

The Factory Workers (1870)

*Abraham Kuyper**

If anything deserves the name of Augias stable, it is the social condition of our working classes.

As the labor question presses ever further to the fore and demands a louder hearing, it is no longer possible to placate oneself in this regard with reassuring generalities. The veil is lifted, which covered the life and suffering of thousands in our immediate surroundings, and with a shudder the eye gazes upon the somber lines and figures of this sad painting.

In all its moving details, a life that seems to be a chain of care and deprivation passes before our eyes.

An existence worn out joylessly and disconsolately in monotonous manual labor, more monotonous and joyless as the place of manual labor is taken by steam, which has elevated the machine to a worker and reduced the worker to a machine.

A life, at whose low, cloudy horizon only one noteworthy but then daily—and with unavoidable seriousness and soul-killing punctuality—looms the question: “How to feed me? Wherewith to clothe myself?”

[A life] which, insofar as it is spent in factory work, does not know want in this sense of the word, because its ample earnings enable it to provide for its first needs.

But [a life] which even then remains alien to true enjoyment of life, because it is unfamiliar with the garden where the fragrant flower grows and plunges in vain into intoxication and animality to obtain it.

A life that seems bent on dissolving and destroying the family, that foundation of society, in all its parts and divisions. That considers and treats father, mother, and children as nothing more than cogs, different in size and purpose, but still cogs in the one, large, always turning, impersonal machine. Where, according to competent witnesses and generally speaking, *domestic sociability*, *frugality*, and *morality* are almost nowhere to be found, and in which the order of nature is so reversed that the children feel and behave as independent of the parents, because it is they who earn the wages, or at least the greater part of them.

A life that hardly suspects the existence of *higher* needs and, by experience at least, knows nothing of their satisfaction or the happiness they bring. [A life] for which mental development does not exist, and which perhaps regards reading and writing as a superfluous luxury. Which also knows no other recreation of labor than to stop working in its sleep, when the ear still catches the dying sound of the pounding and hammering of the machine, which it has had to hear for ten, twelve—no, sixteen hours out of four and twenty.

A life that realizes nothing of the privilege of being descended from pious, stalwart fathers, or of the obligation that such descent places on the sons.

[Sons] whose endless weeks, without resting points or distinguishing marks, flow unrecognizably into one another, because no day of rest, no true day of rest at least, comes to close the long-swept days, to strengthen with its everlasting spring feeling the exhausted strength, or to refresh the jaded brain, or to revive the weary soul.

A life that, inherited from generation to generation, extinguishes all spiritual susceptibility, paralyzes all inner resilience and self-reliance, to become in the end nothing but a mechanical breathing, an involuntary movement of arm, or hand, or foot; an imposed, unabsorbed burden, perhaps even a curse....

Ah, there is no need to argue the existence of the Augias stable. The greatest grief is this, that society still awaits the Hercules who will cleanse it.

* * *

For well are the trials for curing evil, and the trialists, who extol theirs as the infallible, are many—but it only makes the matter worse, that usually so few satisfactory results are furnished. [It only makes the matter worse] if it should not even be said of many, that their remedy is worse than the malady!

There is, for example, the *International* preached to him, so highly praised by itself and by counterproductive friends of the workers.¹

What does it want, what does it commend to restore the broken balance between labor and capital, to shrink the distance between master and workman?

First of all, [it wants] an elevation of the so-called *natural state*, in which with as little labor as possible, all the necessities of life are fulfilled as if by a miracle.

As if labor in itself were a curse, or that state of nature anything but an impossible product of the imagination! Then [it commends] a wide-ranging and detailed presentation of all the grievances which the workers can bring up against their employers, as a legitimate basis for their hopes of a day of bloody, swift retribution.

Furthermore, a complete reversal of the situation by *universal suffrage*, which will transfer the administration of the country's affairs from the well-to-do, with whom it now rests, with arithmetical certainty to the working class, which outnumbers it by far.

Thus, [the result would be] no *restoration* of the broken balance in society, but transfer of the preponderance to the other side, which would not eliminate the disorder, but would perpetuate and perhaps worsen it.

