THE GUILD STAMP AND THE UNION LABEL:
BY THE EDITOR

When the trade union of today returns to the standards of the me-
dieval guilds, it will provide itself with real leaders, not limited by
rank or birth or wealth or circumstance, but opening the way for each
individual to rise to a place of honor and influence by the expression
of his own best and highest self.—Nicholas Murray Butler.

The year that has just closed has seen many happen-
ings in the political, financial and industrial world which
would seem to indicate that we are on the eve of a
general readjustment of the forces which go to make up
our national life. As a result of the investigations which
have been so unflinchingly pursued, there is no question
but that at the coming session of Congress there will
be placed upon our statute books very important and far-reaching
legislation that will have for its object the better control of our banks,
our common carriers, our public utilities and the great monopolies
we call trusts. The financial crisis and the resulting industrial
depression have also brought their lesson, for a change for the better
in the conduct of affairs by large industrial concerns seems also to be
imminent, and the openly expressed opinion that the curtailing of
production will result in more efficient work and so in the end be a
benefit to our national industries may be taken as the indication of
a widespread belief that our present industrial system falls far short
of producing the best results.

As readjustment seems to be a part of the order of the coming
day, would it not be a good thing for the nation if the spirit of reform
and reconstruction could be extended far enough to include the labor
organizations? It is pretty generally admitted that under present
conditions these bodies fall as far short of fulfilling the purpose for
which they were originally organized as do the great combinations
of capital from serving the best interests of our industrial life as a
whole. For the sake of their own healthy growth and development
and for the welfare of their members as individuals, it would seem to be a wise move on the part of the labor unions to fall in with the prevailing spirit of readjustment and to take account of stock with a view to reorganizing on a basis that shall be constructive rather than disintegrating.

In times of overflowing prosperity such as we have just experienced, the demand for labor so far exceeds the supply that every man, whether competent or not, is reasonably sure of a job. It is the natural consequence of such prosperity that the unions should have found in it no incentive to cultivate the forces that alone make for permanent growth. Instead, the fact that there was plenty of work and plenty of money led the union leaders to consider that all their thought and energy was well spent when it was directed to the increasing of wages and the shortening of hours, together with the enforcing of rules and restrictions that would tend to give the unions at their own prices a monopoly of all the work to be done. In endeavoring to do all this, they did not stop to consider that by the time everything is adjusted to a scale of increased wages, prices of all commodities have moved up in proportion, so that the average workman is no better off than he was before. In fact, the chances are that he is not so well off, for the natural effect of a larger income is a feeling of greater freedom as to expenditure, without regard to the increased cost of all the necessaries of life. To the unions it was a golden opportunity for solid advancement, but judging by present results, it seems to have been lost. For in return for the increased pay and lessened time which they have exacted from employers, the unions have given no more competent work; rather, the standard of efficiency has been lowered to the level of the least competent, thereby taking away from the individual workman all incentive to increase his own efficiency as a means of obtaining steady employment or advancing to a higher grade of work.

IN THIS country there has always been a disposition on the part of the people to sympathize with the struggles of the laboring man against oppression, and until lately public feeling, as a rule, has been with workmen out on strike for whatever reason, regardless of the inconvenience caused by the tying up of important industries. It was natural that this should be so, if only from the inherent desire for fair play, and in the past there has frequently been good reason for the laboring man to meet force with force. The methods of large manufacturers,—particularly of combinations of manufacturers,—
have often been unscrupulous when it came to dealing with their workmen as individuals. Therefore, the labor union seemed to offer the only defense, and with the first feeling of strength resulting from combination, it has been only natural for the workingman, in his struggle to emancipate himself from oppressive conditions, to attempt to defend himself with the same kind of weapons that were used by his opponent. The methods of warfare now so popular with labor unions have grown up as a natural consequence of this tendency on the part of the individual members. Of late, however, there seems to be a change in our attitude of general tolerance, and now there are strong indications that the main current of public feeling is beginning to go the other way. Under these circumstances it would seem only prudent for thoughtful workingmen to consider whether their unions are on the right track, and whether or not they wish to allow the power of their united efforts to wane until it becomes a factor not worth reckoning with. The matter lies in their own hands, for it requires only a determined effort to uphold a higher standard of efficiency and honesty to give them in the end the power, privileges and influence that belonged to the unions of former days, known now as the old trades guilds,—the powerful organizations which were frankly based upon the honesty of individual effort and which gave to their members a training in efficiency that fitted them not only to do work that was unimpeachable, but gave them such experience in the general affairs of life that they were well fitted to take an important part in the ruling of the nation.

