

BOOK REVIEWS

LAND PURCHASE AND MINIMUM WAGE

We have to welcome two new pamphlets of exceptional ability, whose rare usefulness will be recognised by anyone who engages in discussions on the land question and its related problems. They deal with special aspects of our agitation and should do good service by the way in which they set certain controversies at rest.

Mr. Frederick Verinder has filled a gap in our bookshelf of *ad hoc* literature by having provided in pamphlet form an analysis of that body of opinion which is partly persuaded and partly misled by vague projects for "nationalising" the land and at the same time compensating the present receivers of rent. He calls his *METHODS OF LAND NATIONALISATION** "a brief critical examination of some proposals of the Land Nationalisation Society." It is more than that. It is a damaging and unanswerable exposure, written with that virility and pungency which are among the peculiar gifts of Mr. Verinder's pen. No social-reform reading circle or library of Co-operative Societies and Trade Unions, where such libraries are kept, will be complete without it. How shall the land become the common property of the people? The Land Nationalisation Society says "nationalise it"—a glib term which catches the unwary until it is realised that by nationalisation is meant the purchase of the land from the landowners. How the L.N.S. comes to that conclusion after setting forth its powerful indictment of private property in land, on what basis it would purchase, how ambiguous and self-contradictory its policy is, how it would lead to the permanent and greater exploitation of industry, how it is said that a tax on land values would be "shifted" and should nevertheless be used to reduce monopoly values, how unnecessary and harmful "Government control" is, how lamentably it has failed—are some of the matters disposed of by Mr. Verinder. This pamphlet is at once an education to the reader and a gift to the propagandist. Let every student of the land question use it whenever he meets opposition of the land-purchase type, and give it the widest possible circulation among those he has to contend with either in conversation or correspondence. We have only one word of criticism. In his references on the question of "Compensation," Mr. Verinder has curiously omitted to recommend to his readers Henry George's illuminating chapter in the *PERPLEXED PHILOSOPHER*.

Mr. B. Seeborn Rowntree will not, we hope, take the sound drubbing which "Seneca Simplex" administers, as a personal tribute to his authority on social questions. He would pay himself too great a compliment if he did. Mr. Rowntree is simply a type of those whose attitude to the function of labour in industry is to speak of the working classes much as slave-owners spoke of slaves. Their wages are a "cost" to the employer. There is a social danger in wages being too low and an economic danger in their being too high. They must be regulated somehow, so that both dangers are eliminated. Starvation and discontent must be secured against, but no greater sacrifice must be made out of the employers' "wage fund" than "industry" can safely bear.

It was a chance article in the *DAILY NEWS* by Mr. Rowntree that prompted "Seneca Simplex" to produce his severe indictment of this false and hopeless attitude. We have here an instructive examination of the fallacies on which the patronising would-be friend of the working classes bases his claim for a "minimum wage," *viz.*, what he in his generosity thinks is sufficient to provide for human "needs," in utter neglect of and contempt for human rights. THE "MINIMUM WAGE" STUNT,† as the

pamphlet by "Seneca Simplex" is called, discharges a mine under the feet of those who imagine that wages can be or ought to be arbitrarily fixed by legislative action or common consent. It explodes the theory and the ideas behind it. It provides a chapter on the economics of wages (showing the level to which they would rise under economic freedom) which many Labour men and Liberals of the new "National Minimum" school would do well to learn by heart.

"Seneca Simplex" rightly takes Mr. Rowntree to task for his arrogance in appropriating "industry" as a property class possession—which is "ours" and in which "we" are likely to be prejudiced if labour demands too much. There is a passage in Professor Cairns's *SOME LEADING PRINCIPLES OF POLITICAL ECONOMY NEWLY EXPOUNDED* which might be appropriately quoted to point the lesson.

Criticising the same argument in Mr. Brassey's *WORK AND WAGES*, Professor Cairns asks:—

What inversion of the true relations of things can be more complete than to represent high-priced labour as an obstacle to production in the same sense in which the proximity of our coal-beds to our iron mines constitutes a facility? . . . What is the explanation of this singular confusion of thought and perversion of facts? Obviously this—the whole problem of industry is looked at exclusively from the capitalist's point of view. The advantages we derive from our coal-beds and iron mines are the advantages which capitalists derive from them. "British trade" means capitalists' profits; and as the only cost taken account of in production is the capitalists' cost, so naturally the capitalists' remuneration is the only remuneration thought worth attending to. Hence high wages are represented as "neutralizing" industrial advantages, as if nothing were gained which did not come to the capitalists' maw.

We will allow "Seneca Simplex" to give in his own words a far more apposite and conclusive comment upon this "inversion of the true relations of things." "It is just possible, even probable," he says, "that after the war the returned 'workers' may refuse to compete against each other for less than starvation wages. They may be looking for the *Land* for which they have been fighting and may desire to work for themselves, or for each other, leaving 'industry'—alias 'us'—without that adequate supply of labour without which the mill of supply and demand will not work; or worse even, will work against us. Instead of workers competing with each other to obtain work, employers might have to compete to obtain labour. 'The war has torn the scales from our eyes, and alas and alack! also from the eyes of the 'workers' who already seem to have learnt that a supply of labour in excess of demand means low wages; and a supply of employers in excess of labour means high wages. If we stand by idly they may learn also how to reduce this 'surplus labour' by other means than a terrible war. They—the returned soldiers—may ask, Where is that *land* we have been fighting for? The *land* for which thousands of our comrades have shed their blood on foreign soil?"

"Heaven help us if it should come to that. Something must be done to prevent such a calamity. Force will not do it. The men have shown in Flanders and in France what they can do when threatened by force. They have fought to suppress the aggressor abroad. They may not want to tolerate him any longer at home either. They fought for the freedom of foreign peoples. They may now demand it for themselves. The war has torn the scales from their eyes as well as ours, and if once the people ask for the *land* our power is gone. The mill of supply and demand will continue to grind; but it will grind us; it will grind privilege out of existence."

A. W. M.

Copenhagen, December 23rd.—According to a Berlin telegram, a Soviet Government has been established for the Lithuanian people, with headquarters at Riga. The ownership of private property in the shape of land and grounds has been repealed by Government decree.—Reuter.

* Published, price 2d., by the English League for the Taxation of Land Values, 376-7, Strand, W.C.

† Price 3d., published by Ogden and Shuttleworth, Keighley.