hand, and a constantly enlarging production of luxuries by the masses for the wealthy on the other hand, are essential features of that system. Therefore we advocate its abolition, that the masses of the people may no longer be, as they were in 1840, and as they are now to a much greater extent, dependent for their means of life and future advance upon a class naturally destructive of the public welfare and necessarily hostile to human progress.

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