

TRADE UNIONS AND LANDLORDISM.

HOW PRIVATE OWNERSHIP IN LAND KEEPS DOWN WAGES.

AN APPEAL FOR CO-OPERATION.

It is one of the most significant tributes to the solid basis of practical common sense that underlies the work of the organised trade unions of the United Kingdom that, for several years past, the annual Trades Congress has, with practical unanimity, affirmed the principle of the national ownership of land. Amid many detailed and technical proposals for the improvement of the condition of the workers in various industries, this protest against the private ownership of land now has a permanent place. And it is fitting that it should be so. For this question of the land overshadows all other reforms. It is the root from which industrial grievances spring. It is the basis upon which every social injustice stands; and while it remains we may palliate injustice here and there a little, but can never effect that general advancement of the working classes which the Trades Congress is banded together to secure. The private ownership of land is able to neutralise the effect of much work that would otherwise be productive of great good; and at every point and turn it stands in the way of the workman who desires to make his class independent and happy. Therefore the standing resolution of Congress on the subject is notable as a proof of the insight possessed by the labour leaders into the real foundation upon which class privilege and its accompanying evils find a firm footing.

The practical instincts of the British workmen will not allow this resolution to be a mere pious expression of opinion. What is wanted is some channel through which the force of this opinion can be sent so as to produce actual and tangible results; some method of working that will enable the principle not only to be affirmed in words, but realised in facts. Working, as the trade unions are, for the improvement of the conditions of labour, and recognising, as they do, that fair access to the land is essential to the prosperity and due reward of industry, we would suggest the advisability of hearty co-operation with those who have undertaken the special work of organising public opinion upon the land question.

There can be but little need to argue as to the necessity of such a step. THE LAND QUESTION STANDS UPON A DIFFERENT BASIS TO ANY OTHER LABOUR QUESTION. Until it is settled the trade unions, with all their splendid energy, can make very little permanent impression upon the main bulk of social injustice. A glaring excess of injustice here and there may be lopped off, but the great mass of class privilege and inequality will remain. We suggest that trade organisations throughout the United Kingdom should affiliate with the Land Values Taxation Committee for the purpose of this special work.

The method of reform advocated by the Committee is easy of application, and easily understood. We deny the right of any man to a monopoly of the earth. His present possession of that monopoly was begotten by injustice, continued in injustice, and results in injustice. That the community should pay the present holders of land compensation for resuming its rightful ownership is a contention with which we have no sympathy. Instead of buying out the landlords we must tax them out. This principle has been accepted by the Liberal Party which, in the Newcastle programme, has adopted the taxation of land values as one of its main intended reforms.

The Royal Commission on the housing question has also given expression to weighty and impressive opinions in the same direction. Working men do not need to be told that it is the refusal of direct access to the land which keeps the wages of agricultural labourers at 11/ or 12/ a week, thereby constituting the competition of these labourers a standing menace to the standard of working class hiring in every industry. The taxation of land values would cure that. It would give an enormous impetus to industry by relieving it of the burdens it now has to bear, by throwing open lands held for speculative or unprofitable purposes, and would give effectiveness to all the other reforms that are at present nullified.

THE RESULT OF SUCH A POLICY MUST BE EVIDENT TO EVERY INTELLIGENT WORKMAN. By throwing land into the market, and opening it up to industry, the taxation of land values would affect the unemployed question to a degree beyond the narrow calculations of those pettifogging statesmen who tinker at reforms without going to the root of the evil. Land at present held for speculative or unprofitable purposes would be thrown open. Agricultural rents would fall. Labour would be thus attracted in large quantities to the land. Wages would go up with a bound; for who would work as a labourer for another man at the existing miserable wages when he could earn his own living on his own land? The effect of all this upon the artisans of the towns would be enormous. The great housing improvements so urgently needed, but at present hindered by the landowning class, would be put in hand at once; and a general stimulus given to every branch of industry. The adjustment of this question is the first duty of every civilised Government. As the law now stands, the classes possess—and do not fail to avail themselves of—the means of robbing labour; and the fair development of human life is consequently rendered impossible.

Trade unionism must therefore go hand in hand with land reform if it is to be thoroughly successful. Of course no Government has a right to pauperise anyone; and the friends of landlordism have ingeniously used the fact that a few working men, out of their hard-earned savings, have got little freeholds, and under cover of asking what is to become of these if private ownership of land is done away with, have attempted to stir up working class sympathy with the Dukes and Squires. The attempt is, of course, utterly ridiculous; but at the same time it is as well to point out that while compensation as compensation cannot for a moment be accepted, it is quite within the power of Parliament to make such provision as would prevent the taxation of land values from reducing such men to pauperism. But that is quite a different matter from giving huge sums in compensation to landowners who have made ample provision for themselves at the public expense.