The guild idea, that is, the spirit of association uniting individuals for common profit as well as preservation, is as old as civilization, and has flourished among peoples differing widely from one another and at periods separated by hundreds and even thousands of years, but unquestionably it reached its highest expression in the trades guilds of mediaeval Europe, those great organizations which crushed the power of feudalism, established free communication throughout Europe, made possible a form of government established upon a sound and lasting basis, ruled all the operations of finance and fixed a standard for work, for art and for literature that has made the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries famous for all time. And all the power and influence of the trades guilds resulted from the fact that the success of their united action depended solely upon the honesty of individual effort. A rigid industrial system that was the law and life of the guild governed both the training of each individual workman and the quality of the goods produced, and the effect of this
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was to develop such skill in hand and brain that the workman could take honest pride in what he made, and could feel that he as an individual had achieved something that would add to rather than lower the reputation of the guild. In short, instead of being a cog in a vast system of industrial machinery, the workman was accustomed to regard himself as legitimate heir to a part of the business of the nation.

There is no more interesting tale in all history than the story of the Greater Guilds, which were little republics within themselves, living under the strictest laws and enjoying an influence so extensive that the wonderful commercial prosperity, the artistic and industrial supremacy and the intellectual acumen of the mediæval Florentines, for example, may be regarded as the outcome of the guild system. As each guild was an independent, self-ruling institution, its members naturally took a continuous and eager share in political life and obtained, as a consequence of such varied political and economic training, a grasp of large matters that made them as adroit in diplomacy and parliamentary practice as they were accurate in business methods, so that on the occasion of upheavals in the existing form of government, which frequently took place in the Italian cities, they were able at once to step forward and meet the emergency with well-advised and adequate provisional government until the crisis was passed.

It would take a volume to tell of the honors and achievements of the guilds, but only one sentence to show the foundation of them all, which was—efficient workmanship, thorough honesty, the perfection of system and personal pride in the reputation of the organization. These old merchants and craftsmen made a religion of industry, and it was the object of the guild not only to maintain and extend its power as an organization, but to benefit each member in his individual capacity, providing him with work, profit and pleasure, but always with the understanding that his work and his moral character were to be subjected to rigid scrutiny and that any one falling short of the standards of the guild must submit to severe punishment. The great power of the guilds lay as much in their close connection with the conduct and details of every-day life as in their relation to national or continental enterprises. They were no mere formal organizations for purposes which began and ended with commerce and industry. To borrow some vivid words of description: “Their members sat together at the feast, stood by one another’s honor in the mart, lived in the same quarter, shared the same purchase, marched
side by side in the pageant, acted together in the play and fought together on the part of the city walls committed to their care. The merchant lived in his warehouse, which was also his factory as well as his shop, the apprentice sat at his master’s table for seven years, somewhat after the manner of an adopted son, and on attaining the membership of the guild he gained a recognized and honorable position in the land.

That this last was so was due to the high standard of the guild. When the guild stamp was put upon any piece of work it was accepted without question in all markets as a guarantee against any falsification of material or any flaw in workmanship. To quote from the history of the Calimala, or the guild of Florentine cloth dressers: “The statutes for the good of the guild, enforced by so many magistrates, prescribed hard and fast rules for the exercise of trade. Very severe punishments were inflicted when the merchandise was of inferior quality, defective or counterfeit. Every piece was labeled, and any stain or rent not recorded by this label entailed the punishment of the merchant concerned. Above all, there was great strictness as to accuracy of measure. Every guild had a tribunal composed either solely of its members or jointly with those of another for the settlement of all disputes connected with the trade, and enforced severe penalties on all who referred such disputes to the ordinary courts of justice. The punishments were usually fines, and persons refusing to pay them, after receiving several warnings, were excluded from the guild and practically ruined, from that moment their merchandise, being unstamped, was no longer guaranteed by the association, and they themselves were unable to continue their work in Florence, and often were debarred elsewhere.”

