

HIGHER WAGES AND SHORTER HOURS

By Mr A. MacLaren, M.P.
In Broadcast Debate

(Reprinted from the STAFFORDSHIRE EVENING SENTINEL,
22nd October.)

"HIGHER WAGES and shorter hours" was the subject of debate in the Midland Parliament, when the fourth session of this well-known broadcasting feature was opened in the Midland and Regional programmes last night (21st October).

Mr Andrew MacLaren, M.P. for the Burslem and Tunstall Division, was one of the speakers for the Labour and trade union side, and in the course of his speech he said :—

Production is the mother of wage. Science has performed the miracle once again of the loaves and the fishes, but this time they are not distributed among the multitude! Our duty is to ascertain what are the impediments which check the flow of wealth into wages.

It seems to me that the first obstacle to higher wages which must be removed is unemployment; so long as there are unemployed men competing for work in the labour market, the tendency will be for wages to remain at subsistence level. But even as things are, "wages" are not what they seem. It is necessary to ascertain how much of the money received represents buying power in the hands of the recipient.

RATES AND TAXES

If we combine the rates and taxes for 1913, they work out at £5 10s. 3d. per head of the population, whereas in 1937-38 the combined figures will be over £21 15s. 3d. per head of the population.

These vast and increasing sums, levied as they mostly are upon industry and the products of industry, must be paid before one penny can be counted as wages. Startling as these figures are as an evidence of an increasing burden, my main point of criticism is not their immensity but the basis upon which they are levied, for their effect is to decrease the purchasing power of the people and increase the cost of living.

Another element which is increasing and encroaching upon the income of the worker is rent. To deal with this problem the Government would have to take strong action against land speculators in and around cities.

The nominal increases in wages which have recently taken place have been more than offset by an almost disastrous increase in the cost of living. With the present ruling prices one really wonders how a housewife can make ends meet.

APPLICATION OF SCIENCE

Let me meet a fallacy which is commonly held—that if prices per commodity drop, wages will suffer. One need only site the motor industry as a disproof of this; the price per car has dropped but the money wages of the workers in the motor industry have increased. The whole meaning and objective of applying science to production is to increase volume and lower costs per unit.

The Luddites smashed machinery, thinking they saw in it the enemy to their employment; many modern capitalists seem also to be imitating them by checking the full powers of scientific production in order to keep up prices. Millions of tons of coffee thrown into the sea by the Brazilian coffee controllers; wheat used as fuel for locomotives and millions of acres of cotton ploughed under in the United States; and at home oranges thrown back into the River Mersey, and fish thrown

back into the sea—here we have the malicious destruction of wealth, which, if continued, will make it impossible for any worker's wage to keep pace with the price level. This process is aided and abetted by the speeches of responsible statesmen who talk vaguely about "raising the price level."

"TAX LAND VALUES"

As a first step to increasing wages the problem of unemployment would have to be seriously tackled, for there need be no unemployed man or woman in this country. Rates on houses and taxation, wherever it is a burden on industry, should be removed and an equivalent amount levied or those values in land created by the community. The Government should take powers to deal with all forms of price-rigging and wealth-destruction. These proposals may seem drastic but they are immediately necessary.

Pious sentiments and paternal concessions are no substitute for justice. Consider the cost to the State of low wages, undernourishment, disease, stultified mental and spiritual development, and economic discontent are the outcome of the unjust distribution of wealth. And, what is more important, we know that this economic misery is due, not to the niggardliness of Nature or to the inability of man to satisfy his needs, but to man-made laws for which you and I are responsible.

LAND VALUES (RATING) BILL

Among the Members of Parliament who were successful in the ballot for Private Bills in the House of Commons was Mr Andrew MacLaren, M.P. for Burslem, who has given notice that he will introduce a Bill for the Rating of Land Values. The Bill "to enable local authorities to levy rates upon land values and to exempt buildings from rates" was presented in the House of Commons on 29th October. It is supported by Colonel Wedgwood, Mr Barr, Mr McGhee and Mrs Hardie; to be read a second time upon Friday, 26th November, and to be printed.

SOCIAL JUSTICE FIRST

THIS LITTLE BOOK* contains a proposal for limiting the income from investment for the purpose of adding to the earnings of labour. Space does not permit us to examine at this moment what the economic results of such measures would be. We would draw attention, however, to the final chapter of this work in which the author emphasizes the great importance of the land question in the problem of social justice. He says:

"In the term land it is intended to include things which exist by the bounty of nature and cannot be produced by the labour of man. It is contended that from the point of view of social justice the monopolization of land by individuals to the exclusion of others cannot be justified. The bounty of nature must in common fairness belong to the whole community. Every member of that community should have equal rights to it. That one member should have to pay rent to another for the use of land is, therefore, wrong in principle. If rent is to be paid for land, and it is difficult in our modern society to see how this can be avoided, that rent should be paid to the community. In practice this would mean its being paid to the State as the trustee of the whole community."

This is an admirable statement of a fundamental principle.

*SOCIAL JUSTICE FIRST. By C. V. Brayne, Retired Land Commissioner of Ceylon. Allen & Unwin. 3s. 6d.