

THE AMERICAN WORKMAN.

BY THOMAS I. KIDD.

[Thomas I. Kidd, fifth vice-president American Federation of Labor; born Edinburgh, Scotland, and educated in the schools of that city; became identified with the labor movement in America shortly after his arrival in this country, and was general secretary of the Amalgamated Woodworkers from Aug. 5, 1890, to Jan. 1, 1905; has been editor of the *International Woodworker* since 1891.]

In fifty years the working power, the exerted energy, of the nations of christendom has more than doubled. That of Europe has increased fourfold. That of the United States tenfold. All signs point toward the United States as the country which for the next half century must sustain and surpass this enormous increase of the world's productivity.

The last half century's great increase in the working energy of the world was due mainly to the development of steam. In the adoption of modern machinery this country surpassed the world in promptness and in the productive consequences. Its expansion in applied energy was greater than that of all Europe put together.

Students of industrial evolution attribute the waxing pre-eminence of the United States in all lines of productivity, first, to its freedom from overpopulation; second, its favorable system of government and society; third, the superiority of its workmen and its facilities—the latter including raw material, fuel, transportation, and mechanical appliances. Ten years ago, figuring on the accepted basis by which there should not be more than fifty people to every 100 productive acres, seven European countries were overpopulated—viz.: England, Scotland, Germany, Belgium, Holland, Italy, and Switzerland.

The American workman himself may fairly be regarded as the principal factor in the surpassing excellence of his country's manual and manufacturing performances, since he is chiefly responsible for the existing industrial system, a powerful influence in the governmental attitude toward labor, the operator and in many cases the author of the best of

modern machinery, and, in the last analysis, the director and governor of that energy which makes things.

Fifty years ago the United States held lowest rank among the four great textile manufacturing nations. To-day it has almost equaled Great Britain and surpassed all the others. In the making of hardware this country has excelled, in the quantity and value of its output, all the other nations except England. It makes one third of the hardware used in the world, although it consumes not more than one seventh.

The superiority of the American workman to all others is not longer a doubtful proposition even in England, where both prejudice and rivalry help to put every claim of American pre-eminence in the category of brag. But when it is said that the American workman is the best the world has known, it should be understood that his unequaled excellence as a class is what is meant. There are individual mechanics and artisans in different countries of Europe who have not been surpassed in skill and ingenuity by the workmen of any country. Yet in summing up their productive abilities, who have not been surpassed in skill or influences for the betterment of their class, they are outnumbered and outweighed by their peers in the United States.

In cataloguing the points of excellence of the American workman over his English contemporary, the first should be, perhaps, the superior volume of his output, whether manual or mechanical. It has been estimated that, in purely manual efficiency, the American workingmen, as compared with the English, produce in the ratio of three to two as to quantity. In the United States the productive volume of man run machinery is almost two to one as compared with England, and from this probably accurate estimate it has been inferred that the American mechanic is twice as effective, with the same machine, as his British rival.

In order to be perfectly just, however, it must be stated that the English workingman is to a great extent handicapped by his own established and accepted system of labor regulations, and that his true ability, whether individually or collectively, hardly can be gauged by his performances. For almost half a century the workingmen of England have ac-

cepted and acted upon the theory that the less work they did the more work there would remain to do, so that in reckoning their efficiency by the results it should be borne in mind that most of them do as little work as may be compatible with holding their places in shop or factory.

The hostility which European workmen have inveterately and continuously shown to modern machinery is another potent cause of the disparity between the mechanical output of American factories and that of England especially. In one instance a manufacturer installed six machines to be attended by one man, but the English labor union compelled him to employ one man for each machine. In another case a machine capable of increasing the factory output 25 per cent was emplaced. But the union ruled that it should not be permitted to run more than 75 per cent of its capacity.

It would not be accurate, therefore, to finally measure the skill or intelligence of the foreigner by the quantity of his output, though the wisdom or folly of his labor system may be nearly appreciated by the fact that he earns less than his American rival in the same craft and that the factories of the United States successfully compete with his employer in the shadow of the English factory. The foreign workman in his home shop and factory has been an obstructionist rather than a promoter of the quantity phase of effectiveness. The result is that man for man the workers of the old countries have not produced on an average more than two thirds of the output of the Americans in the same lines, and about half as much as the operators of American machinery in similar industries.