This was the significance of the guild stamp, which being affixed meant that the goods reached the standard established by the guild, and had the whole power of its reputation behind them. In these days we have the union label, and the difference between it and the guild stamp symbolizes the whole change in standards. Everybody is familiar with the efforts of the unions to force the use of the label through appeals to the public to patronize union-made goods to the exclusion of all other, and also through threats of boycotts, strikes and every form of warfare known to those who control the campaigns of union labor against the manufacturer or dealer who refuses to recognize the label.
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Remembering the significance of the guild stamp, the question naturally arises: What does the union label stand for? Is it a shop mark to indicate a standard of excellence of which the manufacturer is proud and which serves to advertise the fact that his goods are of a quality that he is willing to acknowledge and to guarantee, or is it simply an indication that men who have banded themselves together for the purpose of monopolizing the production of that particular article have been successful in forcing some manufacturer to come to their terms? In the present day, of course, we have no guild stamp to serve as a general standard and guarantee, but when a manufacturer makes honest goods, he generally wants the consumer to know it, and his label or shop mark is as important to him as a means of identification as the guild stamp was to the guildsmen of centuries ago. It is also to be noted that shoddy goods are seldom identified in this way, for if the goods do not come up to the standard demanded by the consumer the label would only have the effect of identifying them to the detriment of their sales. But in the case of the union label there can be no possible significance as a mark of excellence in quality. That is a matter entirely beyond the control of the workman or of the union to which he belongs. The label of a manufacturer is, in a sense, a personal guarantee of quality. It means a certain grade of material, a certain style in the make of the article, and may, in some cases, be worth millions to the man who owns it. It is the direct descendant of the old guild stamp, while the union label has nothing to do with the standard of the goods produced and, save for the fact that it guarantees the exclusion of sweat-shop goods, it carries no meaning to the consumer beyond a reminder that an organization of workmen is using every means to enforce the recognition of the union shop, there being not one iota of difference in quality between goods that bear the union label and those that do not. The manufacturer having entire authority as to designs, materials, quality of goods and the apportionment of tasks to the workmen in making those goods, it follows that the purpose of the union label is purely coercive, and that its sole value to either workman or consumer lies in the recognition of the union that is implied by its use and the revenue derived by the union from the sale of it to the manufacturer.

If the trade union of today is ever to return to the standards of the mediaeval guilds and to attain to the power which resulted from the strict and honest maintenance of these standards, it must abandon its policy of attempting to secure monopoly prices, of
unfair methods of keeping down membership and of intimidation—and violence toward non-union men, and return to the principle that no organization can be organic and constructive in its nature unless it be founded upon the principle of efficiency,—upon honest individual effort, out of which effective united effort naturally grows. To do this would, of course, demand a thorough reorganization of our whole industrial system. The high standards of the old guilds were possible because the guilds themselves were not organizations of workmen arrayed against employers, or organizations of employers excluding the workmen, but bodies which included every member of the trade or craft, from the wealthiest master craftsman or merchant down to the humblest apprentice whose indentures had just been signed. All alike were responsible for the honor of the guild, and the esprit de corps that resulted from the personal contact of the master and workmen and the freedom and encouragement given to all individual effort made vital and natural the growth of the whole organization.

Yet, false as are the standards which actuate most of the efforts on the part of modern labor organizations to control the industrial situation, they are by no means all to blame for the meaningless-ness of the union label and the fact that it has nothing behind it worth fighting for. If a standard of efficiency in which the unions have a share is to be established in manufactures, it must be one in which the men as individuals are interested, which they take a personal pride in maintaining and for which they receive a just proportion of the reward. The effect upon the men of the present system, by which they are able through certain coercive measures on the part of the union to obtain shorter hours and higher wages in return for careless and incompetent service, cannot be otherwise than harmful. It shelters the lazy and inefficient workman and it denies to the ambitious and skilful man his right to advance to the position which naturally belongs to him. Consequently, the great weakness of the labor union of today is that it tends to drag all its members down to the level of the slowest and the stupidest. While they belong to the union there can be no acknowledgment or higher payment for the production of superior goods for which there is a legitimate demand and which are worth more money than the inferior product of less skilled workmen; in fact, their work as individuals has nothing to do with the price or standard of the product. The business of each man is to run his machine, get through his day’s work, draw his pay and stand by his union. He can have no possible interest in the
thing made. When matters are shaped so that the individual workman may find some scope for the expression of his own ideas,—for the use of his knowledge and experience in opportunities given to study the need for which the article is produced and to share with his employer the responsibility of its design and its quality, it will be time to talk of returning to the standards of the old guilds and also of enforcing the use of the union label on goods made by union men. But the only way to gain energy, honesty and intelligence from the workman is to make it worth his while to exercise them. Under the present system he is little more than a part of the machinery of the factory he works in. There is absolutely no reason why he should feel any interest in his work beyond the daily wage he earns for performing the monotonous task set for him. It is a universal law that work is not alone a means to keep body and soul together, but also a means of growth through self-expression,—a means by which individual capacity and industry gain individual recognition and bring an adequate return, and if the opportunity for growth is denied, the work is hardly worth the doing.

