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The Revolt of the New Immigrant

by

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CONSIDER the so-called new immigrant as he is upon his arrival. He is usually a peasant, barely literate, coarse, somewhat superstitious, with feebly developed reflective qualities and with a low self-esteem. The family is his center of existence. His pride of race and his patriotism are feeble. In the state he has little interest. He accepts it as something inevitable, but as unreasonable and cruel. He worships private property; his highest aim is to come into possession of a farm. No task is too heavy if it will only lead to this precious goal. No communism for him; nothing but individual possession of land. Unless he comes from certain parts of Hungary or Finland, he has no knowledge of socialism or radicalism or even trade-unionism. He imports with him no revolutionary experience, no radical traditions, no acquaintance with labor organizations.

Candor compels one to state that he comes here in search not of our ideals, our free schools, our social equality, but of our jobs, our wages. In the beginning his plan is not to settle here, but to stay long enough to save a sum with which to purchase a homestead in the old home. What he covets most is steady employment. But if he should join a union, he might arouse the wrath of the employer, be discharged or laid off; or he might have to join a strike, and cease to draw wages. The argument that his losses would be more than offset by the gains of victory, evokes no response in him. It was for this

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reason that in pre-war days our basic industries courted peasant labor. The peasant takes orders and does not grumble. Although he has lost the independence he enjoyed as a tiller of the soil, and his job is tedious and exhausting, and if he misunderstands directions he is often abused and scolded, he is sustained by the thought that within a year or two he will have his one or two thousand lire or marks and rubles. Then he will rush back to the old village.

But disappointment lies in store for him. He knows little about the ebb and flow of productivity in an industrial society, and the precarious position of the man who depends solely upon his job. Pay-envelopes cease to come. He must live upon his accumulations. It dawns upon him that his task is not so easy as he had imagined. His return home moves out of the foreground of his mind. He thinks less of the distant and more of his immediate future. In his old village, if he was out of work, a friend or relative would care for him. But in America everyone is for himself. He has to be. Food comes not from the cellar, but from the grocery. The peasant soon realizes that he has nothing here that is so firm, so reassuring as a hut of his own and a parcel of land. Here everything he needs costs cash. Money! Money! The words bite into his mind as he realizes their power. And he knows that as long as he is in this country his destiny is fixed: he will remain a laborer, with his job as his sole means of support. The story of the successes of other immigrants leaves him cold. He knows that he lacks the training and mental equipment to rise to such a position. And the longer he stays here

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the more critical he grows of the conditions that surround him. At this point, if the labor leader comes and presents to him the case of the trade-union, the words have new meaning.

Consider, now, the effect of the campaigns of our sales agencies upon the mind of the immigrant. In no other country has business mustered such an array of talent to conduct its advertising. Persistently, seductively, one sermon is preached: buy! buy! The natural result is that the peasant worker becomes dissatisfied with his form of living. How often have factory-owners complained to me that the trouble with the alien is his growing extravagance. But shall we not lay a large portion of the blame to our sales forces, which so persistently and so shrewdly beset him with all manner of temptation? And when he succumbs, why wonder that he grows more aggressive, demanding higher wages, and striking when the demand is denied?

And what shall be said of the publicity given to the item of profits and its effect upon the mind of the worker? Nowadays the information is in most cases public property. It is the most persuasive argument of the stock seller. The newspapers feature it. The result is indignation and resentment on the part of the worker. During the steel strike, nearly every striker could reel off the figures on the profits of the Steel Corporation. Let those who are in the habit of ascribing the restlessness of labor to agitators ponder over the significance of the work of sales forces and the publicity of profits.

What further stimulates the discontent of the peasant worker is his unsatisfying social life. They yearn to go back to their old home because "it is cheerful." In every European village the people are accustomed to community life — festivals, games, dances, song-festivals. Here, the peasant craves social diversion. He lives very much by himself, and a thwarted social life does not add to a person's spirit of contentment. Meanwhile he becomes aware that he lives in an atmosphere of political freedom and individual equality. His

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equality is continually emphasized. It is all different from what he had been accustomed to. Here he sees people of wealth and power, yet without outward marks of distinction. He sees few soldiers on the streets. Policemen do not spy around him and keep constantly telling him what he must not do. There is no doffing of the hat to superiors. He can go wherever he pleases. And here he eats better food. He eats luxuries just like the aristocrats in the Old World. He wears the same clothes of persons who belong to a higher social stratum.

Now, all these experiences Americanize the peasant. They burn out of him his sense of social inferiority. He becomes a bolder, a more self-assertive person. Loud words and abuse no longer cower him. He regards himself the equal of others, and is ready to defend what he conceives as his rights. It can truly be said that this, the opportunity to discover his own individuality, is the greatest contribution America makes to the spiritual development of the peasant immigrant.

And shall we ignore the result of idealistic war propaganda? We proclaimed him as our equal, a brother in arms, destined to share equally in the noble fruits of victory, in a richer, happier life.

The new immigrant is now a changed person. That is why he is now in revolt. He now joins the union and goes out on strike readily enough. There is not a more stubborn striker than he. The time is not far distant when every basic industry will be solidly unionized. That is the direction in which American life is pushing the immigrant worker. He has discovered the union and the strike, and he has been making use of these weapons in his own way. In the future he will wield them with ever-increasing firmness. What needs to be emphasized is that he has come to the discovery of these weapons only through a long period of struggle and experimentation with individual methods of industrial relations. Instead of being the result of alien influences, as has been persistently averred, his present-labor activities, his revolt against conditions, are the result of a prolonged and painful process of Americanization.