

What's the Matter With Chicago? (October 15, 1902)

Terre Haute, Ind., Oct. 15, 1902

For some days William E. Curtis,¹ the far-famed correspondent of the *Chicago Record-Herald*, has been pressing the above inquiry upon representative people of all classes with a view to throwing all possible light upon that vexed subject.

The inquiry is in such general terms and takes such wide scope that anything like a comprehensive answer would fill a book without exhausting the subject, while a review of the "interviews" would embrace the whole gamut of absurdity and folly and produce a library of comedy and tragedy.

Not one of the replies I have seen has sufficient merit to be printed in a paper read by grown folks, and those that purport to come from leaders of labor and representatives of the working class take the prize in what would appear to be a competitive contest for progressive asininity.

The leader, so-called, who puts it upon record in a capitalist paper and gives the libel the widest circulation, that Chicago is all right, so far as the workers are concerned, that they have plenty and are prosperous and happy, is as fit to lead the working class as is a wolf to guide a flock of spring lambs.

It is from the wage worker's point of view that I shall attempt an answer to the question propounded by Mr. Curtis, and in dealing with the subject I shall be as candid as may be expected from a socialist agitator.

The question is opportune at this season, when the "frost is on the pumpkin," and the ballot is soon to decide to what extent the people really know "what is the matter with Chicago."

First of all, Chicago is the product of modern capitalism, and, like all other great commercial centers, is unfit for human habitation. The Illinois Central Railroad Company selected the site upon which the city is built and this consisted of a vast miasmatic swamp far better suited to mosquito culture than for human beings. From the day the site was chosen by (and of course in the interest of all) said railway company, everything that

entered into the building of the town and the development of the city was determined purely from profit considerations and without the remotest concern for the health and comfort of the human beings who were to live there, especially those who had to do all the labor and produce all the wealth.

As a rule hogs are only raised where they have good health and grow fat. Any old place will do to raise human beings.

At this very hour typhoid fever and diphtheria are epidemic in Chicago and the doctors agree that these ravages are due to the microbes and germs generated in the catch basins and sewers which fester and exhale their foul and fetid breath upon the vast swarms of human beings caught and fettered there.

Thousands upon thousands of Chicago's population have been poisoned to death by the impure water and foul atmosphere of this undrainable swamp (notwithstanding the doctored mortuary tables by which it is proven to prospective investors that it is the healthiest city on earth) and thousands more will commit suicide in the same way, but to compensate for it all Chicago has the prize location for money-making, immense advantage for profit-mongering — and what are human beings compared to money?

During recent years Chicago has expended millions to lift herself out of her native swamp, but the sewage floats back to report the dismal failure of the attempt, and every germ-laden breeze confirms the report.

That is one thing that is the matter with Chicago. It never was intended that human beings should live there. A thousand sites infinitely preferable for a city could have been found in close proximity, but they lacked the "Commercial" advantages which are of such commanding importance in the capitalist system.

And now they wonder "What is the Matter with Chicago!"

Look at some of her filthy streets in the heart of the city, chronically torn up, the sunlight obscured, the air polluted, the water contaminated, every fountain and stream designed to bless the race poisoned at its source — and you need not wonder what ails Chicago, nor will you escape the conclusion that the case is chronic and that the present city will never recover from the fatal malady.

What is true of Chicago physically is emphasized in her social, moral, and spiritual aspects, and this applies to every commercial metropolis in the civilized world.

From any rational point of view they are all dismal failures.

There is no reason under the sun, aside from the profit considerations of the capitalist system, why two million humans should be stacked up in layers and heaps until they jar the clouds, while millions of acres of virgin soil are totally uninhabited.

The very contemplation of the spectacle gives rise to serious doubt as to the sanity of the race.

Such a vast population in such a limited area cannot feed itself, has not room to move and cannot keep clean.

The deadly virus of capitalism is surging through all the veins of this young mistress of trade and the eruptions are found all over the body social and politic, and that's "what's the matter with Chicago."

Hundreds of the *Record-Herald's* quacks are prescribing their nostrums for the blotches and pustules which have broken out upon the surface, but few have sense enough to know and candor enough to admit that the virus must be expelled from the system — and these few are Socialists who are so notoriously visionary and impracticable that their opinions are not worthy of space in a great paper printed to conserve the truth and promote the welfare of society.

This model metropolis of the West has broken all the records for political corruption. Her old rival on the Mississippi, catching the inspiration doubtless, has been making some effort to crown herself with similar laurels, but for smooth political jobbery and fancy manipulation of the wires, Chicago is still far in the lead. In the "Windy City" ward politics has long been recognized as a fine art and the collection is unrivaled anywhere.

