

LAND & LIBERTY

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Editorial Offices:

11, TOTHILL STREET, LONDON, S.W.1.

All communications to be addressed to the Editor.

Telegrams: "Eulav, Vic, London."

Telephone: Victoria 7325.

THE DEBATE ON UNEMPLOYMENT

"But it is a task (to restore the land to the people) which, when it is accomplished, will bring Britain in our judgment a long march nearer the dawn. I believe it will have the effect not merely of filling the countryside with a happy, prosperous, contented peasantry, but it will do more than that—it will free the towns from the nightmares of unemployment and sweating and slums."—Mr. Lloyd George at Swindon, 22nd October, 1913.

"As somebody said, any man who has got any muscle can dig the soil. Even a barn-door fowl can do that. So what you want is to provide an opening for them at home, so that instead of the country being attracted to the towns, because the towns are the only place where they can find employment, you will constantly be getting the attraction of the country to draw men from the town to find healthy and remunerative employment on the soil. . . . What would happen if you raised up the rural districts, if you had a great demand for labour, for the surplus population of the towns, if instead of a constant flow of labour from the villages to the towns, you found the current reversed of the great flow of labour from the towns back to the country? Then the people who were going away to Canada, instead of paying £3, £4, or £5 to obtain their ticket, instead of doing that, they will just take half-a-crown ticket to go to some contiguous district where they can find work in their own country. . . . There are plenty of men to look after the top-dog. I am here to look after the under-dog."—Mr. Lloyd George at Middlesbrough, 8th November, 1913.

"All I ask is this: that when there are meetings of unemployed, full of despair, full of worry, and they are ready to be exasperated as people under these conditions always are, at any rate the truth ought to be told."—Mr. Lloyd George, House of Commons, 19th October, 1921.

Yes, let the truth be told, and let the under-dog have his day. And what is the truth of the matter? There is, according to the live register of the Labour Exchanges, close upon two million unemployed; and the Prime Minister, who formerly charged land monopoly with the crime of unemployment, now, as positively as ever, says there is no land hunger. In his land-reforming days he demanded for the safety of the Empire itself the colonisation of our own country-sides. To-day he offers assisted passages to the Dominions, to the ends of the earth; anywhere out of sight—and to the scrap-heap with pre-war and post-war promises and perorations. Here is one to hand in the Prime

Minister's best form: "Millions of gallant young men have fought for the new world. Hundreds of thousands died to establish it. If we fail to honour the promise given to them we dishonour ourselves. We shall be guilty of the greatest perfidy that ever blackened a people's fame."

The under-dog is hungry, and angry as well, and the top-dog is more on top than ever before. We are in a war for peace, and it is obvious that any talk of land hunger would throw the machinery of 10, Downing Street out of gear. We must talk unemployment with the land question in the background, or on the presumption that it has nothing to do with the case.

Parliament, which had stood adjourned since 19th August, met on 18th October, to consider the question of Unemployment and to make provision for dealing with it and its "ordinary mercies." In his opening speech the Prime Minister said we were confronted with the worst period of unemployment that this country had seen for 100 years, and he gave the usual rendering of the subject. It was due, he said, to the impoverishment of customers, the diversion of industries from production to destruction, the derangement of the machinery of trade, the fluctuations of exchanges, and all of them would be summed up in one word, "War." The war ended three years ago, but it has been going on one way and another ever since. What part the Government have taken in this aftermath is common knowledge. The springs of industry have been sucked dry to establish peace by the sword. The top-dog has had his expensive expeditions abroad, and at home the under-dog has been thrown a few bones in the shape of ill-designed and costly housing schemes and reconstruction that will not reconstruct. Warships are being built to promote work for the workless and incidentally to prepare for the next bloody fight. £48,000,000, the Prime Minister said, had been spent by the Government since the peace on schemes of relief works and out-of-work payments, including £637,000 to enable 60,000 heroes who fought for the country to clear out of it for their own sake, and their country's good. What is wanted now, he tells us, is more money to maintain such services, and an additional £40,000,000 is to be spent, including £25,000,000 for a brand-new exports credits scheme. Credit, he declared, is the oxygen of trade, and you can't build up your strength with patent medicines, and so on, closing with an appeal to get out of the atmosphere that if you talk about a German without a frown on your brow you are not a patriot. And this is he who was chief spokesman in the campaign of revenge organised to make Germany pay to the last penny.

