

CASUAL AND SURPLUS LABOUR

THE DOCK Workers (Registration of Employment) Bill, which had its second reading on November 12, is the Government's attempt at a solution of the problem of casual labour at the docks. Uncertainty of regular employment, a feature which attaches to more trades than that of the dock worker, has presented intractable difficulties to successive Cabinets, and has causes deeper than mere changes in weather or fashion.

In the past, it was said, whenever there were 80 jobs and 100 men waiting to take them, 20 of the men would, of course, be turned away, but it might not be the same 20 each day this happened. None of the 100 could know what their luck would be, and it was a matter of chance whether they made a livelihood or not.

The Government propose to change all this by a system of registration. There are already in operation in most ports systems of voluntary registration, and in all the main ports these were made compulsory for war purposes. The new Bill sets out to make these systems permanent, first by voluntary agreement between the port workers and their employers, and then by giving these voluntary schemes statutory enforcement through the present Bill. All that this elaborate machinery will really accomplish is to provide that when there are 80 jobs to do at any port, there shall be 80 men on the register, who will have guaranteed, regular employment. This leaves out of the picture the fate of the men who are seeking jobs but are allowed no chance at all. The root problem always was the existence of surplus workers. The popular use of the term "casual" has hidden the basic disorder. It was the existence of surplus labour that caused casual employment, and the latter cannot be cured by merely ignoring the surplus percentage and giving a privileged position to a selection of the would-be workers.

Mr. Isaacs, the Minister of Labour, in opening the debate on the second reading, explained that registration meant that the place of engagement to which the man should go is the place where he got engaged, and that men should only be engaged in those places. "That prevents a good deal of hole-and-corner work by men getting in by the side door, or the back door, and thus evading the regulations." One object of the Bill, he said, is to ensure that there is an adequate number, but not more than an adequate number, of dock workers. The Bill "provides a prohibition respecting employment of dock workers to whom the scheme does not apply, and the employment of dock workers by employers to whom the scheme does not apply. In other words, under the registration scheme, the men to be employed will be those who are registered; no others will be allowed to come in."

Mr. S. S. Silverman and other members criticised a clause which seemed to hold a threat of criminal proceedings against offenders, and the Minister provided an amendment ruling out any such interpretation. Mr. Hopkin Morris, Liberal, had said the clause was not "Socialism in our time" but "slavery in our time." A Conservative member, Squadron Leader Hollis, had reminded the House that the "traditional English doctrine of a free man is that he is free to accept or refuse work as he wishes to do. It does appear that that free tradition is denied in this Bill."

Mr. Clement Davies, Liberal, asked a pertinent question: under the scheme provision may be made for the allocation of workers to a particular employer for the discharge of a particular ship. If, because of the kind of cargo, or some other reason, a man refuses to go, is he to be dragged before a magistrate to be fined or imprisoned? On the other hand, another member, Mr. Cobb, Labour, pointed out that if you are to regularise employment in this way, you will be bound to plan the movement of ships in a proper way into a given area. Still another supporter of the plan said: "It is designed simply to exclude blackleg employers or workers from starting up a bit of dock work on their own, and so torpedoing the whole scheme."

The Bill offers a percentage of dockers a certain regularity of work and pay, in return for taking away a certain amount of their freedom to dispose of their own labour in their own way. For the remaining percentage of workers unable to secure registration, so far as the Debate showed, they might not exist, and no provision is made for them beyond what the Unemploy-

ment Insurance Acts provide. In his winding-up statement on the Bill, Mr. Ness Edwards, Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Labour, said: "We are trying to remove the starvation sanction and, in order to do that, we say to a man, 'You voluntarily go into this pool and take the work as it comes.' That is all. We are guaranteeing him life, and without life he gets no liberty, except the liberty to starve. Therefore I think the Hon. and learned Gentleman has been quite wrong to bring across this the old Liberal smattering of *laissez faire*, for that is what it amounted to—going back to the days of free enterprise and freedom to starve."

Instead of riding off on the old clichés about *laissez faire*, supporters of legislation of this kind should well ask why there should be any casual or surplus labour in any trade, in a world of unlimited resources and unlimited opportunities for producing and exchanging goods of all kinds, and in a world where mankind's unsatisfied demands were never so clamant. There is surplus labour everywhere, because labour is shut out, by private monopoly and public laws, from self-employment through access to land. In the debate on this Registration Bill, Mr. Solley, Labour, gave striking facts from the history of dock disputes, especially that of 1889. It was this dispute that Henry George referred to in *The Condition of Labour*, when he quoted from a volume called "The Story of the Dockers' Strike," written by Messrs. H. Llewellyn Smith and Vaughan Nash, with an introduction by Sydney Buxton, M.P.; the writers' summing up being in these words: "If the settlement lasts, work at the docks will be more regular, better paid, and carried on under better conditions than ever before. All this will be unqualified gain to those who get the benefit from it. But another result will undoubtedly be to contract the field of employment and lessen the number of those for whom work can be found. The lower class casual will, in the end, find his position more precarious than ever before, in proportion to the increased regularity of work which the 'fitter' of the labourers will secure. The effect of the organisation of dock labour, as of all classes of labour, will be to squeeze out the residuum. The loafer, the cadger, the failure in the industrial race—members of 'Class B' of Mr. Charles Booth's hierarchy of social classes—will be no gainers by the change, but will rather find another door closed against them, and this in many cases the last door to employment."

This is a prophetic quotation. *Laissez faire*, which means the opening of doors, and not shutting them, would be salvation to the redundant man who is "squeezed out" as he was under the Conservative regime of 1889. Remove the barriers to employment by opening up the resources of the land to productive purposes, and casual and surplus labour would vanish from the docks and other overcrowded trades, and find new demands for labour in the expansion that would follow the ending of monopoly and of State restrictions imposed to govern its effects.

D. J. J. O.

"We see in the social and industrial relations of men not a machine which requires construction, but an organism which needs only to be suffered to grow. We see in the natural, social, and industrial laws such harmony as we see in the adjustments of the human body, and that as far transcends the power of man's intelligence to order and direct as it is beyond man's intelligence to order and direct the vital movements of his frame. We see in these social and industrial laws so close a relation to the moral law as must spring from the same Authority, and that proves the moral law to be the sure guide of man where his intelligence would wander and go astray. Thus, to us, all that is needed to remedy the evils of our time is to do justice and give freedom.

"And it is because that in what we propose—the securing to all men of equal natural opportunities for the exercise of their powers and the removal of all legal restriction on the legitimate exercise of those powers—we see the conformation of human law to the moral law, that we hold with confidence not merely that this is a sufficient remedy for the present condition of labour, but that it is the only possible remedy."

Henry George in *The Condition of Labour*.