

THE GOVERNMENT AND IDLE HANDS

By Councillor Arthur H. Weller, J.P.

Alarming as are the unemployment figures published by the Ministry of Labour, they do not reveal the full extent of the evil. For example, the total number of applicants for employment at the Exchanges on 30th July—1,354,000; an increase of 115,000 in four weeks—only includes persons registered at the Exchanges, *i.e.*, those who are officially recognized as unemployed.

A report issued by the Ministry of Health shows that in June there were 883,600 persons in receipt of outdoor relief, apart from those in institutions. These are additional to the people registered at the Labour Exchanges, but neither the Exchanges nor the Guardians include in their totals the thousands who are not registered and do not receive public assistance. It is difficult to keep pace with the changing and worsening situation of which the frequent official returns only give an inadequate indication.

Spreading Unemployment Evenly

So serious has the problem become that even a complacent Government seems to realize that something more than a Micawber-like inaction is desirable. Three schemes have recently been launched: one, to transfer the surplus workers from districts where unemployment is very severe to districts where it is less severe; another, to provide temporary employment for 10,000 men in the harvest fields of Canada; a third in the form of an appeal from the Prime Minister to employers urging them to find as much work as possible to relieve unemployment.

The sweet simplicity of the last scheme is somewhat discounted by the fact that the Government has discharged and is discharging men from the Civil Service on grounds of redundancy. All these trivial measures, however, which only aim at alleviation, are a confession of the Government's failure to solve the problem.

In his defence of the transference scheme, Mr Baldwin said: "If the unemployment in these districts (mining) were spread evenly all over the country the seriousness of the position would be far less." Had he completed the sentence by saying "the seriousness of the position would be far less noticeable," the statement would have been true.

An instance of spreading unemployment evenly was given in the debate in the House of Commons: unemployed miners have been sent from South Wales to trundle ice-cream trucks in London streets, although there are thousands of unemployed workers there willing to accept the jobs. Others are being engaged as bus conductors—but there is more unemployment in South Wales than in London, and the seriousness of the position is less noticeable when it is spread more evenly!

Idle Land—Idle Men

It is quite obvious that a redistribution of unemployment such as the foregoing can neither lessen the total number of the unemployed nor lighten the total cost to the community. One can feel the deepest sympathy with the unfortunate "surplus" miners without approving of their being sent to fill other men's jobs. Mr Baldwin is asking employers to give preference to these men and that can only mean that the local unemployed elsewhere—equally unfortunate, equally worthy, equally or perhaps more capable and possessing equal rights to life and to the means of living—will have their last miserable hope of employment shattered; the miners' prospect of permanent unemployment will be transferred to them.

The 1928 returns of the Ministry of Agriculture show that while unemployment has been increasing, the area of cultivated land has been diminishing. In one year the area of arable land has been reduced by 200,000 acres and there are now nearly 1,000,000 acres less under the plough than there were in 1914. On these million acres alone are neglected opportunities for the permanent employment of 40,000 men with ordinary farming methods. Used as small-holdings, 80,000 men could be employed, and with modern improved methods of farming as many as 150,000 persons could earn a living in producing foodstuffs.

But it may be objected that unemployed miners and town workers would be useless in agriculture or unwilling to engage in this work. The eager response of such men to the Government's offer of work in the Canadian harvest fields is a sufficient answer to that objection. It is not suggested, however, that the unemployed should be sent "back to the land" or sent anywhere. All that ought to be done, and all that is necessary, is to open up such opportunities for all who desire them. That would at least reverse the flow of population from the countryside to the towns and keep within our own shores many who will otherwise be driven to seek agricultural opportunities in the Dominions.

Opening up the land means making the country's natural resources available to labour and capital. To do that the present systems of local and national taxation must be altered. Before labour can be employed in building, a landowner has to be satisfied, and his price is usually higher than the opportunity is worth, because there is an artificial scarcity of sites.

Remove these Obstructions

In the mining industry also an agreement must first be entered into which will give to a non-producing landowner a large share of the product in the form of ground-rent, royalty and dead-rent. When that is amicably arranged and production begins, the tax and rate assessors watch the proceedings and "fine" the enterprise in proportion to its success.

The industry of the manufacturer and shopkeeper is penalized in the same way by the landowner and taxation authority, and in these circumstances employment of all kinds is discouraged and often prevented.

By reversing the process both employment and production can be encouraged. Instead of taxing and rating land only when it is used and in proportion to the value of its use, land ought to be taxed and rated on its full unimproved value, whether used or not. Under that system it would not pay to hold building sites, clay and slate lands, mineral lands and land suitable for farms and small-holdings out of good use; the owner of unused land would pay as much in taxation as the owner whose land of equal value was fully utilized. In these circumstances all the unused valuable land in town and country would become available and cheap.

The first obstacle to employment and production would thus be removed, and the lightening of the burden of taxation on industry through the provision of new public revenue from the taxes on land values would further encourage business enterprise. The resulting demand for labour and the new supply of opportunities for self-employment would soon lift the dark cloud of unemployment and poverty which overshadows the country.

Poverty in the Midst of Plenty

The tragic absurdity of more than 2,000,000 people being unemployed and many other millions being "poor" can be seen when the production of wealth is understood. Wealth includes all the material things produced by labour out of land to satisfy human desires,

such as food, houses and coal. Poverty is a lack of wealth.

