

CONSCRIPTION AND THE LAND QUESTION

By Douglas J. J. Owen

THE TRIBUNALS set up under the Conscription Acts have so far examined about 8,000 conscientious objectors out of the 26,000 already registered. A good proportion of these have been ordered to join combatant units, and about an equal proportion have received absolute exemption. A slightly larger section have been given non-combatant service. The remaining category, the largest with nearly fifty per cent, have been given varying forms of conditional work of a civilian character. In this last group the decision usually specifies amongst other conditions, "that the man shall, when required by the Ministry of Labour, undertake work in Agriculture, Horticulture or Forestry."

It will be seen that when 40,000 or 50,000 men have registered as C.O.'s there may soon be available as many as 20,000 young men for use in agriculture. So far the Ministry of Labour do not seem to have any scheme in prospect for utilizing these men in large scale operations, in labour camps or colonies. Perhaps it is realized that to have such a number producing foodstuffs for the market might seriously upset the economic basis and the price structure of the farming trade. Meantime, an agitation gains strength in certain organs of the Press that these men should be penalized in some way, and that they therefore ought to be given agricultural work at the same rates of pay as the conscripts in the Forces. Their keep and 2s. a day is all they are worth, say some of those who support the present war as a struggle for liberty of thought and conscience.

The *Daily Express* (8th March) says that agricultural areas in South Wales are suffering from a serious scarcity of men to work the land. In Brecon and Radnorshire a farm labourer gets a wage of 36s. for 51 hours a week in winter and 53 hours in summer. But a road man employed by the county authorities gets £2 5s. a week in the agricultural areas, and £2 10s. in the industrial areas. The latter also gets free protective clothing, and superannuation, is allowed to contribute to a hospital scheme, and qualifies for 2s. a week higher unemployment pay. The farm worker has 15s. a week deducted by the farmer for seven days' board. His overtime is 9½d. an hour. No wonder there is a shortage of farm labourers, and that the National Union of Agricultural Workers is to campaign for higher agricultural wages in Wales. "But," says the *Daily Express*, "it is too late. During the last three or four years hundreds of Welsh farm workers have drifted into the industrial areas where rates of pay are higher." At the Brecon Labour Exchange there is not a single agricultural labourer registered on the unemployment books.

All this is understandable to those who have read Henry George's chapters on Wages in *Progress and Poverty*. But what have these Welsh farmers been doing with the Subsidies doled out to them for so many years? Could they not afford higher wages to keep the men? Was not this one of the excuses for the subsidy system? Or is it true that subsidies are absorbed in higher rents and land purchase prices, leaving the farmers no better able to attract men to the soil?

The Ministry of Agriculture War Executive Committee in Brecon has a local Labour Sub-Committee which is much exercised as to how many more men will be needed in the period March-May and succeeding months for the Ministry's increased programme of production. "I don't know where we are going to find them," said the Secretary of the Committee to the *Daily Express*. "The countryside is denuded of labour. I understand the position is even worse in Pembroke-

shire where there are more Government works."

This brings us back to the reserve of C.O. agricultural workers being created by the Tribunals. They constitute a strong temptation for the Ministry of Labour to come to the help of the Ministry of Agriculture. Three birds could be killed with one stone. The demand that "conchies" should only get 2s. a day; the attempt to keep farm wages from rising to an economical level; and the necessity for not disturbing the process whereby the farmer goes on paying increasing land rents and charges; all these objectives could be reached by employing the conscientious objectors on the farms at army pay.

Whether the Ministries of Agriculture and Labour will attempt to solve their difficulties in this way remains to be seen. It is certainly a matter that the National Union of Agricultural Workers should be considering. Farmers all over the country are short of labour. Under a natural and free economic system wages on farms would rise automatically and the men be attracted back; but farm rents would have to fall proportionately. This free adjustment would be made possible by a tax on the value of land, including farm land, making impossible the land boom such as was reported in February *Land & Liberty*.

Whilst our War Cabinet adopts every device to raise money but that of the Taxation of Land Values, speculation in land will increase; farmers will experience increasing difficulties in spite of subsidies; labour shortage will continue, but wages will not rise to any extent on the farms; and the conscientious objector may find himself being used as one more instrument for maintaining land monopoly and undercutting the wage-level, not only in agriculture, but as a consequence throughout the whole field of industry.

Mr K. R. F. Newton, deputy town clerk of Morecambe and Heysham Borough, addressing the local Ratepayers' Association on 15th March (*Boro' Advertiser* report), said: "When a Corporation carries out improvements which increase the value of the land in the neighbourhood, the Corporation should benefit. If an authority constructed a by-pass road and sewers when purchasing the land it would probably have to pay far more for it than a private buyer would. The total expenditure on the land might mean an increase in the rates of 1s. 6d. but the adjoining land owners would reap an enormous benefit from the development. Why should not the local authority share in the increased land values? Taxation of land values by the Government would mean that the local authority would derive an immediate share in such increases in these land values, a proportion of which the Government could pass on to the local authority either directly or in the form of increased grants."

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In the Annual Report of the Land Union, the "national organization for the protection of all interests in landed property," issued in December, 1939, it is stated: "We would like to express our pleasure that Parliament refused to give consideration to the local Bill promoted by the London County Council to introduce a fundamental change in the law of Rating and to impose the unjust principles of the rating of site values."

The Greek philosopher gave us the injunction "Know Thyself." Another, if not so good, is to know thine enemy, which is not so difficult to follow when the enemy is so accommodating as this.