

THE WAR AND SOCIAL REVOLUTION.

At this moment of national emergency we are confronted by an upheaval in British industry, which is all the more formidable because its causes are obscure and its range incalculable. This upheaval has affected transport, the coal trade, and the supply of munitions; it will, as Mr. Thomas warns us, develop into an urgent problem for whatever Government undertakes the task of conducting the war through the coming winter. My only claim to attempt a diagnosis of this situation is that since the day, seven years ago, when I introduced the Right to Work Bill I have heard all the debates on labour and examined with some care the successive crises which have disturbed our economic system. Looking back over these years we need feel no surprise at what is sometimes called "the bad behaviour" of certain British workmen, especially of those—or some of them—who earn their living in rough seaports like Liverpool, Barrow, the Tyne, and the Clyde. We have here the inevitable result of a defective education, of chronic evils, still unremedied, and of that harsh atmosphere which is apt, as in South Wales, to breed faults on both sides.

Let us look at the case by way of retrospect. The General Election of 1906 aroused great hopes, yet proved to be only a Pyrrhic victory for social causes. Still, by that change, the destinies of the nation were committed to new men and new measures. Mr. Chamberlain's campaign was unsuccessful, but it was a failure that, like the parallel movement towards Socialism, brought the State into direct contact with the actual life of the poor. Questions of sectarian education, disestablishment, and Home Rule were overshadowed by economic controversies over the size of the loaf, regular employment, wages, access to land, and breakfasts for children. The old middle-class was submerged in the larger franchise, and even in Wales, the stronghold of dissent, a new nation was arising, which, recruited as it was by immigration into the mining areas, became less contentious and more ambitious, anxious to govern instead of merely to protest and to revolt. Mr. Lloyd George went to the Board of Trade, where he dealt, not with the tyranny of Bishops and the sorrows of school-teachers required to play the organ on Sundays, but with railway magnates, shipowners, and millionaire patentees. Not a year passed before the economic issue, most reluctantly recognised by personages of the old school, were in fact, if not in form,

dominant in the House of Commons. Child feeding, small holdings, a threatened railway strike, old-age pensions, and the poor law were urgently, if not always helpfully, debated. Yet, with all the talk, a bold advance was delayed. Neither Mr. Birrell nor Mr. McKenna was an expert on infant diet. Mr. Burns stiffly awaited the reports of the Poor Law Commission, which, when received, gave him little satisfaction. Mr. Lloyd George, more supple, referred railwaymen to those blessed words, Conciliation Boards, while Mr. Asquith cautiously though proudly laid on the despatch box a tiny nest egg of a million or so for old-age pensions. Cottages were reserved for Ireland, and Mr. Harcourt's Small Holdings Act, though excellent in intention, was merely an ante-room where applicants might wait in patience for the dawn.

When war broke out, some of these problems had been squarely faced. Nine years of legislative effort had pensioned the aged, provided some food and some medicine, with much inspection, for the young; had insured the sick and disabled; and provided in a measure for the unemployed. Yet discontent, so far from abating, flamed forth, like the eruption of a volcano, without warning or explicit reason. Miners, dockers, railwaymen, postal employees, cotton workers, were all in turn, and sometimes simultaneously, seized by the epidemic. Trade was good, unemployment was a minimum, yet there was this constant, this often mysterious disaffection.

The legislation, so outlined, was thus for some reason inadequate. It assisted special classes—the under-fed child, the sick, the man out of a job, the aged, the consumptive—in a word, what the Devil calls the hindmost. It was ambulance work, admirable for casualties, but scarcely affecting the able-bodied soldier in the trenches. The Cabinet, following the line of least resistance, had naturally selected glaring, exceptional, and limited evils for treatment, while the normal workman, who was hale and hearty and by no means down on his luck, discovered that it was always some other fellow who was being looked after. He still remained on his old scale of pay and at the old contract, based on a week's notice. He found by experience that arbitration by conciliation boards, save in the case of the Post Office and of industries specially scheduled as sweated, scarcely modified the *status quo*. The awards, when converted into coin, left little change at the end of the week with which to develop the standard of life and meet rising prices. That was why the workers, even the best of them, angered their critics by tearing up their bond, as if it were only a scrap of paper. One leader after another was deposed, and all the union officials alike were mistrusted, despite their stern recti-

tude and unquestionable fidelity, because it was felt by the rank and file that somehow these men had escaped from their class. They held the pen. They wore the black coat. They also had joined the ranks of economic privilege.

