

THE LABOUR MARKET

In July, 1914, there were millions of Englishmen in whose hearts there was ever the dread of hunger or in whose bellies its pinch. Who marched at dawn in slave-gangs, millions strong, to the factory gates, and whose fate was determined by whether they were permitted to pass in or not. Who with weary limbs returned at night to frowsy dens in reeking slums after long hours of toil in the creation of wealth to enable others to uphold the magnificence of civilisation. If they are not to return from the battlefields to such slavery, the first thing for them to do is seek its origin.

There are many manifestations of economic injustice, but all can be brought under one head, and its name is Poverty. Poverty means inability to maintain decent existence. Poverty means the empty belly, the ragged back, the foul crib, the disease-stricken children swept by battalions each year to untimely graves, the prison and the gallows, malice, hatred, and the curse of charity. Poverty is the lot of those who create the wealth of the world, who produce all the food and the clothing, who build the mansions and the palaces, or of those who would do all these things, were they permitted. The poverty of the workers is due to their not being permitted to produce, or to their not being permitted to retain what they do produce. Moreover, it is because some workers are not permitted to produce that all workers who are permitted get less than the result of their labour. This becomes clear when we consider the wage system.

The wage of a worker should in justice represent the value he creates by his labour. But wages are not fixed on this basis. The rate of wage is determined by the competition of workers for employment. They come into what is termed the "labour market" to sell themselves, and the price of their flesh and blood, brain and muscle, is fixed by the supply in relation to the demand. To be bought at or above a price that will maintain life is a privilege. They compete with one another for that privilege, and the competition for jobs, when there are not enough for all, causes millions to sell themselves at a wage price which just ensures sufficiency to keep body and soul together. The unemployed men at the factory gates determine the status of those within. So long as they are there the employed are at the mercy of the employers. This is the struggle for existence. This is the modern slavery.

Were there no unemployed the employed would be in the position to bargain without fear of being under-sold. If there were scarcity of labour, that is to say, if the demand were greater than the supply, there would be a reverse form of competition set up to that which has maintained—namely, the competition of employer against employer. There is only one way in which one employer can compete against another to secure workers, and that is by raising wages. The elimination of unemployment is therefore the key to the just wage, to the abolition of wage-slavery. In the organised trades before the war it was not a problem of great magnitude, for less than three per cent. of trade unionists were unemployed. Their absorption would have created a scarcity of labour problem with its contingent results. But even three per cent. of unemployment gives the whip-hand over labour to the employer. Three men at the gates for every hundred employed within does not enable the employer to substitute the unemployed for all the employed, but it does enable him to substitute an unemployed man for the "agitator," for the man who urges his fellows to revolt. So a man at the gates makes for the subjection of every man within.—"*Land or Revolution*," by R. L. Outhwaite, M.P. Price 1s.

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