



CLARENCE DARROW.

THE COST OF WAR

By CLARENCE DARROW

A LONG with the many other regrets over the ravages of war is the sorrow for the destruction of property. As usual, those who have nothing to lose join in the general lamentation. There is enough to mourn about in the great European Holocaust without conjuring up imaginary woes. So far as the vast majority of people is concerned, the destruction of property is not an evil but a good.

The lands and houses, the goods and merchandise and money of the world are owned by a very few. All the rest in some way serve that few for so much as the law of life and trade permit them to exact. At the best, this is but a small share of the whole. All the property destroyed by war belongs to the owners of the earth; it is for them that wars are fought, and it is they who pay the bills. When the war is over, the property must

be re-created. This, the working men will do. In this re-building, they will work for wages. Then, as now, the rate of wages will be fixed by the law of demand and supply—the demand and supply of those who toil. The war will create more work and less workmen. Therefore labor can and will get a greater share of its production than it could command if there was less work and more workmen. The wages must be paid from the land and money and other property left when the war is done. This will still be in the hands of the few, and these few will be compelled to give up a greater share. The destruction of property, together with its re-creation means only a re-distribution of wealth—a re-distribution in which the poor get a greater share. It is one way to bring about something like equality of property—a cruel, wasteful, and imperfect way, but still a way. That the equality will not last does not matter, for in the period of re-construction the workman will get a larger share and will live a larger life.

As the war goes on, the funds for paying bills will be met in the old way by selling bonds. These too will be paid by the owners of the earth. True, the property from which the payment comes must be produced by toil, but if the bonds that must be paid from the fruits of labor had never been issued this surplus would not have gone to labor, but would have been absorbed by capital. This is true for the simple reason that the return to labor is not fixed by the amount of production, the rate of taxation, the price of interest and rents, but by the supply and demand of labor, and nothing else.

If labor shall sometime be wise enough, or rather instinctive enough to claim all that it produces, it will at the same time have the instinct or wisdom to leave the rulers' bonds unpaid.

But all of this is far, far away; in determining immediate effects we must consider what is, not what should be. And the jobless and propertyless can only look upon the destruction of property as giving them more work and a larger share of the product of their labor. Chicago was never so prosperous, or wages so high, as when her people were re-building it from the ashes of a general conflagration. San Francisco found the same distribution of

property amongst its workmen after the earthquake and the fire had laid it waste, and her people were called upon to build it up anew.

Carlyle records that during the long days of destruction in the French Revolution the people were more prosperous and happy than they had ever been before. True, the guillotine was doing its deadly work day after day, but its victims were very few. The people got used to the guillotine, and heeded it no more than does the crowd heed a hanging in our county jail, when they gayly pass in their machines.

After the first shock was over, during the four years of our Civil war, wages were higher, men were better employed, production greater, and distribution more equal than it had been at any time excepting in the extreme youth of the Republic. Then land was free.

Then again, this world has little to destroy. After centuries of so-called civilization, the human race has not accumulated enough to last a year should all stop work. The world lives, and always has lived, from hand to mouth. This is not because of any trouble in producing wealth, but because things are made not to use, but to sell. And the wages of the great mass of men does not permit them to buy or own more than they consume from day to day.

It is for this reason that half the people do not really work; that the market for labor is fitful and uncertain, and never great enough; and that all are poor. After a devastation like a great war, the need of re-creating will turn the idle and the shirkers into workmen, because the rewards will be greater. This will easily and rapidly produce more than ever before. From this activity, invention will contrive new machines to compete with men, going once more around the same old circle, until the world finds out that machines should be used to satisfy human wants and not to build up profits for the favored few.

One may often regret the impulses that bring destruction of property, but before any one mourns over the destruction of property, purely because of its destruction, he should ask whose property it is. —*The Little Review.*