Germany could only pay in goods, and only this year an Act was passed calculated to make it impossible for the goods to be delivered. His closing words in the debate deserve a special place in the report of the proceedings: "We want to see the nations begin again the task of peace. The world has been harrowed by war for years, and yet there are people who talk war, and who think war. In order to re-establish trade you must have peace, you must have goodwill, and you must have co-operation between the nations, yea, and between all classes." It is a paralysing statement from the lips of a man head of a Government which this year, three years

after the armistice, is spending £237,000,000 on the fighting forces.

Mr. Clynes associated himself and the Labour Members with the Prime Minister's desire for world peace and international good will with some high talk about the coming day when Government would accept the task of providing the masses with employment and contentment and the workman's right to work in this country. Throughout the debate, with the exception of the speeches of Mr. Neil Maclean and Mr. Wedgwood, Mr. Morgan Jones and Mr. Sexton, there was not one gleam of light shed on the land question. It had apparently no more to do with unemployment than Parliament was prepared to acknowledge. The House bowed down before the great conspiracy that is organised to keep the basic facts of the people's undoing out of sight. Doles were demanded, and condemned; the war of Napoleon first was resurrected to show how much worse the people were in those days and the contrast made with the humane spirit of our times; the proposed credit scheme was blessed, and criticised, the war debt was given its own place, and high taxation placed in juxtaposition. Employers and employed were told alternately in flattering and menacing terms to get together and come to a settlement. The underlying idea was that Parliament might debate the matter till the day of judgment, but after all it was for industry itself to look to its own deliverance. Every conceivable proposition was brought forward, nothing was left out, but the one thing needful—the liberation of the people from the bondage of monopoly.

The time for "bursting up" land monopoly, to quote the classic language of Mr. Lloyd George, had not arrived, and the unemployed must continue to be fed in some shame corner provided for them by our social arrangements. One speaker, Lord Cavendish Bentinck, gave it as his opinion that the best way of restoring our trade is to be true to the principles for which our sailors and soldiers fought in the war. We shall never get prosperity in this country, he said, unless we have the honesty and good faith to be true to our pledges and promises to the men who served us so well.

The pledges and promises made to the men are known to all. Never again were they to be treated as were factory hands. The rough places were to be made smooth, the lamb of labour was to lie down beside the lion of monopoly, the slums were to disappear before the magic wand of the chief medicine-man, the land was to be opened up, idle acres were to take on the idle hands, there was to be no more unrequited toil, undeserved poverty was to be a thing of the past. In a word, it was to be real life and brotherhood in a land fit for heroes. The heroes were after all our own kith and kin, and were we not confessedly ashamed of their past treatment as ill-paid hewers of wood and drawers of water? In the war this was the prevailing thought and the moving opinion that carried us to victory. It was in the bond that every warrior who returned was to have his place in the sun.

The war is over, the scene is changed, and the men and their dependents are starving by the million because they are denied the opportunity to work. Up and down the country the cold stone of countless war memorials is offered for the bread of

life. It is the mockery of statesmanship, and the shame of all concerned; "the greatest perfidy that ever blackened a people's fame."

