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Eugène Steens, [*The Effect of Machinery
on the Situation of Workers*]¹³

[...] Thanks to human knowledge, which, in our time, eludes all authoritarian and political constriction, the old organization is breaking down.

From one day to the next, science sheds a vivid light upon the most obscure points of the social question, and drives the irresistible movement of the old world towards its dissolution.

Also, we see social injury expand in direct proportion to inventions and discoveries. Indeed, do we not remark that the improvements introduced by the driving force of steam, weaving and spinning machines, the development of tools and mechanisms, though lessening the hardships of labour, lead to a depression in wages and give rise to successive crises and periodic disturbances?

To formulate an overall judgement upon the good and the harm that machinery exerts on the situation of the worker, we believe that it must be considered from the view point of each of the following three phases: Its introduction into industry. The period of transition. Its role in the future.

The introduction of machinery in the manufacturing, commercial, agricultural and extractive industries threw into disarray the old system of labour; the character of demonstrations for and against machinery left no doubt as to the fair assessment of those involved. The antagonism between

¹³ This text is an excerpt from a report of the Brussels section presented at the Brussels Congress (1868) to a session of 9 September dedicated to the question of machinery. Likely written collectively, it was read by Eugène Steens [unk.], director of *La Tribune du Peuple* of Brussels and also a delegate to the London Conference of 1871. The full version is in PI, I: 291–4.

the monopolizers and the exploited, the basis of the existing order, became sharper and fiercer. The exploiters, filled with delight in anticipation of immense profits and the considerable reduction of their operating costs, sang the praises of the inventor of a marvel so favourable to their speculations; while labourers, appalled to see steam supplanting human force and machinery doing away with millions of workers, were filled with great loathing for the infernal genius behind the aggravation of their destitution in present society, and devoted themselves to the destruction of its instruments of grief and exploitation.

The future justified in part these cries of joy and sounds of alarm. Employers and workers were aware of the transformative role of these new and immense engines of production and consumption: the equilibrium was upset and crisis was generalized. [...]

Steam engines existing in England today replace by themselves the work of thirty-five million labourers.

This simple factual statement, clear, precise and irrefutable, brings to the fore all of the grievances that workers have against machinery. It demonstrates beyond dispute that, when monopolized in the hands of employers, machinery is the prime agent of the rapid and prodigious rise of their wealth, and the cause of the frightful reduction of pay.

What adds to these disastrous effects is that, as machinery is improved, competition is redoubled and becomes ever more frantic. The masters of industry that have not adopted the new machinery, or cannot acquire it, make recourse to the lowering of wages to keep up an impossible battle, and, in this way, oblige the possessor of machinery to lower them equally.

This is evidently one of the most alarming causes of modern pauperism and the utopia of riots so fatal to the worker.

And this competition between the owners of older sophisticated machinery, does it not extend as far as nations? For a long time Belgium and France, faced with the superiority of English machinery and its products, and terrified by the immense centralization of English capital, imposed an import tariff on manufactured products from England in order to shut off

access to their markets. Today, this exclusive protectionism still partially exists, to the great advantage of speculators, and to the detriment of labour's prosperity.

But the loss of a few million jobs does not, however, bring about the immediate danger of social demise. The momentary crisis, intense as it was at the appearance of steam in industry, was, in the long run, averted by a series of compensations which the labourer, in his first moments of terror, did not fully grasp.

The indispensable needs of steam machinery gave rise to a lucrative chain reaction. Previously unknown industries sprang into being, while others experienced a new and rapid growth. The railways, the manufacture of mechanisms and machinery, the iron industry, coal mining, etc., have in part reclaimed the hands sacrificed by steam engines; but such compensations are only illusory. The same phenomena erupt in these new industries; there, as everywhere, owing to machinery, employees suffer a reduction disproportionate to their needs.

In vain economists try to convince us that, with the aid of machinery, immeasurable improvements have, in the span of a few years' time, been introduced in the plight and the living conditions of the poor classes; that life is sweeter and toil less tedious owing to the fallacious claim that industrial products of all kinds are at the disposition of the less fortunate. We see the facts of daily life refute these pretentious assertions. Periodic and rapidly-succeeding riots, as never before seen, unmask such affirmations with bitter irony.

Admittedly, since the invention of steam engines, cheapness is the order of the day. The products of labour have decreased notably in price, one of the improvements invoked by economists; we would be happy if we could applaud such a result, if economic laws did not demonstrate to us that it is by compressing wages, turned into a raw material, that cheapness is established and competition maintained.

It is therefore a total error to affirm that the abundance of products and their favourable price, when compared to the past, represent a new comfort for the worker.

The opposite is true, as simple reason suffices to show. Indeed, what satisfaction can the worker derive from the cheapness of the products of his labour if the lowering of product prices flows directly from the reduction of his wages? Evidently none; his position will be only more precarious than ever if the rise of foodstuffs coincides with successive decreases in his earnings. Consequently, how can he be expected to enjoy the benefits of inexpensive goods if his earnings hardly permit him to restore the energies he expends in labour; in a word, how would you have him clothe himself decently when he has nothing to eat? After that, to claim, as bourgeois economists are inclined to do, that the worker gains in consumption what he loses in production, is a bitter joke.

However, as the worker advances in his career, he modifies his first impression of his formidable rivals, and his fears are assuaged with the progress of enlightenment.

A revolution has been accomplished in his ideas and in fact; initiated today into the mysteries of social renewal, he considers machinery from the point of view of its results in the future; he recognizes the great alleviation that it has brought, through the immense aid of its resources and its force, to the most arduous forms of labour; finally, the labourer plunges into the new transformation.

This is the flight of the past into the future; such that these fatal and dangerous crises, generated by machinery in the phase of transition, are phenomena utilizing the experience of the past for the benefit of the future.

On the day in which steam engines cease to be the monopoly of capital and pass, along with all other instruments of labour, into the hands of labourers organized in agricultural and industrial associations, the worker will be liberated, peace will be achieved and justice will reign.

Originally intended for the exclusive benefit of employers, this gigantic machinery of production has taken its place, as of now, among the salutary means of precipitating social decomposition; it will exercise an extraordinary influence on the prosperity of the future; multiplying by an incalculable

proportion the sum of public wealth, it will render life sweeter and more agreeable by the large and constant diminishing of the hours of labour made more appealing; once machinery is placed at the disposal of all, as a fateful compensation for lost well-being, evil will cease to exist; already now, it presses towards the full emancipation of the worker.