[There would be] no *rapprochement* between the estranged, often tense parties, but an unheard, unmerciful condemnation of the one, and a fierce, irreconcilable, deadly hatred of the other.

And finally [there would be] nothing which could really reconcile the workman to his lot, or make the hardships, which afflict him, less hard or oppressive. For the family and domestic happiness, to which he is so often alien, the political club and women's suffrage for the relaxation of the feverish brain are not salutary, fascinating, and at the same time instructive reading, but the excitement of popular political men and women and of election leaflets.

Instead of a Day of Rest with its comforting gospel, [they preach] nothing but the prediction of a social paradise, in which the flesh will compensate itself for the privation and oppression it has so unlawfully suffered.

In the face of the injustice suffered by the worker, in a word, only hatred and retribution are preached to him,² and in order to lift him out of the neglected condition in which he often lies down, a method is advocated which, for that very reason, would be reprehensible, because it totally disregards the law of gradual development.

It is by no means our purpose here to discuss the social question or its solution in its entirety. But from the few lines we have pointed out, and along which the International moves, it is already clear that the solution to the complex problem is not to be sought with it. To her the workman, who understands his interest, may safely add: Your help will not avail me; I need no defenders like you.

Another method has been tried and has produced better results. The Church has not [acted], as it should have done, on a large scale, but nevertheless, here and there, within local limits, it has advanced the solution of the problem, which both a self-willed philanthropy and a corrupted government have proved too powerful. And it is a brave thought that it has already accomplished so much with so few resources.

In Veenendaal, where only the three largest factories provide work and bread for fifteen hundred workers, the Council of Churches has for some time taken a great interest in the fate of these neglected people; for there, too, they had become accustomed to the existing situation, and had gradually placed all those hundreds of souls as if outside the circle of the congregational life.

To what has been accomplished in a relatively short time among the factory population, not so much by large forces, as the Report on the activities says, but rather by the unification of small existing forces, we would now like to take a brief look, as a comparison. The aforesaid Report, originally published in the periodical *Goud uit Schuim* [Gold from Foam], has been made available separately by Messrs. Höveker and Zoon, Amsterdam, and deserves to be brought to general notice.

In the first place it attracts our attention, that in Veenendaal, province of Utrecht, they had an eye for the *spiritual* need of the neglected multitudes. For the Church, the factory worker is not primarily a *citizen of the state* and called to uphold his constitutional rights, but a human being, and as such an object of God's merciful love.

What use are all other rights and privileges to him as long as he lives in ignorance of his God, of the purpose of his existence, of the future, of which he too carries a dark premonition? It is therefore understandable that, in the first place, a room for proclaiming the Gospel was sought, knowing full well that once interest in it had been aroused, everything else would gradually follow.

This measure appeared all the more necessary because the factories were mainly populated with children, who, as the mothers themselves said, were on the way to completely losing any idea of religion left with their parents. So in the bosom of the congregation a cents-club was founded, which already in the first week of its existence counted about 1,500 members, and enjoyed the satisfaction of seeing the construction of a suitable building, which, when the remaining debt has been paid off, will be built mainly from cents donations. An example of the power of the small.

And on this basis they worked. Gradually, all kinds of other exercises and activities for the development of the mind and the civilization of degenerate morals grouped around the spiritual work.

A *Youth Society*, whose members are often, as the Report says, a blessing to their immediate environment through their personal activities.

A *Boys' Association*, where perhaps with a rough comrade's hand, but still with the best of intentions, the spirit is stripped of its unsightly husk, and the sharpest criticism cannot banish the elders' peace or the courage to venture the camp afresh.

A *library*, which supplies healthy food for the hunger of the mind raised by instruction with public lectures, is where a celebrated speaker, by the power of the word, managed to bring even a subject like Dante Alighieri within the reach of his audience.

A *sewing and knitting school*, where the girl's hand—and it is bound to leave seeds of domesticity in the often so unfeminine mind—learns to handle the needle and knitting pen, more suitable for her than the handle of the stool of the machine.

Evening schools for learning to read and write, where the candidates at the first convocation applied in such large numbers that the Commission had to request a postponement of several weeks in order to determine the method and regulate the hours.