This is the indictment that can be put over on the Government and their parliamentary supporters; but what of the others? The chief astrologer may scan the heavens and locate some star that tells him that all is not well in foreign lands, and that this illness abroad has a sympathetic influence on our home trade. This is the great discovery, and it works as well with the Liberal and Labour parties. Mr. Asquith, in his studied contribution to the debate, declared that "the root causes of unemployment are not domestic, but international, for it exists in the United States and in almost all countries of the world." What profound wisdom. We can imagine some U.S. or continental politician excusing himself for not dealing with root causes there because the problem exists in Great Britain as well. The fact that unemployment exists in other countries; Mr. Asquith goes on, raises the whole problem of international indebtedness, and this, we may add, enables him to ride off on some political issues that divert attention from the land question. It is an awkward question, gentlemen, so let us play the game and dwell at large upon the need for "a natural and normal and well-conceived policy that will do more than anything else to diminish the volume of unemployment in this country." That is the voice of the Liberal leader on the vital question of unemployment. He does not mean to accuse land monopoly even of any share in this industrial deadlock. Yet it is a system that limits the expansion of our towns, as he more than once affirmed. It does this both in peace and war, and surely narrows the field of employment.

Mr. Asquith calls for a reduction of expenditure to stop the crushing taxation which is now weighing down the springs of industry, and is, in his judgment, the most immediate, direct and effective cause of limiting production. In that case what about the taxation of land values? At Paisley he cried aloud that in the matter of taxation we could get something from land values. A tax on land values is not a tax on industry, and if money is wanted for temporary and immediate relief here is the true source from which to take it. The taxation of land values will provide money and at the same time set free the municipalities for the natural expansion that will lead to additional employment. No one knows that better than the Liberal leader, and it is certain that not a few Paisley supporters backed him at the election on that principle.

As for the Labour Party on the debate, its chief spokesman talked about the famine in Russia, its reaction upon employment and the economic conditions of this country and welcomed the Prime Minister's proposals for assisting trade by credits and loan arrangements. He blamed the peace treaty and called for international co-operation and to facilitate production at home, profits and interests and dividends and rents for land and premises, high salaries and maintenance charges should all be subject to revision. Scarcity, Mr. Clynes said, is the shield of the profiteer, and the workman is just as bad a profiteer if he deliberately refrains from doing a fair day's work for a fair day's pay.

If the workman deliberately refrains! What is the good of talking like that to a workman before something is done to make him feel that there is work in abundance, work for him so long as his own needs and the needs and desires of his fellow-workman remain unsatisfied? Every unused natural avenue to employment is a shut door to the workman to-day. In these circumstances he is driven to compete for employment at starvation wages or go without, driven on to the limited area of employment open to labour. The struggle undermines his health, his spiritual and intellectual life suffers, and when he is down and out and facing gaunt famine he is lectured as if he were an enemy of his kind. These are the hard facts of the case, and instead of insisting on opening up nature's unlimited storehouse, the workman is calmly told, not by the monopoliser of the raw material of his work, but by a Labour leader in Parliament, that if he, the workman, fails to make good he is as bad as any profiteer. Perhaps he is, but at least he is entitled to justice and fair play. Overbearing insult is not justified because the victim does not possess all the virtues. If the workman has lost his balance it is not likely to be restored by words that make up in abuse what they lack in counsel. The decent workman has learned in the hard school of experience to dread his job coming to an end. Let the politicians try to grasp what this means to the character of the man; put themselves in his place and then try to throw stones at him.

The preaching is that our well-intentioned workman is under the sway, if not the rule, of the extremists, who are out to smash up the existing system without undue delay. But this despairing faction is after all but the wayside fruits of a society based on economic injustice, and it is likely to grow in volume as the injustice is maintained. Meanwhile, the impatience, the outbreaks, and the influence for evil of the direct actionists make a fine excuse for so much incompetent leadership. It has come to pass that in hard times violent and absurd action, which no sensible person can defend, comes even to the council chamber. If this force makes for revolutionary ends, there is but one way to subdue it, and that is, in plain English, to put an end to the economic causes that produce undeserved poverty and unemployment.

J. P.