

EDITORIAL

TESTIMONY THAT IS TESTIMONY

By DANIEL DE LEON

ANDREW Carnegie, who is taking the place of Depew as a “funny man” and utterer of economic preposterousness, recently delivered himself of the statement that

“Wages are going up and prices are going down.”

This optimistic capitalist protectionist view suited only partially the capitalist free trade *Times*. In so far as the statement contained the implied falsehood that the earnings of the workingman were rising, it suited the *Times*; in so far, however, as the statement was a dig under the fifth rib of free trade it did not suit the *Times*. The free trade fallacy and deception reason that, owing to the tariff, prices are high; that this robs the workingman; and that the rise in prices brought on by protection neutralizes the rise in wages. The free trader’s position, accordingly, can tolerate no such idiom as suits the protectionist. The *Times* joined issue with Carnegie on the relative cost of living. Out of that has sprung a debate by letters. One of these, recently published in the *Times* of the 3d instant under the misleading title “Relative Cost of Living”—the true title should have been “Relative Earnings and Relative Cost of Living”—is reproduced below:

I belong to a family that has lived in New York since long before the Revolution, and the history of one average American family may be said to be the history of the country, in a sense. Not to go back so far that my facts will be considered “ancient history,” I had an uncle who for the last twenty-five years of his life owned a successful molding mill in Bethune street. But during the previous twenty-five years, beginning with his marriage, he never earned more than \$12 a week. Yet on that income he supported his family in perfect comfort; in the last years the family consisted of ten persons! They always lived in an entire house, were refined, self-respecting people, and it would take, at this time, at the very least, four times that

amount to support such a family in much less comfort.

Another relative, in the first half of the last century, in changing his occupation, lived, with his wife and child, on \$1 a day, without serious privation or going in debt.

My mother when a young woman could buy the material and pay for the making of a silk gown for \$18 that would last her two or three years for church and visiting wear. A woman in the same position now would be obliged to spend ten times as much as was sufficient at that time for my mother to dress well. These general standards applied still more to places away from the large cities.

In a life of William Cullen Bryant it is mentioned that when preparing for college he paid \$2.50 a week for his board; and Howells, in his *Literary Friends and Acquaintances*, tells of paying \$3 a week for a large room and excellent board in Columbus, O., about the year 1860.

In considering the question of the relative cost of living we must take into account the difference in customs and standards of living. We have now innumerable artificial wants, many of which, considering our surroundings, amount to necessities, from which our grandparents were happily free. The improvements and conveniences, also, of our modern life must be paid for. Many of the new wants are wholly artificial and unnecessary and are the outgrowth of the ever-increasing luxury of living which strongly influences the grade below, and that the next, and the next, until all to some extent are affected by the standards of the millionaire. This is one of the great evils and threatening dangers of our modern life.

Now, is it true, as many assert, that even if the cost of living is greater it is more than made up by the greater earning power and higher rates of wages?

I think it is not true. Undoubtedly, some lines of labor are more liberally paid—certain skilled mechanic trades, and especially domestic service. But un-skilled labor is not as well paid and the supply is in excess of the demand. That is true even of the West, where for many years the young man who acted upon Horace Greeley's advice was sure of some kind of employment and opportunity, but that condition does not exist now. In nearly all clerical positions the salaries are lower and the opportunities for promotion infinitely less than fifty years ago. In commercial life the young man without capital has absolutely no chance except a perpetual clerkship.

The uncle I referred to began independent business with no actual capital and succeeded. Another uncle, who began life as a salesman in a dry goods store, established himself in business on Grand street with no capital—merely a little credit—and he made a fortune. But that is impossible now. No boy can begin by sweeping out the store, and end as senior partner in the firm. The best he can do is to end as buyer or head of a department.

Again, not only are most kinds of employment less well paid, but the difficulty of obtaining it at all is immensely increased. In the history of the

many generations of my family in New York in the earlier days there is not one account of an able-bodied man who could not find remunerative employment of some kind. Now we whose eyes are open to the conditions of life around us, and who observe our fellow-beings not from the altitude of Carnegie millions, but from the level of “the man in the street,” know too many heartbreaking experiences of overcrowded occupations and locked doors to be able to partake of the cheerful optimism of the millionaires. A successful lawyer recently told me that if he should advertise for a clerk who could carry a case through court at a salary of \$10 a week his office would be almost mobbed with applicants.

As to women’s work—well, one instance will do! I know of a woman with four children who makes infant’s dresses for 50 cents a dozen! And they must be well made at that!

I could fill every column of the *Times* with instances of the fearful discrepancy between the expense of living and the money that can be earned. Is it any wonder that to those who suffer by these conditions the constant boasts of our wonderful prosperity seem almost a ghastly sarcasm.

J.R. GRIFFING.

New York, Feb. 3, 1902.

This is an old American’s experience; his testimony is one that can be elicited from any other old American who is inclined to tell the truth, that is to say, whose capitalist—free trade or protection—interests have not yet extinguished his truthfulness. It is the sort of testimony that conversation with any old American family constantly elicits; and the facts that such conversations bring out make root-and-branch work of the stacks of “lies in figures” that are set afloat as “statistics.”

Apart from that portion of Mr. Griffing’s letter, where he indulges in the indistinct assertion about the wants that are “the outgrowth of the ever-increasing luxuries of the rich,” the letter reads like a page from some well-considered Socialist address, adducing facts that go to prove the mischievous effect of capitalism upon society: that prove the earnings of the working class to be sinking, their opportunities to earn to be shrinking, and their cost of living to be rising.

Transcribed and edited by Robert Bills for the official Web site of the Socialist Labor Party of America.
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