From the millions of dollars filched from the millions of humans by the corporate owners of the common utilities, the reeking corruption funds flow like lava tides, and to attempt to purify the turbid stream by the "reform measures" proposed from time to time by the Republican-Democratic party in its internal conflict for the spoils of office, is as utter a piece of folly as to try with beeswax to seal up Mount Pelée.²

Chicago has plutocrats and paupers in the ratio of more than sixteen to one — boulevards for the exhibition of the rich and alleys for the convenience of the poor.

Chicago has also a grand army of the most skilled pickpockets, artistic confidence operators, accomplished foot-pads, and adept cracksmen on earth. So well is this understood that on every breeze we hear the refrain:

When Reuben comes to town,
He's sure to be done brown—

And this lugubrious truth is treated as the richest of jokes, with utter unconsciousness of the moral degeneracy it reflects, the crime it glorifies and the indictment of capitalist society it returns in answer to the *Record-Herald's* query: "What's the Matter with Chicago?"

Besides the array of "talent" above mentioned, fostered by competitive society everywhere, the marshy metropolis by the lake may boast of a vast and flourishing gambling industry, an illimitable and progressive "levee" district, sweatshops, slums, dives, bloated men, bedraggled women, ghastly caricatures of their former selves, babies cradled in rags and filth, aged children, than which nothing could be more melancholy — all these and a thousand more, the fruit of our present social anarchy, afflict Chicago; and worst of all, our wise social philosophers, schooled in the economics of capitalist universities, preach the comforting doctrine that all these are necessary evils and at best can but be restricted within certain bounds; and this hideous libel is made a cloak that theft may continue to masquerade as philanthropy.

It is at this point that Chicago particularly prides herself upon her "charities," hospitals and eleemosynary endowments, all breathing the sweet spirit of Christian philanthropy — utterly ignorant of the fact, designedly or otherwise, that these very institutions are manifestations of social disease and are monumental of the iniquity of the system that must rear such whited sepulchers to conceal its crimes.

I do not oppose the insane asylum — but I abhor and condemn the cutthroat system that robs man of his reason, drives him to insanity and makes the lunatic asylum an indispensable adjunct to every civilized community.

With the ten thousand "charities" that are proposed to poultice the sores and bruises of society, I have little patience. Worst of all is the charity ball. Chicago indulges in these festering festivals on a grand scale. Think of cavorting around in a dress suit because some poor wretch is hungry; and of indulging in a royal carousal to comfort some despairing woman on the brink of suicide; and finally, that in "fashionable society" the definition of this mixture of inanity and moral perversion is "charity."

Fleece your fellows! That is "business," and you are a captain of industry. Having "relieved" your victims of their pelts, dance and make

merry to “relieve” their agony. This is “charity” and you are a philanthropist.

In summing up the moral assets of a great (?) city, the churches should not be overlooked. Chicago is a city of fine churches. All the denominations are copiously represented, and sermons in all languages and of all varieties are turned out in job lots and at retail to suit the market.

The churches are always numerous where vice is rampant. They seem to spring from the same soil and thrive in the same climate.

And yet the churches are supposed to wage relentless warfare upon evil. To just what extent they have checked its spread in the “Windy City” may be inferred from the probing of the press into the body social to ascertain “what is the matter with Chicago.”

The preachers are not wholly to blame, after all, for their moral and spiritual impotency. They are wage-workers, the same as coal miners, and are just as dependent upon the capitalist class. How can they be expected to antagonize the interests of their employers and hold their jobs? The unskilled preachers, the common laborers in the arid spots of the vineyard, are often wretchedly paid, and yet they remain unorganized and have never struck for better wages.

“What’s the matter with Chicago?” Capitalism!

What’s the cure? Socialism!

Regeneration will only come with depopulation — when socialism has relieved the congestion and released the people and they spread out over the country and live close to the grass.

The *Record-Herald* has furnished the people of Chicago and Illinois with a campaign issue.

If you want to know more about “what is the matter with Chicago,” read the socialist papers and magazines; read the platform of the Socialist Party; and if you do, you will cut loose from the Republican-Democratic party, the double-headed political monstrosity of the capitalist class, and you will cast your vote for the Socialist Party and your lot with the international socialist movement, whose mission it is to uproot and overthrow the whole system of capitalist exploitation, and put an end to the poverty and misery it entails — and that’s “what’s the matter with Chicago.”

Published in the *Chicago Socialist*, vol. 4, whole no. 190 (Oct. 25, 1904), pp. 1-2. It is not known whether this piece first ran in the *Chicago Record-Herald* as part of its “What’s the Matter with Chicago?” series.

¹ William Eleroy Curtis (1850-1911) was a traveling correspondent for the *Chicago Inter Ocean* from 1873 to 1886 before moving to the *Record-Herald* in 1887. He would remain with that paper until the time of his death.

² Mount Pelée, a volcano on the island of Martinique, underwent a destructive eruption in May 1902 that killed approximately 30,000 people.