

## LETTER I

### To The Union Societies

Brethren, – Scarcely had I written the above word “societies,” than I perceived my error. When there is union, there are not societies, but one great SOCIETY! You are teaching society that there is, in truth, but one interest among mankind, and that that interest is universal welfare! As far as individuals are sensible of this universal interest, they are virtuous and happy; while, exactly in proportion as they do not feel it, and do not act upon it, they are vicious and wretched, and diffuse around them the miseries of selfishness and corruption.

You, brethren, are acting, for the first time, upon earth, upon that broad basis, respecting which moralists have talked, parsons have preached and statesmen have legislated; but their doctrines were absurd, and their laws were impracticable, under a system in which men were necessarily in perpetual conflict with each other; and where a benefit was scarcely ever gained without the infliction of either a direct or an indirect injury.

Look, brethren, look at the deplorable state of the greatest, the most honourable, and the most beneficial of all powers – the power of *productive labour*, as it appeared without a single redeeming feature, before you commenced the struggle you are so spiritedly maintaining.

Productive labour, wherever it acts for the benefit of others than the labourers, is slavery, or something worse. I leave political economists to their jargon. They wrote under a system of evil; they wrote not for the purpose of getting rid of the evil, but to cut down man to the endurance of it. They tried to shape you all to the existing system; strait waistcoats, little food, empty bellies, together with the anti-population process, would, they declared, fit you to compete with any sort of machinery. Could they only have deprived you of brains and nerves, they would have converted you into quiet appendages of the mill, and told the world with delight how peaceful and happy you were. But it would not do; you do not now submit to the process as your unhappy forefathers did of yore. You kicked, you stretched out your limbs to their full extent, you held your heads erect, and you told the proud and perverse capitalists that you were MEN, and that, instead of their cramming you into their narrow system, in which it was impossible for you, as human beings, to exist, you would have a system of your own, made in every respect conformable to your proper dimensions, as men!

Brethren, you are beginning to act upon this enlarged system. It is the system of associated labour. There are three states of labour–

Enslaved, or compulsory labour;

Hireling, or marketable labour;

Free, or associated labour.

In the early and rude state of society, man enslaves his fellow-being, and compels him to assist him in peace, and to fight for him in war. Neither ignorance nor baseness is capable of comprehending those higher qualities by which men, connecting themselves with one another, act in unison, for the benefit of all. The lord and the serf, the satrap and the slave, the planter and the negro, are equally ignorant, and equally base. There are luxury and pride on one side; there are servility and wretchedness, and toil to the utmost extent of human sufferance, on the other. Still there is a partial unity of the means, and, consequently, produce – perhaps even plenty – is the result. But who enjoys the produce? Not the enslaved, but the enslaver. The latter revels and

wastes – the former pines and starves. The produce increases; exchanges are made; the enslavers combine, not for good, but for safety; and the slaves are increased. But in the enlargement of their numbers there is no enlargement of their strength; for their servility and their ignorance, they are employed in repressing the sense of independence, or more frequently the desperate spirit of vengeance, that their wrongs sometimes excite among them. But enough of this.

For some few ages, the condition of absolute slavery has not been known in Britain. It has been changed for the second state of labour. We have been habituated to hireling, or marketable labour; and political economists have bewildered themselves and the world, in endeavouring to prove that hireling labour, at the lowest possible rate of hire, is the proper condition of that vast and overwhelming portion of our race, from whom proceed all the wealth and strength of communities. These writers know nothing of man, of his nature, his rights, and his powers. They write of narrow-minded beings, with money in their pockets, called capitalists; but they know nothing of the intelligent head, the warm heart, and the unwearied hands, that love with mutual love, that think and communicate thought, and act with mutual aid for the comfort and happiness of all. How, indeed, should they know these things? They have hitherto seen hireling labour alone, creating wealth, and repaid by penury; raising palaces, and replenishing those palaces with luxuries and then shrinking, naked and hungry, into hovels. They say, “This is so, and it is the natural order of society; it is good for the government to be rich and strong, and for the labouring people to be poor and weak. Let the hireling be content with his hire; and it is well for him that the capitalists condescend to esteem him worthy of it!”

