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THE FORUM

President Elliott's Argument
"Not Conclusive"

Cleveland Ohio, April 5—(To the Editor.)—The appended editorial from the Boston (Mass) "American" should be carefully read by all thinking Americans. Shall the workmen be refused an eight hour work day in order that the financial manipulators shall have more "Velvet" with which to juggle?

Is there any good reason why the employee should be sacrificed to make additional "Roman holidays"?

With the railroads run as business institutions instead of private grafts, they can easily give the employee an eight-hour day.

President Howard Elliott of the New Haven Railroad declares that if the demand of the railroad employes for shorter hours of labor is granted, it will increase the cost of living by limiting production.

Mr. Elliott may be right, and he may be wrong. But in any contingency this is not conclusive argument against the wisdom of granting this demand of the railroad employes.

Of course, if all other things remain fixed, to decrease the hours of labor would mean an increase in the cost of railroad business, which would have to be met by the public through in-

creases in carfares and freight rates, or through a decrease in the quality of service which the railroad renders to the public.

But in this day of wonderful inventions, of wonderful organizations, of increasing general intelligence, it is not necessary to assume that all other conditions affecting the railroad business will remain fixed and unchangeable. There are a great many conditions which can be changed and which by changing will very strongly tend to offset this loss in the hours of labor.

First, During the last quarter of a century, since labor organizations began to demand a decrease in the hours of toil by workmen, their employers have met this demand by the same argument which Mr. Elliott now advances. In fact, the manufacturers, who were usually the employers involved, had ever a stronger case than the railroad managers, because the Legislature which proposed to reduce the hours of labor was always a State Legislature, and the manufacturer was able to say that to reduce the hours of labor in the factories of the State would result in handicapping the industries of the State in comparison with the industries of another State, where no such law was in force.

This is always a serious argument for the State Legislature to consider. But the labor unions always met this

argument with the contention that the human frame is like the soil; that the law of diminishing returns applies as forcibly to the workman's body as it does to the tilled fields; that the more intensely you work it, the less in proportion you produce by it. They contended that by shortening the hours of labor you could speed up the workman and put more intelligence into the work, and, therefore, more economy and more productivity.

Nobody doubts that the labor organizations were right. The history of the shorter-hour legislation has proved it. Certainly there is a limit beyond which this rule will not apply, and the limit is not incommensurable; but we have not yet reached that limit. How far the rule will apply to the railroads is not certain. Probably the decrease in the hours of work will not be completely offset by the increase in the efficiency of the workmen. But it will have some effect. It will be one of the elements which will contribute to keep down the cost of operating railroads at the public expense.

Now, the railroads have not any such argument as the manufacturers, in a State opposing a State law which would raise the standard of wages above the level of the standard of any upon the railroads alike and is not giving any railroad an advantage over its competitor.

Second, Mr. Elliott assumes, naturally enough as a railroad manager, that the cost of operating a railroad in the other departments than labor will remain fixed and unchangeable. But Mr. Elliott assumes too much. It may remain fixed, but it is not unchangeable; and if it remains unchanged, it will be the fault of the railroad managers. There is a vast difference in the cost of production between a railroad operated as a railroad for the benefit of its stockholders and of the public, and a railroad operated as an instrument of stock speculation by stock gamblers in Wall Street, whose eyes are on the ticker and not on the trains and freight houses.

Let us take for example, this very railroad of which Mr. Elliott is president. The New Haven Railroad has within ten years lost, through waste, mismanagement and general lawlessness, from one hundred to two hundred million dollars. Now, that is part of the cost of operation under present business standards in the railroad world. The New Haven is not an exceptional but a typical case. The Boston & Maine has had the same history recently. So has the Chicago & Alton, which Harriman looted. So has the Rock Island and the St. Louis & San Francisco, the Missouri Pacific, the Santa Fe, the Union Pacific, and nearly all the railroads in the country.

They have been in bankruptcy several times, and huge profits have been made by those who put them in bankruptcy and who were given control of their reorganization. In the old days this mismanagement not only came out of the public ultimately, through an increase in the freight and passenger rates, but it used to come in the first instance out of the railroad employes themselves; for these wreckers of railroads, when their conspiracy was ripe, would apply to a friendly Federal judge—a scallawag whom they had put upon the bench—for the appointment of a receiver, and the judge would appoint one of the conspirators receiver to run the road during reorganization.