There is only one of two possible reasons for unemployment and poverty: either there is not enough land, or else men are prevented from producing the things they want. In our own country there are many millions of acres of land lying idle or misused which are suitable for the production of food, buildings and minerals—upon which all the other industries depend—but legal barriers shut out the idle men from Nature's Storehouse. They can be broken down by the Taxation and Rating of Land Values. When that has been done and men are free, individually or co-operatively, to produce and enjoy all things necessary for their sustenance and comfort, the horrors of man-made poverty will disappear. * * *

This able article by Mr Weller has appeared in the *Southport Guardian*, the *Stockport Express*, the *Clitheroe Advertiser*, the *Bacup Times*, the *Middleton Guardian*, the *Cotton Factory Times*, and the *Warrington Examiner*. It ought to be issued in leaflet form.

UNEMPLOYMENT

By Wm. Noble

(From a letter in the *Stockport Times*, 23rd August)

The Boards of Guardians have an impossible task. Poverty and unemployment are made by our unjust laws and no Guardians can cure those evils. If the Poor Laws of this country were administered by the Archangel Gabriel and Sir Galahad, they would be a disgrace to us—not because our Poor Laws are not better than those of most countries, but because the very phrase "the poor" connotes injustice.

My critic asks five questions. To take them seriatim:—

1. What should be the aim of each individual in this world?

Answer: Justice; and the first essential of justice is that each shall demand for all access on equal terms to the storehouse of nature.

2. How should the country be governed?

Answer: Justly; and that is impossible so long as the value of land, which is created by the community as a whole, is not taken for communal needs, but is allowed to go into private pockets.

3. Under what conditions should commerce and industry be carried on?

Answer: Just conditions; and just conditions are impossible where land is treated as private property, for there will be found idle men, some forced to sell their labour for bare subsistence and others not able to do even that, but having to exist on poor relief.

4. How should the selfishness of mankind be controlled or eradicated?

Answer: By justice. When human beings sit down to a well-filled table, there is no jostling and pushing. Each sees to the wants of his neighbours before tending his own. This country is a well filled table, but a few, called ground landlords, insist that it is theirs alone. They and their friends have more than a glutton would ask, some others are allowed a share on condition that they work for the ground landlords or their friends, and the great majority go short.

5. Is it possible to avoid the unequal distribution of wealth?

Answer: It is possible to avoid the *unjust* distribution of wealth. All that is necessary is to make all land available to labour by putting a suitable tax on its value. That would make such a demand for labour that unemployment would disappear, and once we get to the stage that there are more jobs than workers, wages will rise to the full amount of what each worker earns.

I am not afraid of the human element that my critic beseeches me to consider. Human nature is good in spite of our inhuman laws: how nearly perfect it can be we never shall know till we abolish the most inhuman of all laws, that which makes the land the private property of the very few to the exclusion of the very many. My critic says that the land values policy is no better than it was in 1910. Of course it is not; nothing which is based on truth can be better or worse with the passage of time. The essence of truth and justice is that they are unchanging and unchangeable.

How landowners "turning their landed estates into Limited Companies" can make any difference to any government who intend to tax land on its value I fail to see. Land cannot be hidden nor its value camouflaged, and a tax on land value whether the land is held by a duke who is not trying to dodge death duties, or one who has made a Limited Company of his estate for that purpose, will force that land to be put to its best use.

STOCKPORT

Consideration of the housing question led to a discussion on land value taxation in the Stockport Town Council, reported in the *Stockport Express* of 6th September.

Councillor Bowyer said the health and general well-being and the morals of the people—as the Police Court often showed—were being affected in Stockport through the Council's neglect to tackle this great problem of housing. He expressed his disapproval of the attendance of Aldermen and Councillors at sales bent on buying parcels of property for profit without any regard for the health and comfort of the people. Private interest in property lay at the root of the Council's apathy.

Councillor Helen Henderson: Again and again have ground landlords, by the high prices they asked for land, made it impossible for the Housing Committee to proceed. The only remedy seems to be the taxation of land values, then much of the difficulty besetting the housing problem would disappear.

Councillor W. Stanton said they had to aim at the building of houses at a reasonable rent, and to do that they had to get the houses built at a reasonable price and get the land at a reasonable price. They had inquired about desirable land, and had been asked £400 or £500 an acre. If the owners had to pay rates on that value they would soon get the land at £150 an acre. They could get houses built at a reasonable price, but the trouble was the price asked for the land. He hoped he would live to see the day when the landowners would be compelled to disgorge the land for purposes like this.

Councillor W. A. Downham said he wanted to emphasize what Mrs Henderson had said about ground rents. In Reddish higher prices than had been mentioned had been asked for land.

Alderman M. M. McGregor said they were not moving at a pace commensurate with the need for houses, but there were people trying to get unreasonable prices for their land, and there was a limit on the number of houses to be built per acre.

Subscribers to our Sustention Fund who gave special contributions this time last year are earnestly asked to renew their support for 1928. Will friends concerned please take this as an urgent personal message from the Editor on behalf of the Journal? It is a word also to all interested in "Land & Liberty."