The trouble was aggravated by increasing evidences of luxury. Tempted by the Press, wealth, or, as sometimes occurred, the pretence of wealth, was revealed in the limelight, and increasingly courted advertisement. The cheapest papers were busiest in describing and possibly romancing about an affluent *régime*. Every artisan could see for himself what London spends on jewels, on furs, on hotels, travel, fishing, shooting, and costume balls. The more thoughtful Socialists studied new issues—how millions went to develop the Argentine, other millions to Japan, and other millions to the Dominions, while the savings of the British working man, if any, were reckoned, not collectively, but in detail, as pence. Sir L. G. C. Money turned the arithmetic into diagrams, and Mr. Snowden pointed the same with his peculiarly incisive epigrams. Nor did the middle-classes escape attention. The wage-earners read of garden cities—somewhere else; of cheap tours to Switzerland, which cost just too much; of theatres, where a decent seat would swallow up a day's pay; of golf, where a lost ball or a broken club would drive a labourer to the pawnshop. In London the gaiety of the West End, like the Lord Mayor's show, was shared to some extent by the poor; there were pageants to be seen, and glimpses of sumptuous gowns rewarded the spectator on the kerbstone. But in the North, where the difficulties have been acute, wealth appeared in a more selfish—or at least a more distant and less attractive—garb. The motor-car raced along the highway, leaving the cyclist in the dust if not in the ditch. There were no pageants, no gold lace—only the infinite comfort of the public-house and the pleasant relief of hearing strong speeches from younger trade unionists who had not yet arrived at responsibility, a pen, and a black coat. Religion did not allay this rising impatience of the people. On the contrary, the revival of faith among the working classes, which assumed the form of the brotherhood meeting, consisted as much in a gospel of revolt as in total abstinence from liquor. Unhampered by theological prepossessions, and by no means to be reckoned among the "unco guid," the Pleasant Sunday Afternoon orator constantly preached an advance in comfort for the workers. Men who could not quote five sentences from the Sermon on the Mount were thus taught that a lofty authority confirmed their various yearnings and demands. The latest evangelicalism dealt with this world rather than the next, and was sometimes so devoid of mysticism as to seem, despite the hymns, like a merely political crusade.

Other hopes were aroused, and other resentments for the time being appeased by Mr. Lloyd George's land campaign. Opponents accused this statesman of endeavouring to snatch one more electoral victory. Admirers believed that he was honestly endeavouring to forestall an ugly outburst—long threatened—of industrial discontent. He had himself seen how, in July, 1911, a complex national strike had enveloped the transport of the country, and had plunged the empire into grave international peril. The coal strike had followed, and Dublin had produced Jim Larkin. It was thus no great wonder that Mr. Lloyd George, while putting from him the land tax formulæ of Mr. Wedgwood, should preach that the solution of the industrial difficulties would be discovered in a better use of land. Mr. Lloyd George, with his fund of human sympathy, turned instinctively from the theories of site value (of which in his famous Budget he had heard enough from the lawyers) to the actual wages of the men who tilled the site. "The labourer's quid" became the cry which carried even land taxers like Mr. Hemmerde into Parliament, and, obviously, the watchword was of supreme concern to trade unionists in the towns. The reason why these organisations had failed, at any rate in recent years of high prices, to raise the standard of living, whether by negotiation, arbitration, or strike, was, after all, the fundamental fact that behind the collective bargain there lay a reserve of underpaid labour, always available through enlistment from the villages. After the famine years Ireland had supplied a similar reserve, and to this day the Irish quarter in many centres of population—a survival of the hungry 'forties—depresses the local labour market. But the policy of land purchase and the efforts of the Congested Districts Board had gradually absorbed this source of immigration, and it was now from the English countryside that railway companies, police authorities, and numberless other employers had automatically recruited the ranks of those who served them. Increase the wage in the village, and you make a new quotation right through the industrial schedule. The wage on the land is the index of all wages, just as the price of Consols is the index among brokers and bankers of all gilt-edged securities. Mr. Lloyd George's most convinced critics recognised this. I remember the late Lord Rothschild speaking to me with emphasis on the matter, a conversation to which, though private, I may here refer, because in his speeches he made public his views on the point.