The first thing that Mr. Conspirator and Receiver always did, was to reduce wages on the roads. Naturally, the railroad men struck. But to strike was to be in contempt of court, because the Receiver was an officer of the Court. So the Federal judge would issue an injunction against the workmen who struck, because the reorganizers were trying to recoup the money which they had stolen out of the pockets of the workmen. If the leaders of the railroad men had the audacity to continue the strike, they were thrown into jail for contempt of court.

Fortunately public opinion has compelled the courts to stop this discreditable secret alliance with railroad looters, but unfortunately the legal principles upon which the courts operated have not yet been disavowed. We hope that Mr. Brandeis, when he takes his place on the Supreme Court bench, will help the court to disavow them, so that these things may not happen again when the audacity of speculators rises to its old pitch.

Now, the New Haven Railroad has lost from one hundred to two hundred million dollars in a short period by aggrandizing schemes not unlike those in character. If that railroad were on its feet; if it had not lost this vast sum of money, and if it had not suffered the consequent loss of moral and efficiency with their train of evils, the New Haven would be amply able to meet any increase in the cost of labor, through this demanded decrease in the hours of labor, out of its surplus prosperity. Therefore another answer to Mr. Elliott's contention is that the railroads can change their methods; can operate a railroad as it was meant to be operated as a railroad not as a victim of unscrupulous speculators. Mr. Elliott is himself trying to do this very thing and is meeting with considerable success. Mr. Hustis and the Federal trustees are trying to do this very thing on the Boston & Maine, and are meeting with great success. They have in a year converted a deficit into a surplus, and in a short time, if its condition improves in the ratio of last year, the Boston & Maine will be on its feet again merely by decent management.

Now, a change which will make it impossible for a repetition of these orgies of railroad speculation and wrecking will completely offset any increased cost of labor which may be involved in the demands of the railway employes even if the increased efficiency of the labor does not help very much.

Doubtless Mr. Elliott will say that the railroad managers have learned their lesson; that the stockholders have been the most to suffer, and that

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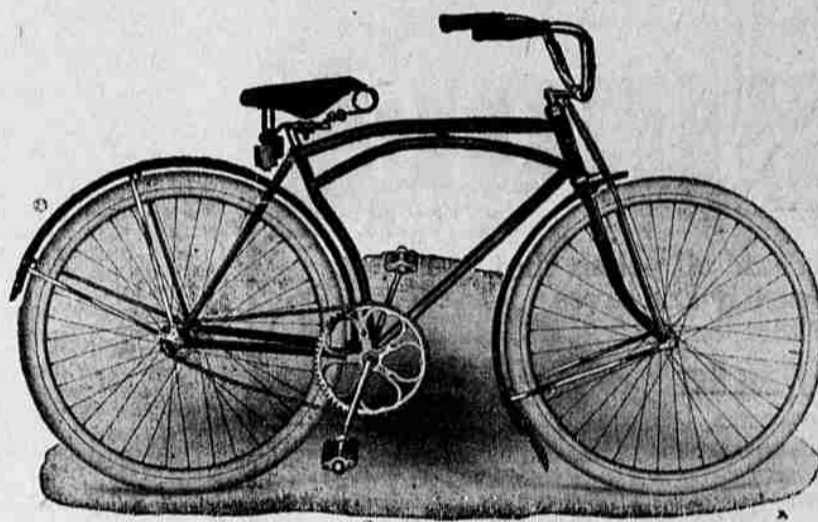
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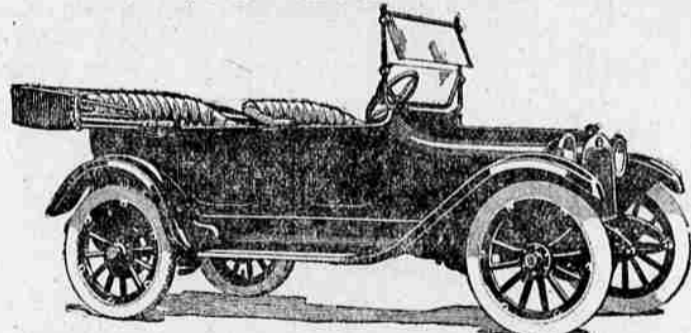
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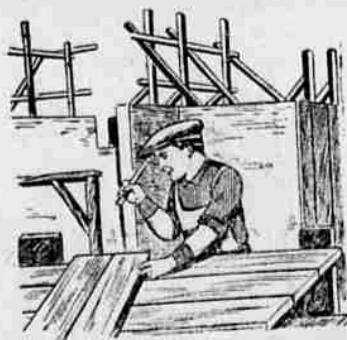
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