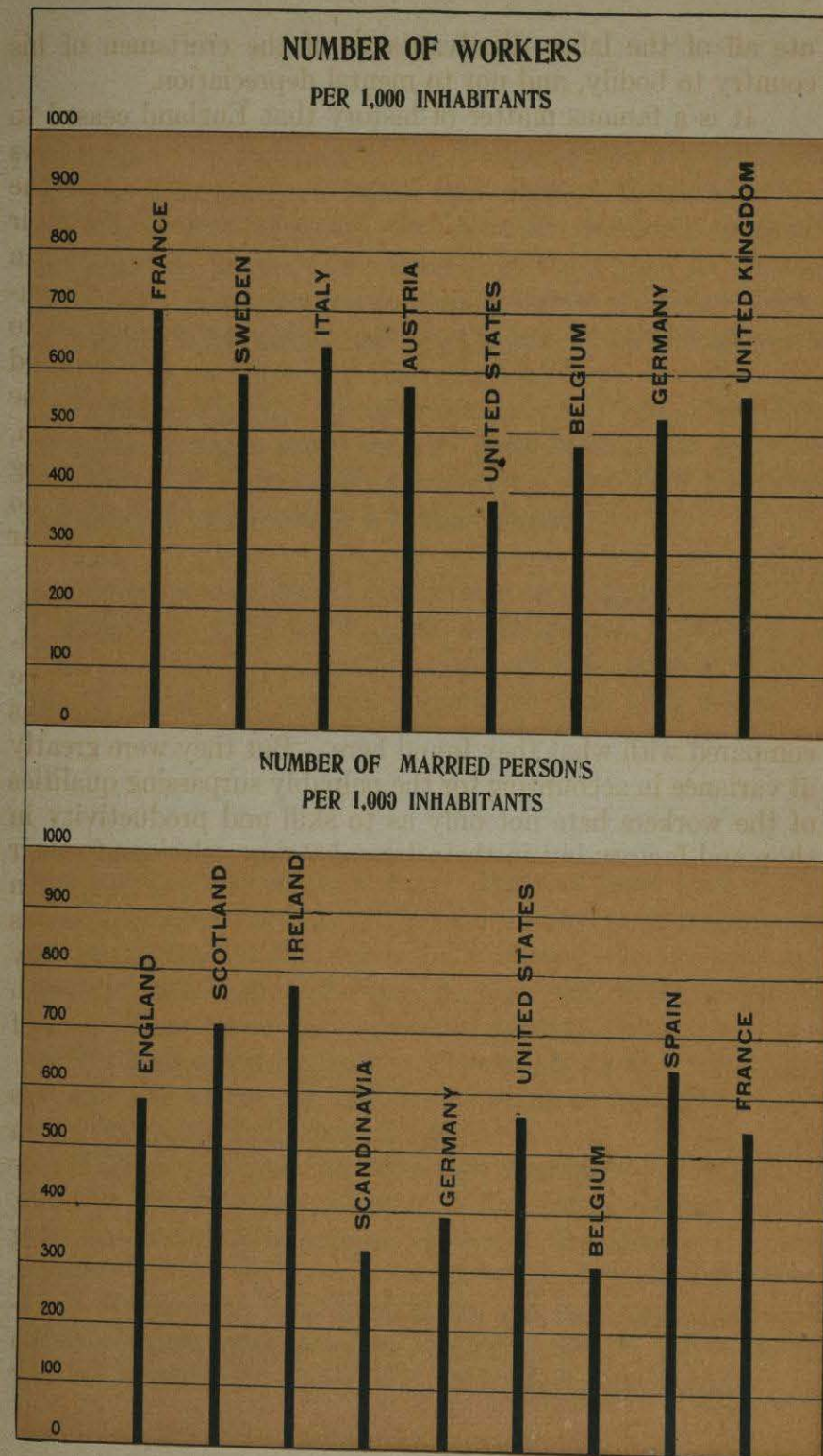
Investigation has shown, however, that the questions of piecework, minimum labor rules, and hostility to machinery set aside, the English workman at home is not as effective as his brother in this country. The proportion of illiteracy among foreign workmen is 40 per cent greater than it is among the workmen of the United States, and, it is argued by many observers, that this alone is sufficient explanation of the superiority of our workmen. There is probably a better explanation to be found in the well known physical inferiority of the foreigners, especially the French and English toilers, and some recent British writers on this subject attrib-

ute all of the labor disadvantages of the craftsmen of his country to bodily, and not to mental depreciation.