This is not the place to consider historically the gradual transition by which, in this country, and generally more or less among the civilized portions of mankind, enslaved labour was changed into hireling labour, although, on a future occasion, it will be both curious and useful to show, not only how this mutation was brought about, but the good and the evil that have proceeded from it. As a relief from direct slavery, hireling labour has, morally, had a great, beneficent effect upon the character of society; but to thousands, and tens of thousands, it has been abundant in wretchedness, that it groans, and the depth of its sorrows, have greatly exceeded those of bondage. The poet has justly exclaimed, with honest indignation, against those

“Who drive a loathsome traffic, gauge and span,  
And buy the muscles and the bones of man;”

but look at the rigid countenance of the capitalist, who with a proud and pompous insensibility, insists upon sixteen hours’ labour out of the twenty-four, from a band of miserable human beings, at a rate of wages that would not purchase lodging and food for them equal to that which the veriest slave in Jamaica is allowed, and actually enjoys. The slave trade was execrable; and sincerely must every friend of humanity rejoice that it is destroyed, notwithstanding the combined interests that were arrayed in its support. From its downfall and extinction I draw the encouraging belief that that bargaining, haggling, and trafficking for human labour at its lowest market-price, will, by the course on which you, brethren, have entered, be brought, at no very distant period, to a similar termination. This will be effected gradually, without doubt; for it must not be denied that the difficulties before you are formidable. But let the principle of associated labour be once fairly shown to be practicable, and the errors and evils of hireling labour will speedily follow those of enslaved labour, and become mere matters of history, warning the future of the follies and the sufferings of the past.

Brethren, to form a system of associated labour, and to act firmly and steadily, according to the tenor of

it, in the midst of the dangers with which you are beset, is an undertaking of the highest importance. The discovery of another hemisphere by Columbus had not difficulties equal to it; nor were its benefits to the human race to be compared with it. But you have entered upon your enterprise, and you must accomplish it, or fall lower in the scale of hireling labour than you were before. Let the advocates for capital, and its tyranny, acknowledge that the position which you have assumed, opposed as it is apparently to the direct and immediate interests of those who so lately called themselves your masters, and extracted from you the utmost toil, at the lowest wages, is a position which has been forced upon you. You were thrust out upon the very verge of existence; you were insulted by doctrines that place you, in the scale of creation, beneath the condition of the brute animals; you were told that you must be of no sex, but must drag out the days of an isolated existence in vicious ignorance and ill-requited labour; You were startled in horror at this naked and audacious exposition which McCulloch, Mill,<sup>1</sup> and other political economists set before you; and your indignation was roused when they proved to you that that was your actual, your irremediable situation, as long as the system of hireling labour was suffered to prevail. To what, then, were you compelled to have recourse? To what, but to associated labour? To that which can alone save you from that grinding down, that relentless and increasing misery, to which the abominable system of hireling labour has reduced you? No; for the productive classes there is no hope, there is not a shadow of comfort, not a vestige of that existence, which, as men endowed with the high faculties of the mind, and impressed with all the delightful sensations of the heart, you ought, as a duty to your Creator, to look for and to secure, except in ASSOCIATED LABOUR!

It is my intention, in a few short letters, to offer you my opinions upon those points in the present state of society, which to me appear either favourable or inimical to the extension of the system of associated labour. Of the progress of this great and beneficial principle I entertain not the slightest doubt; and if I do not look for its immediate general adoption, it is only because I am convinced that its success is dependent upon knowledge, or rather upon a train of thought, which thousands have not yet attained to, and upon a benevolence of heart, an ardent desire to advance the good of one another, which Christianity inculcates in vain, while the productive classes are crushed under the system either of enslaved or hireling labour!

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<sup>1</sup> The classical economists J.R. McCulloch, 1789-1864 and James Mill, 1773-1836; both particular targets for the anti-capitalist and socialist political economists of the period, who considered they believed that the level of wages necessarily gravitated to a basic subsistence level.