When the war broke out, the land campaign, though not the emotions which it evoked, vanished without achieving results. But suddenly, by a stroke of destiny, the situation which Mr. Lloyd George hoped to produce by uplifting labour on the farm

was created *instantly* by the summons to the colours of a million or two men in the prime of life, and the employment of other millions on munitions. With this artificial scarcity, the price of labour, like the price of shipping and of sugar, rose by leaps and bounds. The workers, who previously had been accustomed to regard a job as a favour, now discovered that the favour was on their side. Hitherto it had been said that their patronage was only courted on those rare occasions when the governing classes wanted their vote. But now they were treated with respect and flattered by appeals all day and every day, Sundays included. Where employers had picked and chosen the men whom they would engage, the employed now picked and chose the employers whom they would serve and the hours at which they would render that service. Naturally, they selected those days of the week and those hours of the day when the highest rates could be earned. And their output at times showed some tendency to decline, even in districts where the necessities of war were peremptory.

This situation, already strange enough, was complicated by a new fact—that is, the world-wide demand for munitions. In time of peace output is the source of wages, profits, and national prosperity. In modern war it is an essential of national existence. As saviour of his country, the man at the forge gained a prestige which is usually reserved for the hero on the battlefield. He was offered money and medals if only he would work. At Liverpool the greatest territorial magnate of the county has spent his time drilling a dockers' battalion. The wage-earner's sobriety, the quality of his whiskey, the strength of his beer, his early breakfast, and his habits on the Sabbath, provoked not only controversy, but a Parliamentary crisis. Bonuses were showered upon him. In many areas he could, without excessive effort, make a wage that far exceeded the income-tax limit. Yet often, though able-bodied, he declined to do so. In the same family there would be one man so patriotic as to enlist, and another man so seemingly apathetic as to content himself with short time. Exasperated onlookers set off the example of the one against that of the other, not perceiving that the two men belonged to the same class or that the readiness to enlist and the reluctance to earn good wages arose from one and the same cause. Both men alike had been in unconscious revolt against the monotony of their usual toil. The one has preferred the perilous exhilaration of Flanders, and the other, when dissuaded from that, has flagged in his zeal for the old duties, which, before the heavens opened, were accepted as a matter of course. Given the usual money for the wife at home, and a fair margin for tobacco, the worker has often been content to eschew additional earnings, and the

very man who might have won the Victoria Cross for gallantry at the Dardanelles would, when staying at home by special request of the War Office, sullenly endorse Mr. Keir Hardie's famous dictum that, after all, he would be no worse off as a wage earner if the Germans did rule in England. Not that he meant it. Not that he was really unmindful of his country's need. What, with restricted imagination, he could not see was the special heroism of a faithful performance of monotonous duties.

Enlistment has all the fascination of a splendid moral adventure. And, for the wage earner, that fascination is enhanced by personal contact with officers of high social rank. At the works, mate meets mate while the master sits at his desk, a distant figure, often suspected of financial designs, and too seldom known personally. But in the trench the soldier eats and sleeps, fights, is wounded, and dies side by side with an heir to the peerage, a Gladstone, a Member of Parliament, and an Asquith, not one of whom can be accused of making a dividend out of the war. For the first time, it may be for the last time, the man feels that he counts one, and that with shrapnel bursting nobody counts more. He is clothed as never before. The best leather is reserved for his boots. Ladies wait on him in hospital, and give him rides in their motor-cars. He sees France, hears a new language, witnesses what no journalist may describe, and has at last something to talk about which others want to hear.

It is well that we should clearly perceive these realities before we have to deal, as a nation, with the position which will arise inevitably when, after the war, we endeavour to renew the old fabric of industry. To turn swords back into ploughshares will be a formidable task, but far more delicate will be the handling of immense bodies of men whose minds have been unsettled by the collapse of the old *régime* and by their one hour of glorious life. At normal times, to talk about "back to the land" for the clerk and the average industrial was folly. These men did not want to go back to the land. Trench warfare has taught the softest-handed townsman how to dig and master the soil. After such fusion with mother earth, will the clerk return to his desk? Will the industrial desert the open sky for his loom and his lathe? Moreover, we have for the first time admitted full State responsibility for dependents—not a mere 5s. a week, but a subsistence income amounting to a guaranteed wage paid by the State. Will the agricultural labourer return to 16s. a week, when his wife alone with her children has been receiving a sovereign? and will wives ever again submit to housekeeping on a portion of their "man's" wage, after having handled their own money, in hard cash across the counter of the Post Office, without deduction,