It is a famous matter of history that England ceased to be an agricultural country with the repeal of the corn laws and essayed at once to be the manufacturing center of the world. Its factory towns became overcrowded and their populations in time not only city bred but inbred to a certain degree. In the United States, with all its growth of manufacture, there has been no sudden hegira from the farms to the cities and yet the ranks of the city workmen are recruited constantly and gradually from the yellow farm lands of the prairies. The new blood of the country boy, his ambition, his health, his muscular might, have kept alive and growing the basic vitality of American working enterprise and in no slight measure account for the admitted pre-eminence of our workmen.

Members of the Mosely commission, twenty-three representatives of English labor unions, who inspected the conditions and achievements of American workmen in 1902, were almost unanimous in depreciating their own circumstances as compared with what they found here. But they were greatly at variance in accounting for the palpably surpassing qualities of the workers here not only as to skill and productivity in shop and factory but in their dress, bearing, relations to their employers, and in their home life. One of the commission admitted that he did not like the business or social conditions of American industrial life, and attributed the high quality of the workmen to the fine weather and bright skies, which he found so exhilarating after the dark, foggy atmosphere of England.

He expressed the belief that the American workman does not labor so hard as his English cousin, finding the reason in the fact that here the whole tendency is to make machinery relieve the man of as much of the work burden as possible. The Mosely delegation was astonished at the equality existing in America between the employers and bosses and the men. They found that in most shops and factories there is a premium on mere ideas, whereas, in Europe, the workman who presumed to suggest or dictate a better plan to his superior



would be looked upon as impertinent and probably dismissed.

In the report that resulted from that investigation, it is stated that the workmen of the United States are infinitely better in their personal habits than those of England. For instance, it was estimated that English workmen consume four times as much intoxicating liquor per man as do the Americans. The average yearly expenditure of English working people for intoxicants amounts to two months' wages, and drunkenness, as a habit, is the rule rather than the exception. It was found that the British workman, as a rule, squanders one month's wages every year on horse racing, and that the American of the same calling wastes not more than ten days' wages in twelve months in a similar manner.

Here certainly is unbiased testimony to a lofty quality in the workman of the United States as compared with him of England, made by English investigators, which, while speaking loudly in favor of the virtue of the American craftsman, may help to account largely for that high degree of manual and mechanical expertness which places him at the head and front of the workmen of the world.

The self reliance, the ambition, the diligence, the pride with which the American attacks his daily task also struck these foreigners as extraordinary. Some of them were of the belief that this sense of equality with the best of their superiors was the reason for the wonderful efficiency of our workmen. For it is true that in Europe the man who works is looked upon as baser metal in the fabric of society. He is a servant, and he is expected to know and keep his place. He stands for what is left of the old feudal system, and his spirit is hampered with the fetters of caste.

"When you meet an American workman on his way to or from the shop you might take him for a business man," was the surprised comment of one of the Mosely commissioners. "They don't walk the streets here with dirty faces. They dress better than our fellows, and they have a show of pride and independence that one never sees in the workingmen of London, Liverpool, Birmingham, or Manchester."

The sanitary provisions of the big factories here, the familiarity existing between foremen and workmen, the monetary and moral encouragement of the man with an idea, the self assertiveness of the workers, the comfortable, sometimes elegant, manner in which they live at home, all impressed the English examiners, not as evidence of the admitted superiority of the workingmen of this country, but as reasons for it. Some of them, refusing to admit that the American is better paid because he accomplishes more, held that he does more and better work because his wages are higher.

In Lancashire a weaver who runs two looms is regarded as a fair performer. In New England the weaver who cannot run eight looms is looked upon as an apprentice, and paid accordingly. Some statistician having grouped twenty industries in which American workmen excel their European rivals, decided that the craftsmen of the United States produced, in quality and quantity together, 25 per cent more than the same number of workmen of other countries could do. Fifteen per cent of this excellence he attributed to the higher craftsmanship of the American and 10 per cent to his superior facilities.

There is no way of estimating the degree in which drink, gambling, and the discouraging element of caste may hinder or destroy the craftsmanship of a workman, but it is agreed by the best authorities on this subject that in this phase lies one of the nearest explanations of American supremacy in working potentiality. One writer discussing the question of environment and facilities, says: "the British employer has more to learn from America than the British workman."

In explanation of this assertion he cites the instance of the American electric factory at Manchester, which British contractors and architects said would require from three to four years to build. An American builder came along and, with English workmen to do the work at wages so high as to astonish them, and with treatment so generous as to inspire them, completed the entire structure in twelve months. It may be that American labor could have finished the same job in nine months, but the incident seems to point to the fact that the foreigner at home is, at least in some measure, the victim of the system under which he labors.