IN ORDER TO PUSH FORWARD THE ACCOMPLISHMENT OF THIS REFORM we invite the earnest consideration of all associations seeking the improvement of labour, with a view to their affiliation with the Committee. Each has its own special and detailed work to do, and could hardly give up from that special work the time and energy with which it is necessary to pursue this matter in which all are so largely concerned. But by affiliation with the Committee they can give the sanction of their authority and support to the practical working out of a principle which they have already repeatedly sanctioned in theory; and can show that they do not believe in leaving resolutions to lie idle after they have passed them, but are intent upon following them up until they are no longer mere proposals but accomplished facts.—*“Tracks for the Times,” No. 4. Published by the Committee for the Taxation of Land Values, London.*

Coming Events.

May 1. Partick Liberal Club, 8 p.m. “Merrie England” (a criticism).—Mr. John Paul.

„ 12. Albion Halls, College Street. Debate.—“Will the Single Tax be more speedily realised through the Liberal Party, or by independent action.”—*Aff.* Mr. John Cassels. *Neg.* Mr. J. Bruce Glasier. Tickets, 3d. each. The proceeds are to go to the widow of the late Andrew Muir, and all Glasgow friends are expected to do their utmost to make the meeting a success.

A contemporary says the Duke of Argyll has spent £300,000 on his Kintyre estate. Query—where did the Duke get the £300,000? If from the rents, then the Duke has simply acted as agent in the matter. The toilers in Kintyre have in reality paid the money.

NEW ZEALAND LETTER.

(To the Editor of The Single Tax.)

SIR,—I have to thank some kind friend for sending me copies of your excellent little paper. It gives me a good idea of the universality of the movement for the taxation of land values. Doubtless your readers will be pleased to hear something from this remote colony—sometimes called “The Britain of the South.” Though, so to speak, in our infancy as a nation, the chief, if not the sole evil we have to contend against is the monopoly of our land. According to statistics gathered about five years ago, more than a fourth of the superficies of New Zealand is the private property of about 1600 persons, and there are upwards of 1100 absentee owners. We have made a step in the right direction since then, but there yet remains much to be achieved. In the early days of colonisation the land was acquired from the natives for the smallest trifles—and this it was that led, when the Maoris became more enlightened a few years later, to the disastrous war. Subsequently when the colony became more settled, the land was parted with by the Crown under law made by the landowners in their own interest, despite the repeated and eloquent warnings of Sir George Grey and a few others. In the meantime millions of pounds were borrowed from English money-lenders for the prosecution of public works, and the interest has to be paid. Sir Julius Vogel did propose in 1870 to impose a betterment tax, but the “landed interest” was too powerful, and he had to abandon the idea. The result is that our obligations are mainly met by Customs duties and the people are thus not only deprived of the soil, but they have to bear the burdens of taxation as well.

At present more than a million and a half pounds are annually wrung from the people by so-called protective duties. Yet we number only about 700,000 people in all. A few years ago the principle of the plural vote was abolished and an amendment to the Representation Bill carried, debarring anyone from voting in more than one electorate. This gave the people an immense advantage—which, by the way, they have not yet fully appreciated—and the election of 1890 resulted in the return of a number of members pledged, amongst other things, to a tax on land values. The Land Tax Act has been to a large extent vitiated by exemptions and graduations, and it has besides been allied with an Income Tax. But, despite these defects, it has amply demonstrated the soundness of Henry George's principle. It has exceeded anticipations as a revenue producer, and has had the effect of considerably checking speculation in land. Last session a Bill was introduced in the Lower House by the Government empowering the ratepayers to place all rates on unimproved values if they decided by majority at a poll, which a percentage of ratepayers would have the power to cause. The Bill passed the House by a sweeping majority but was rejected in the Legislative Council by two votes.

The principle of non-party government by having an elective Cabinet, and the referendum or popular veto on legislation, is finding much favour here, and from the present trend of popular feeling it seems certain that in a few years we will be governed on the Swiss model. Certainly the Single Taxers have nothing to fear in the referendum; indeed it seems to me that a popular vote in the United Kingdom would very soon settle the question of Home Rule for Ireland and the difficulty with the House of Lords.

I was very pleased to read in your paper Mr. Norman M'Lennan's cheering letter about the progress of the movement in America. It seems to have impressed Mr. M'Lennan to find there, men of the same mind and determination as in his own country. What would he say if he steamed across the ocean for six weeks and found men of the same stamp at the end of his journey? Yes, they are here and in the Australian Colonies. The Single Tax crusade is being carried on by good men and true “who will not rest till victory is won.” And it cheers them in the fight to hear news from the other side of the world such as that conveyed by the organ of the Land Restoration Union.

PATRICK J. O'REGAN.

REEFTON, NEW ZEALAND, 12th February, 1895.

“Are you in favour of Taxing Land Values?”