whether for beer or "baccy"? Again, what about these war bonuses? They are easy to grant, especially when the State pays the piper, but they are less easy to terminate, and, for the classes affected, their continuance during the war obviously weakens the personal motive for desiring an end to the struggle which has reduced unemployment to *nil*. Yet to maintain the bonuses when Government contracts are brought to an end might be to strain commerce to breaking point.

There is much to be said, on general grounds, for an all-round increase in wages. Money, so paid, is not lost. It maintains the home market, conduces on the whole to good health, and tends to diminish pauperism. The mere fact that the workers are doing well out of the war is not in itself to be regretted. But one wishes that they had done better out of peace. For the peril lies just here—that the new industrial standards, instead of being based on permanent and wealth-producing industry, are precariously maintained by an obviously artificial boom. The shortage of labour on which all depends may be followed by an unemployed surplus. Such surplus must tend to produce a slump in wages. And if, as is possible, there should continue to be an increased employment of women, and especially of young and marriageable women, it may be that men will find their places filled by the very girls whom, if they could get these places, they would make their wives. Hence it follows that statesmen will, if they are wise, make a close study in advance of the measures which will be needed to avert a real and even dangerous revulsion of industrial sentiment when the great struggle is over. Relief works of the usual type will be utterly useless. There is much to be said for Mr. Lloyd George's view that, for some years at any rate, trade, if wisely directed by the Allied States, will continue to be good. While, undoubtedly, the war has been exhausting the resources of Europe, it has actually checked the development, some would say the too rapid development, of South America. The world will renew its demand for necessities of civilisation, and, with German credit shattered and German workmen stricken to the ground by the hundred thousand, the opportunities of Great Britain will be not less than in past years. Moreover, the reconstruction of devastated areas must be as boldly financed as the war itself. Whatever may happen as to indemnities, which, if adequate to the case, will take years to clear off, loans must be made in the form of houses and goods for Belgium, Poland, Serbia, and the French provinces. The reconstruction must be carefully and comprehensively planned out in advance. In addition, the lesson must be learnt that a high standard of living, whether for rich or poor, depends, by inevitable law, upon steady,

honest, efficient, sober labour. If a nation will not work, neither will it eat, and in the long run its life will be neither more nor less abundant than the products of its industry and the invested fruits of its thrift. Trade unions have endeavoured by curious and often incomprehensible customs to safeguard their members against overdriving of the machinery of commerce. Those customs should be, for the moment, laid aside. The aim of the unions was good. The method was far less sound. True industry should be based on the fundamental maxim that whatever a man finds for his hand to do, he should do it with his might. The ideal system would be short spells of hard work and complete change—entire recreation for the rest of the day. Hitherto we have devoted attention too exclusively to what goes on during hours of labour. We should now realise that labour, while it lasts, must be arduous, dirty, and unpleasant, and that the true compensation must be found, not in any mitigation thereof, but in a better use of a more extended leisure. If Great Britain is wise she will retain her war taxes, burdensome though they be. She will establish a high sinking fund on her debt, and she will invest that sinking fund, either directly or indirectly, in a complete reconstruction of her industrial centres of population, and especially of areas where, as in South Wales, a rapid influx of workers from surrounding counties has produced an acute housing problem. Until this is accomplished she will allow no man to be idle. And when it is accomplished she will have small reason to fear either disloyalty or ingratitude among her working classes. If she allows herself to be too preoccupied to attend to the vital necessities of her population, and especially of that population which labours in the North of England and the South of Scotland, she will quickly discover that the crisis which she has so boldly faced in Europe will be followed by a not less challenging crisis nearer home. The prospect would be alarming if it were not for one fact. Fore-warned is fore-armed, and we may surely assume that our statesmen are alive to the duty of thinking out not only the terms of peace which will re-settle the map of Europe, not only the strategy by which those terms of peace are to be composed, but the industrial conditions by which domestic peace is to be maintained within our own borders.

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