

LAND & LIBERTY

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COAL AND THE LAND QUESTION

The national stoppage in the coal mines continues. Twice during the past month the railwaymen and the transport workers were on the point of being called out on strike in sympathy with the miners. This was to be the final argument of the Triple Alliance to force a settlement. The date of the strike was at first fixed, on five days' notice, for the 12th April, but was postponed when negotiations between all the parties seemed to promise some basis of discussion. Then came a further deadlock and the strike was fixed for 16th April. The Triple Alliance proclaimed in a manifesto published on the 14th: "The miners have been denied the right to have their wages regulated upon a national basis . . . it is proposed that they should accept district wages arrangements . . . a challenge has been thrown down, the miners have taken it up, but they must not fight alone. The railwaymen and the transport workers are standing by them . . . for fundamental trade-union rights. The fight must be won; it will be won." Two days after, within six hours of the strike notices taking effect, the miners had been deserted by their allies. There had been a meeting of members of Parliament addressed by Mr. Hodges, the Miners' Secretary, who was reported to say that he was willing to consider suggestions for a temporary wages arrangement. The leaders of the railwaymen and transport workers urged this concession upon the Miners' Federation; but the latter repudiated any compromise and refused to discuss with the Government or the mine-owners any proposal which did not at once establish the principle of a national wages board to determine equal rates of wages over the whole industry as a single unit. Thereupon the strike notices to railwaymen and transport workers were cancelled. The miners were left to carry on their fight alone. The Triple Alliance failed to function, and met disruption from within at the supreme moment of its opportunity to prove the power of combined trade-union action. Meanwhile, on the threat of a national stoppage, the Government had made elaborate preparations to maintain the transport services, and fearing grave disturbances organized a costly and wanton display of military force. This new and sinister departure was excused by the Prime Minister as a proof of the readiness of the community "to defend itself against anything in the nature of an attack upon property, anything in the nature of an attack upon the established institutions of the country."

The wages problem must surely be baffling if it leads to talk and action of that kind. And yet, is the solution so difficult? It is, if trade unions and

others insist upon looking for it by isolating any one industry and quarrelling over some arbitrary division of its results, on the principle that the greater the employers' "profit," the lower must be the wages of the workers, and *vice versa*. So it is in this devastating dispute that has closed down the whole production of coal for many weeks. The one party decided in favour of what is called a national wage rate; the other for what is called a district rate. Both parties agreed that, since the late fall in prices, the industry as a whole has been carried on at a loss, although it has now been discovered that many mines were yet making a considerable profit. Both parties, but with different intentions, agree that wages should be determined by the "capacity of the industry to pay wages"; and there is a vain hunt for some workable formula according to which profits or wages in prosperous mines may subsidize low wages in the poorer mines, if these are to continue at all. The miners refused to go back to the mines on 1st April because the mine-owners offered, in many districts, a new scale of wages below the subsistence level. If it is true, as was contended, that higher wages could not be afforded, the wage notices were equivalent to the announcement that a number of mines would have to be closed. But miners are concerned for their employment. They were determined that some means must be found to keep non-paying mines at work by outside assistance and at wages equal to any obtainable in any other part of the coalfields. The suggested outside assistance has taken various forms. It had to come from the taxpayer; from the "profits" of richer mines; from the wages of richer mines; from a general levy of 1s. per ton payable even on the coal produced in the losing mines. For the sake of employment, men were to destroy wealth, not to produce it—to cause more than one pound to be spent in raising one pound's worth of coal—and to secure a national wage in doing so. It all seems most absurd, but what other outlook is there for those who seek the law of wages in some "fundamental trade-union right," to decree that a given rate of wages *shall* be paid in this or that particular industry?

Wages cannot be so fixed or decreed. The law is that the rate of wages in any one occupation cannot rise very much above nor fall very much below the general level of wages, and that general level depends upon the opportunities available for employment over the whole field of industry. If opportunities are denied as by the withholding of agricultural, mineral, building or other land from use, the natural result is unemployment and a general fall in wages. If opportunities are plentiful there will be general prosperity and a general rise in wages which no employer could keep back. Would miners, for instance, fight to the bitter end to avoid being driven to hew coal underground for £3 a week or less if they had the alternative of good and secure income on the surface, or if they had access to coalfields not now developed because private interests stand in the way? Would men drift to the railways or to the towns to work at a pittance if they had the chance of a prosperous living by cultivating the land? There would be freedom for anyone to take a job or leave it and to make his own terms without fear of unemployment if such alternatives were made available. And in the absence of such

alternatives no trade-union action directed against particular employers can alter social conditions for the better.

The Miners' Federation have been in constant touch with a Prime Minister who prates now about property rights and "established institutions," but who at one time made it clear enough that the "bursting of land monopoly" was an essential condition for the solution of the wage problem. Yet in all these late controversies the land question has not been mentioned. Royalties, wayleaves and mineral rights, the monopoly of coal-bearing land which prevents the development of rich coal seams, have disappeared from view. The bold challenge offered by Mr. Robert Smillie to the landed interests at the historic meetings of the Coal Commission swept aside all confused and confusing plans for fixing the capacity of the coal industry or any industry to pay wages. It is somewhat amazing that the cue he gave to the whole Labour movement has been lost or forgotten. The natural resources, from which abundant wealth may be produced, are held as a close monopoly. To whom do these natural resources belong? Why are they withheld from use? Why must tribute be paid to the holder before the people can have access to them? Or to put the question as Mr. Lloyd George himself has stated it, "Who ordained that a few should have the land of Britain as a perquisite; who made 10,000 people owners of the soil and the rest of us trespassers in the land of our birth; who is it? Who is responsible for the scheme of things whereby one man is engaged through life in grinding labour, to win a bare and precarious subsistence for himself . . . and another man who does not toil receives every hour of the day, every hour of the night whilst he slumbers more than his poor neighbour receives in a whole year of toil?"

Since that speech was made, the Government over which Mr. Lloyd George presides has passed much legislation deliberately designed to strengthen land monopoly. Its pretended housing, land settlement, small holdings and corn production Acts have but protected and endowed private property in land, before which all schemes of reconstruction lie shattered. The essential thing is to come to grips at once with the land question, knowing that in putting an end to landlord privilege we shall open the unlimited resources that the earth offers to man. Unemployment abolished, the wage problem for miners and all workers will settle itself.—A. W. M.