If such reorganization were possible, and employers and employees would realize that their best can be done only when they work together toward a common end, the labor unions might hope to provide themselves with the “real leaders” spoken of by Dr. Butler, and, founded on the solid basis of efficient work, to grow healthily along the lines of personal development and of sound citizenship. This is a question that affects not only the workingmen, but the whole of our national life, for our workmen are our citizens, and under the present system our workmen are becoming less and less efficient. When a man depends not on his own efforts but on the efforts of some one else, that is, on the power or influence of his union to do for him what he is too indifferent or too inefficient to do for himself, he is sinking in the scale as a man and a worker and is losing all the power of individual achievement which might be his were he allowed to depend upon himself.

As it stands now, the whole policy of the labor union seems to be tending toward disintegration. The walking delegate is supreme, and the walking delegate is the natural prey of the great money powers. Many an honest, capable workman is sent unwillingly out on strike, not because there is any real grievance to be fought, but because the vanity and cupidity of the labor leaders have been used to further the ends of some unscrupulous captain of in-
dust industry who wishes to overwhelm his competitors or to shut down for a time upon his own expenses. Even when this is not the case, the rule of passion and prejudice in the persons of glib-tongued demagogues is often responsible for widespread disaster that comes to working people as the result of their loyalty to the union.

As a nation we are now using every possible effort to destroy or reorganize the trusts and start afresh upon a sounder basis. It would be easier and perhaps better in the long run to destroy or reorganize the labor unions, for the trusts, whatever industrial evils have arisen from their unchecked growth, are organized on principles that are essentially constructive. They unquestionably are created to serve individual greed, but they are also the greatest expressions of individual efficiency. Whatever the captain of industry may or may not be, there is no question as to the efficiency of his method of doing the work that he has set himself to do, or of his interest in the performance of it. With the standards which now form the basis of its action, the labor union can oppose to cool generalship only brute force; to well calculated and sound business principles and methods only prejudice and feeling. If efficiency could be made the warrant of advancement for each individual, and honest conviction the basis of united action, as in the days of the mediæval guilds, there is no question but what the organizations of workers could rank among the most important powers in the land. History teaches us no more significant lesson than that the rulers of a nation, when they become weak or unworthy, are always replaced from the ranks of the workers. It is a fundamental law of progress that no development is possible save through interest in work, and the problems that come up concerning it, and that the man who wrestles most vigorously with these problems is the man who is best able to grapple with great things.

If labor would follow the example of capital and combine for greater efficiency, it would be more in accord with the old American spirit that made this country what it is: the spirit of independence, of self-confidence and of ambition to rise in life by force of ability, intelligence and honesty. The labor unions have relaxed the moral fiber of their members even while striving honestly to benefit them. The union man is provided with easy work, good pay and short hours when well, and is sure of some help from his organization should he fall ill, but as a penalty he is restricted to the level of the weakest member of his union, and can never hope to rise by excellence of workmanship or the use of his brain to a leading position or to the acquiring of a competence by superior industry or frugality.
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As the matter stands now, the principles and policies of the unions are directly opposed to intelligence, independence, industry and ambition on the part of their members. In place of encouraging these, the union as a body endeavors to coerce and to overreach, to gain every advantage and to give as little as possible, to produce class hatred and antagonism between employer and employee, instead of acknowledging that capital and labor are mutually interdependent, and that a single standard for both would go far to remove the antagonism that now exists between them.

THE DREAMER

LET be his dream candles,
Be silent and revere,
Scorn not what he doth rear,

Because thine own abode,
A vault is, dark and old,
Where thou doth creep 'mid mould.

Who fired the dream-tapers?
Know 'twas no mortal hand
These glorious visions fanned.

And those not lit by Truth
Old age with withering breath,
Hath power to put to death.

Let be his dream candles,
Be silent and revere
Behind them dwells the seer.

—EDITH GERRY HELM.