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The Farmers' Union and Co-Operation

National Secretary, A. C. Davis, Gives Some Views on Co-operation, and Says the Time is Ripe to Begin Applying Co-operation to Business.

To the Membership:—

Co-operation has become almost a household word in the homes of America. In it the producer sees a panacea for the ills that beset him, and to it the consumer looks for relief from the exorbitant tribute he is constantly paying to the "middleman." So much has been said and written upon this subject that it would appear the general public should be thoroughly familiar with its teachings. But after carefully observing the workings of numerous institutions presumably based upon co-operation or co-operative principles, I am forced to say that the theory has been but remotely approached, and the practical application almost nil, as a factor in the business. This is not said to discount the value of numerous enterprises controlled by our membership, that have made a success financially, and have saved thousands of dollars to those interested, either by forcing competition to lower the price of supplies, or by saving the cost of the "middleman" in selling products to the consumer. None appreciate more than I the value of these institutions, and it is not to reflect upon the business acumen of the men in charge that the above statement is made, but rather that we may work out a system that will make them more efficient by incorporating the co-operative idea.

Co-operation, aside from any generic significance it may have, has a specific and technical sense. It occupies a middle position between the doctrines of the communists and specialists on the one hand, and the private property and freedom of individual labor and enterprise on the other. It departs from communism at a very definite point. While communism would extinguish the motive of individual gain and possession in a heigh of universal happiness or good and remodel all existing rights, laws and arrangements of society upon such a basis as would promote this end, co-operation seeks, by working consistently with the institutions of society, as thus far developed, to remedy the social condition by a concurrence of ever increasing numbers

of individuals in a common interest.

Co-operation societies springing from this idea have greatly increased in number and in amount of business transacted in recent years. Most of these have taken one of three principal forms that may be classified thus:

First: Societies of consumption, the object of which is to buy for the membership the necessities of life, or the raw material of their industry.

Second: Societies of production, the object of which is to sell the product of the membership.

Third: Societies of credit or banking, the object of which is to open accounts with their members and advance them loans for industrial purposes.

These three kinds of associations have attained marked success in three different countries of Europe. England stands at the head in societies of consumption; France in societies of production; Germany in societies of credit. The masses of laborers in the factories and other great works of England have attained their greatest co-operative success in societies for the purchase, and in some degree, the production, of the necessaries of life. The passion for independence in their handicraft has given France a greater number of artisans who work in their own homes than any other country, and their greatest co-operative success has been in collectively selling the product of their labor. The less abundant capital, and the lack of banks and other institutions of credit in the remote parts of Germany may explain in some degree the development of societies of credit in that country.

It will serve no very great purpose to give an elaborate review of the history of co-operation in the United States. There have been many attempts to install the English system of co-operative stores, but with few exceptions, these have met with failure. There may be any number of reasons assigned for this, such as higher wage scales making the necessity for co-operation in buying necessaries less apparent in America than in England, but the reason that suggests itself to me as having more direct bearing on the matter than any other that may be advanced is the unwillingness of the average American to engage in an enterprise that does not offer to exploit his capital.

The idea, though having met with many rebuffs, will not down. The trend of prices skyward during the past few years, making the cost of living a very serious question, has forced this idea to the front, and another wave is sweeping the country. Especially has this been marked since farmers organized the Farmers' Union with education and co-operation as the slogan. Attempts at forming societies in this country have not been confined strictly to either of the forms outlined above. Most of them combine the principles of the organizations of consumption and production. This is very marked in those institutions operated by members of the Farmers' Union. Authority for this is given by the preamble of our Constitution, which says that one of the objects is to assist the members in buying and selling. The German idea of co-operation has been given but little attention in this country outside of some of the cities and towns which have associations based upon this idea to encourage and assist their members in owning their own homes. Producers, and especially farmers, have given but little thought to this matter which, to my mind, deserves some consideration.

Combination among farmers for the purchase of supplies has never appealed to me quite so much as has the idea of combination for the sale of farm products. Notwithstanding our Constitution states specifically that its object is to assist its members in buying and selling, the great mission of the Farmers' Union is, in my judgment, to assist its members in securing remunerative prices for the products of their labor. Beside this great central thought all others sink into insignificance. This object should be constantly in the minds of every leader, and frequently be presented in a forceful manner to every lay member. Unless we do keep this thought foremost, our organization is apt to be buffeted about by every local problem that offers itself, and we shall present the ludicrous spectacle of a great Union being handicapped in its work by the members of one locality running after one thing of but local importance, and those of another engrossed in an affair that has but little bearing upon the great question at issue.

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