

THE COMMONWEAL

The Official Journal of the Socialist League.

VOL. 3.—No. 82.

SATURDAY, AUGUST 6, 1887.

WEEKLY; ONE PENNY.

NOTES.

MR. WALTER BESANT, as hon. treasurer of the Working Women's Conference, is appealing to people in general to give him information as to the wages and conditions of life of working women. The result of this may be useful, or it may not be. In the first place it will be useless if the information is not thoroughly genuine, if it is allowed to be influenced by the spirit that often creeps into such collections of "information": the spirit that tries to create the impression that things are not very bad, and that even if they are bad they can easily be altered for the better a little, and that—there, that will do.

But supposing a great deal of genuine information gathered and published; what will be the use of it, and to whom will it be useful? It will be absolutely no use unless it is used, so far as it goes, for the purpose of putting both sexes of workpeople into a totally different position from their present one. And under those circumstances it is hard to see how it can be useful to any but those who are striving to change the basis of society, to make all women working-women, and not force either marriage or prostitution on any of them as a profession—in other words, to free labour from the tyranny of monopoly. Those people who are trying to do this are usually called Socialists, and I fear that Mr. Besant can hardly be classed as one of these, in spite of his apparently genuine sympathy with the joys and troubles of working people.

Apart from those middle-class persons who have had the good luck to be convinced of the truths of Socialism and are actually working for it, I have met with two kinds amongst persons of good will to the popular cause: first, persons of very strong and marked advanced opinions who are so far from thinking that the holding of such opinions involves any sort of action on their part, that they rather (or indeed very much) plume themselves on their superiority over those who act on their opinions, whatever they may be;—of course, such persons are desperate pessimists. The other kind are persons whose opinions are not very advanced, but have a sort of idea that they should act upon them, such as they are, and will undertake cheerfully any little job that may turn up, from total abstinence to electioneering, with a cheerful confidence in the usefulness of their work: but all the while they have not even faced the question as to the necessity of changing the basis of society; they suppose that the present system contains in itself everything that is necessary to cure the evils which they are to some extent conscious of; and indeed some of them are very anxious to stave off the radical change which Socialism proposes by exhibiting the said evils in course of being cured by—well, I must say it—rose-water.

I know this latter group of well-disposed middle-class people exists, and I rather think Mr. Walter Besant belongs to it. If I wrong him by so thinking I shall be glad to be convinced to the contrary. And meantime this group of people may yield converts to Socialism when they have found out by practical experience that the evils they are good-temperedly attacking are not accidents of the present system but essential to it. Then they may make up their minds to attack the system itself.

U Till within the last few years St. Alban's Abbey used to be one of the most interesting of the historical monuments of England; not because it was the longest church in the world, nor even altogether because it comprised some of the most beautiful work of the most perfect period of architecture, but also because all kinds of varied historical interest centred in its site and building. Partly built of materials from Verulam, it became in the early part of the Middle Ages the refuge and home of the chroniclers of the time. Some of the most interesting and heart-stirring passages in the Peasants' War, that outburst of Mediaeval Communism, took place around it. It witnessed two of the battles of the Wars of the Roses, the second of which was the bloodiest of all; and till within the last few years, though it had suffered some indignities, was still the stout and beautiful old building that had seen so many dramas played round about it. It is not too much to say that it stood in the homely Hertfordshire fields one of the wonders of the world.

U Well, to-day it has been deprived of most of its beauty and two-thirds of its historical interest. How and why? Insurrections, battles, changes of religion, had left it pretty much unhurt; but the damage

they couldn't do has been done quite lately by such a thing as a common parliamentary lawyer, a cleverish vulgar man, once called Sir Edmund Becket, now Lord Grimsthorpe, who coveted the glory of "restoring" this ancient monument; and although the ruin he proposed to make of it was disapproved of by most of those who had the guardianship of this piece of public property, all opposition went down before the shaking of his money-bag, and 'tis all done, or on the point of being all done; and the whim of a parliamentary lawyer has proved to be more destructive than miller Grindecobbe's bills and bows, than Henry the Eighth's greedy barons, or Cromwell's lobster-tails! Truly the money-bag has more to answer for than the destruction of works of art and monuments of history; yet the wantonness and irremediable character of this kind of destruction, joined with the preposterous vulgarity of the instrument of it, makes it hard to bear. WM. MORRIS.

LABOUR FEDERATION.

ONE of the best indications of the progress of the labour movement is the growing feeling amongst trades-unionists for a federation of all workers. This feeling is vague and unsettled just now, but it is very widespread and it is growing stronger. The trades-union leaders who occasionally speak in favour of it do nothing to carry it out; indeed it is plain that with their narrow spirit and inability to move out of the accustomed rut, they are really afraid of it and want to see it smothered. But in spite of this the mass of the workmen feel more and more strongly that a closer bond of union should exist amongst them, and that the interests of the workers in all trades and in all lands are much the same.

This means a good deal to the Socialists. Everything that shows a growing feeling of solidarity amongst the wage-slaves is in the right direction. The labour struggle has always been weakened by petty jealousies, splits, and contradictions amongst the workmen. In the past it has been difficult to get the men of one trade to agree to act together against the capitalist and impossible to get several trades to co-operate. This is passing away. The miners see one district after another go on strike and get beaten. While the miners of Northumberland were being starved into submission, the miners of Yorkshire, Lancashire, Derbyshire, Durham, Wales, and Scotland, were producing extra coal to supply the market. The capitalists are a helpless lot in themselves, a mere nothing against the workmen; but they generally get the best of it, because they play off one part of the working-men against the other. It was not the mine-owners who beat the miners of Northumberland in the late struggle. It was their fellow-miners elsewhere. The miners see this now and so far as Northumberland is concerned, they will leave no stone unturned in preparing to present a solid and organised front to their employers in the next fight. Coal is essential to every other industry in the country, and were the men thoroughly combined they could compel society to render up their rights or dislocate the whole system by temporarily stopping production.

The great benefit of labour federation must be apparent to every workman who knows anything of the present crisis in the labour organisations. The Socialists have preached it for a long time. The efforts of Karl Marx to weld the working-men of all countries into an international union though unsuccessful (chiefly because the times were not ripe) are full of interesting lessons which no friend of labour can afford to neglect. But as the trades-unionists got their first lesson in labour federation from the Socialists they would do well to learn it thoroughly. A federation of all workers *merely to force a rise of wages* would be useless. If that were its only object it could only appeal to one section of the working-class, it would never raise the universal enthusiasm and fervid devotion that a great popular cause must have behind it, and for these two reasons it would be easily smashed up by the capitalists and their catspaw the Government. Even if it conquered all these difficulties, however, it would still be cheated out of its object. If the capitalists could not resist a rise of wages they could force a rise of prices and get back in one way what they were compelled to yield in another. Let us say that to-day the average wage is 20s. per week and the average cost of living 17s. In three years a Labour Federation well enough organised to stop production in a few industries (say coal, iron and cotton) for one week, might force a general rise of 50 per cent in wages. The average wage would then be 30s. per week. But the traders could immediately raise prices 50 per cent, and then the