

Prohibition Will Never End the Liquor Trade (February 2, 1916)

It was not my purpose in writing the article for the *Star* which was reviewed Sunday by Mr. Harper in his sermon at the First Methodist Church, reported in Monday morning's issue, to discuss the question of prohibition.¹ But an incidental reference was made to that question. The point I sought to make was that vice and crime flow from social conditions and that it was vain to cry out against these results and condemn individual victims of vice while supporting the system productive of these evils. It is far better to stop breeding crime than it is to denounce crime and punish criminals.

But Mr. Harper, whose views are expressed in a spirit of perfect fairness, who has proved his earnestness and sincerity in the fight for better conditions, and for whom I have the highest respect, has taken special exception to what I said about certain results of prohibition in Alabama and West Virginia, as reported in the newspapers, reading a letter from Governor Hatfield² of the latter state contending that these results were exaggerated and that prohibition was making a satisfactory showing in the state.

This depends entirely upon the point of view and Governor Hatfield but expresses his own view, but since the question has been raised I will quote some facts and figures from another source which seems entirely authoritative. The following is taken from *The Survey* of September 1915:

In July 1915 West Virginia entered its first year of statewide prohibition, and a year's experience has resulted in the highest rate of taxation ever known in the state.

Also following from the same source:

Alabama is now struggling with a deficit of about \$3 million, which appears to be the result of prohibition. To bring the municipal conditions, in concrete form, into plain review, we will cite the city of Birmingham, which has discontinued its street cleaning and garbage collection. It has dispensed with its health officer, city physician, and market inspector, extinguished half the lights, cut the school term from nine to seven months, and reduced by 10 percent [with] 10,000 men thrown out of employment as an initial result;

while the final result, as it appears at this writing, is that the expense of the state government has more than doubled since the law went into effect and there is a deficit of \$1,022,000 in the state revenues.

The enforcement of the law in Tennessee has made vacant more than 600 business houses in the four largest cities of the state, and 75 percent of them are vacant today.

There is much more but this will suffice. There are 19 prohibition states in the country and every one of them is swarming with bootleggers; not one of them in which you cannot buy all the whiskey you want if you have the money to pay for it. There is not an actually dry county in all these states and there never will be.

Where Legislation Fails

I realize the evils of the liquor traffic, but it will never be suppressed by legislative prohibition. Murder is also prohibited under the severest penalties, but this does not prevent almost a thousand murders in the United States every month, and it is doubtful if this number were increased if the prohibition was removed. Recent figures show that the percentage of murders in dry Memphis is far higher than it is in wet Louisville.

I know how prohibition works and how it does not work. For seven years I spent much of my time in Kansas and I saw it there in full operation.

I am opposed to the working people being divided upon this question, as they have been divided upon the humbug tariff and now are upon preparedness, while all the time, whichever side prevails, they are exploited, impoverished, thousands of them live in huts and hovels, under conditions which make for drunkenness and other vices, while thousands of others tramp about looking for work, which cannot be found, and are by degrees forced into vagrancy, filth, and crime.

There is not a particle of difference between so-called wet and dry states, so far as the workers are concerned. Wet or dry, there is the same poverty, misery, sweatshops, unemployment, low wages, high prices, idlers (rich and poor), extravagance and squalor, prostitutes (male and female) of high and low degree, and all the rest that go to make up the sum of our Christian civilization. I have traveled over them all, again and again, and if there is any difference between them worthy of the fuss that is being made about it, I have not been able to discover it.

As long as there is profit in whiskey, it will be made and sold, and where this is prohibited, the bootlegger takes the place of the saloon-keeper and the drinker becomes also the sneak and hypocrite.

Socialize the liquor business, take out the profit, and let it be controlled by the state, as socialism proposes, and there will be a summary end to the evil — but never through prohibition legislation. There is far too much “prohibition” in the world and often the spirit of it is bigoted and tyrannical. There are tens of thousands of laws on the statute books which prohibit almost everything conceivable, and for all the good they do they would better be repealed.

Frances Willard,³ grand woman that she was, looking for the root cause of drunkenness among working people, found it in the system which exploits them and keeps them in poverty, and it was while making this investigation that she became a socialist and declared that socialism was the only remedy for the evil.

Question of Profit

Buy it would never do to take the profit out of liquor and have the state control it, for if the profit could be taken out of liquor it could also be taken out of beef and sugar and lumber, and out of every other industry for the benefit of the people. No, it would never do, for that would be impractical and visionary, and so the people must accept with such grace as they can the practical results of the present system.

As to Mr. Harper's objection to what I said about the relation of business to vice in the present system, the following incident is illuminating: The socialist administration in Milwaukee for the first time in the history of that city closed the places of vice and kept them closed. Leading economists and sociologists, other than socialists, declared it to be the cleanest city in the union under socialist administration. Not one penny of graft, nor a breath of scandal in connection with municipal affairs. This did not suit the powerful business interests, breweries included, which had dominated the city and, irrespective of party, they combined solidly against the Socialists, reinstated their “business” administration, and reopened the places of vice.

A vicious system, cornerstoned in the exploitation of the many who toil and produce by the few who do neither can only be productive of vicious results.

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¹ Reference is to Debs’s January 26 article “Ministers and Civic Morals,” this volume pp.

² Henry D. Hatfield (1875-1962) was the Republican governor of West Virginia from 1913 through 1917. He would later serve one term in the US Senate after winning election in November 1928.

³ Frances Willard (1839-1898) was the founder of the Woman’s Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) and an outspoken advocate of female suffrage. Herself a Christian socialist, Willard saw the ready availability of alcohol as a primary cause of poverty and violence against women.