Deliberate *prayer meetings* and a *Bible deposit*, which supplies to reduced prices Old and New Testaments often paid at two, five or ten cents a week—we need hardly mention them. One immediately feels, that they could not be lacking in the context of this labor.

All this and more, for we can only make a few indications, has been accomplished within a relatively short time. And it shows that the guiding idea of labor is approximately this: An external change of destiny, obtained by violent reversal of existing conditions, will benefit the workman—if you do not first show him the way and lend your hand, in order to partake of that internal change which makes him human in the highest sense of the word. Only when that soil has been laid within him will there be receptive soil for the seeds of development, civilization, and ennoblement, without which he will never be able to use his constitutional rights to his advantage.

And the fruits of this labor are more testable than one might suspect. From a *Christian* point of view, we do not commend them, for the other side may assign little or no more importance to Christianity for the prosperity of society. But let us be permitted to point out two bare *social* advantages which, when the balance is struck, speak irrefutably in favor of the Church's efforts.

First of all, among the factory population, who are thus being worked, there seems to be no political upheaval, no grumbling or dissatisfaction about their social situation, no complaints about backsliding in politics. On the contrary, there is a harmless envy to be the first in intellectual development; there is a benevolent competition to awaken and sharpen dormant mental powers. Because boys under the age of fifteen, whose work starts regularly before sunrise and lasts until eight or ten o'clock in the evening, can only be induced with difficulty to stop their exercises two hours before midnight, this at least seems to prove that there is something in this voluntarily arisen work, which reconciles with life not rich in happiness.

And when—it is the second advantage we mention—when on wild fair evenings, on which the distinction between good and evil seems temporarily abolished, a whole host of factory boys prefer the reception offered to them by the Sunday school management in their classrooms, so that only one child is missed at the convocation, then there seems to be an attraction in the pleasures that await them there, which also bears good fruit for the society, whose growing members are also these children.

Which endeavor now seems more fruitful, both for the worker himself and for the society in which he moves? That of the *International*, which suddenly, without internal preparation wants to turn him into a political man and give him a share in the management of the country, or that of the Church, which works *from the inside out* and does not value rights as long as the obligations they impose are not felt and fulfilled? The former, which seems to be able to incite only resistance and rebellion, or the latter, which seems to be able to reveal the secret of contentment, of patience, and of gentle seas?

One should compare and judge for oneself.

* * *

We conclude our reflections with two remarks.

The first is that even the social question proves that only on *spiritual* ground can healing be found for the ills of a sinful society. There is room for law and justice in that society. But where both the law and the sword are powerless to awaken new life in the diseased heart, there comes love, which is of God, with its warm breath to animate the dead field and make it a garden of the Lord. The *Church* is the proper sphere of that love, and the workers, provided they awaken to her calling, have no better advocate than her.

The second remark we wanted to make concerns the *method* of the Church. She works, as we saw, preferably with the small. She begins with the individuals,

and only when they have been won will she bring the masses under her powerful influence. She is thus opposed to the efforts of our century, which always expects reform from colossal compounds and gigantic associations, and thereby deprives itself of outstanding forces, which, standing alone, might have worked something great, but which now merge into the many mundane.

Man is called to reflect in his actions his own essence. He himself is a microcosm, but the whole universe is mirrored in his innermost being. His task is therefore not the great, the unlimited, the unattainable, but the local, the limited, the small, yet which within its given dimensions always reflects the great.

Man is an artist by birth, but for this very reason the work he produces must always show a rounded whole, a correctly drawn and immediately recognizable image. Then his work can be permanent and does not need to dissolve in the sea of immensity, and the work of a single person joins that of all others into a beautifully ordered whole.

Faith in the salvation of *mankind* is an excellent thing. But it must be made fruitful by the conviction that it can be realized only through the salvation of *the single man*.

A lesson, which socialism teaches us in a negative way.

Notes

- * Abraham Kuyper, "De Fabriek-arbeiders," *De Heraut* 21, no. 45 (November 11, 1870), <https://t.ly/cJeET>.
- 1. Kuyper: [This is the] name of the great *workers' association* branched across Europe, which seeks to improve the condition of the working classes through collusion and actual resistance.
- 2. Kuyper: See the article in the *From the Press* section in this issue of our weekly.