England did not awaken to the fact of the physical degeneration of her people until it was necessary to form armies for South Africa out of the millions of workmen in the shops and factories of the big cities. The majority of the new soldiers who went to the Boer war came from the huddled sections of the manufacturing districts, and they did not meet two out of four of the physical requirements formerly required of the imperial recruit. The most patriotic public men of England are now alive to this retrograde condition of the working class, and they have accounted for it adequately, if not satisfactorily.

That the foreigner is not intrinsically an inferior workman is almost evident from the fact that, once he takes his place beside an American fellow craftsman in an American shop or factory he rises in most cases to the same high level of skill and effectiveness as his native born comrade. The exceptions—the foreigners who never adapt or arouse themselves to the American pace and the American standard—are almost invariably old or middle aged men or persons of exceptional stupidity—an uncommon fault, by the way, in the workmen from England, Germany, France, or Scandinavia.

It must be that the pride an American has in his work prompts him to give it always a better finish, always an extra polish, for it is a notorious fact that many American made articles of intrinsically inferior quality are preferred even in rival manufacturing countries for no other cause than that the article from the hands of the workman of the United States had some style about it.

In the absolutely manual crafts there are many branches in which the Americans cannot or rather have not equaled the foreigners as to quality. But, except in what may be called the division of manual arts or artistic crafts in which of late years there has been a noticeable revival in America, the output of wholly manual work, whether in factory or shop, is but a small proportion of the manufacturing capacities of the United States. But if he falls behind in quality of his work in many of the handicrafts, the American continues to surpass all others in the quantity of work he does and can do.

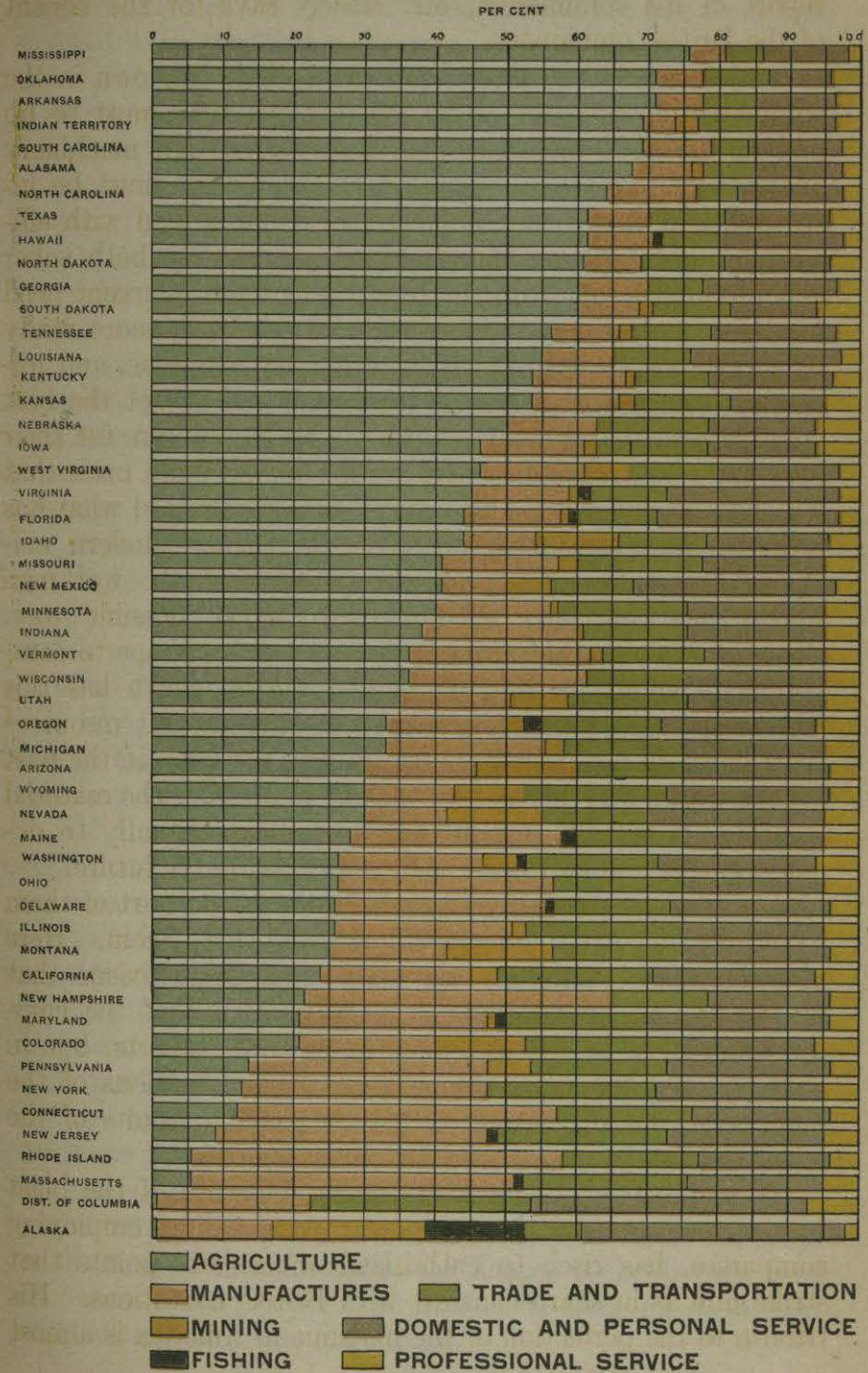
Summing it all up in an introduction to the elaborate report of his commission, Mr. Mosely says for the benefit of the British employer:

"I can only say that if we are to hold our own in the commerce of the world, both masters and men must be up and doing. Old methods must be dropped, old machinery abandoned. Practical education of the masses must be instituted and carried out upon a logical basis, and with efficiency. The bulk of our workmen are already both sober and intelligent, but with many of them there is urgent need for them to become more sober, more rational, more ready to adopt new ideas in place of antiquated methods, and improved machinery whenever produced, and to get the best possible results from a day's work. Manufacturers for their part must be prepared to assure their men a piece price that will not be cut when the latter's earnings exceed what has hitherto been considered sufficient for them. Modern machinery must be introduced, co-operation of the workmen sought, and initiative encouraged in every possible way. Without such a modernized system we cannot hope to compete with countries like the United States, which has this advantage, and is moreover blessed with natural resources such as we do not possess. Britain has, however, in the past led the world, and might yet continue to do so. The material is here. It remains for masters and men mutually to decide whether and how far it shall be utilized in the future."

In the reports of the commissioners only a part of them have gone beyond the general field assigned to them. Here and there are pertinent suggestions and observations that are novel and unexpected. The individuality of the commissioner may be marked in most of these reports, but in only two of them are there any marked indications of the man being out of harmony with the general results of the investigation.

Commissioner Walls, speaking of the work of the blast furnace men and of the equipment provided by employing companies, has risen to enthusiasm on several points that strike him as in sharp contrast with British conditions. His tribute to the perfection of the machine in America is almost

PROPORTION OF PERSONS ENGAGED IN EACH CLASS OF OCCUPATIONS



unbounded. Speaking of a great plant, where every individual piece of the manufactured mechanism has a machine devoted to its production, he says:

"Many of these machines are obviously the product of a marvelous inventive genius, doing their work with more than human ingenuity, and only requiring to be fed through a tube with the brass or steel bar, from which the piece is made. Dayton is an enlarged edition of Bournville. In the rolling mills at South Chicago, Homestead, and Youngstown, the machinery is ahead of anything I have seen in similar works in this country. The American Locomotive company's works at Schenectady, which cover sixty two acres, have a mass of powerful as well as ingenious machines, each having its own special duty. They seem to cut up iron, steel, and brass as wood is cut by a cabinetmaker. We were informed that they could turn out six large locomotives a day, or thirty five a week. Over 10,000 hands are employed."

As to the work of the furnace man, he remarks how the use of machinery has lightened his work over that of the British workman, and says of this machinery: "It has been introduced evidently not so much with a view to dispensing with labor as making it lighter and expediting the work." And of this expeditiousness he says that the output of the American is more than double that of the British furnace.

Of the disposition of the British employer to resent suggestions from workmen, Mr. Walls says that foremen and managers in England almost universally reply to a suggestion with the question, Which of us is gaffer? or the assertion, You are not paid for thinking. "This kind of stupidity kept back progress in the manufacture of pig iron for years. The theoretical man, the manager, insisted on what was known as the open mouth and barring the furnace to make room. The practical workman advised a fast head and leave the furnace to do its own work. This suggestion was looked upon with suspicion because it meant less labor. It was only when it became known that on night shifts, in the absence of the managers, the keeper took his own road and made about 20 per cent more iron than on days, that this suicidal policy was abandoned."