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THE WAGE CONFLICT AT THE MINES

The intervention of the Government in the dispute between the colliery owners and the miners succeeded only in postponing settlement—till 1st May next year—by the guarantee of financial assistance to the industry out of public funds. A crisis had been reached in the refusal of the miners even to consider the proposals of the owners for a new wages agreement. The owners had given notice that employment at the pits would continue after 1st August only on their terms. The miners declared a national stoppage, and as the railwaymen and transport workers resolved that no coal would be moved during the struggle, paralysis of the whole trade of the country was in sight, with consequences no one dare contemplate.

A Court of Inquiry set up on 13th July failed to bring the parties together in conference. It heard evidence from the owners' side, the miners still declining to take any part in the proceedings so long as the owners entertained their proposals. It appears that the one hope the owners could hold out for a higher wage than the proposed agreement offered lay in lengthening the statutory working day from seven to eight hours. But to that change the miners are bitterly opposed, and it stands no chance of discussion.

The Report Court reported on 28th July. It despaired of any solution. The proposals of the owners would entail an immediate and in many cases a material reduction in actual wages paid, although under the existing agreement the miners' wages were on the average less than the pre-war wages, plus an addition representing the increased cost of living. Wages were, in fact, already below subsistence level. On the other hand, the Court conceded the "unanswerable position" taken up by the colliery proprietors that wages were more than the industry in the present state of the market could afford. An increasing number (67 per cent in May) of the mines were producing at a loss, and it had been necessary to close down no fewer than 508 pits during the year, whereas only 96 pits had been opened or reopened. The deadlock was complete. On the 30th July the Cabinet decided upon a subsidy to tide over the difficulty, and the money was voted by Parliament on 6th August. In another column we print the substance of the official White Paper explaining the intricacies of the wage system in the mines and the nature of this temporary settlement.

A special inquiry has been commissioned to find the way out of the dilemma within the next nine

months. In the interval the taxpayer is to be called upon to feed bankrupt concerns with millions of money. The meaning of it all is clear enough. We have reached the climax of the industrial depression. The closely knit fabric of inter-dependent trades and manufactures could stand the strain no longer, and it has been torn asunder. It is significant for this country that the break has shown itself in the coal industry, and that coal propounds the riddle of the Sphinx "which not to answer is to be destroyed."

The terms of reference to the Commission contain words that deserve special notice, and these we print in italics:

To inquire into and report upon the economic position of the coal industry and the *conditions affecting it* and to make any recommendations for the improvement thereof.

One may hope that the most generous interpretation will be given to those words. It is not enough to study the internal conditions, organization, efficiency and the like, to determine what share of the output of mines actually worked can be taken respectively by miner and colliery proprietor, after royalties have been exacted by the landowner, if this tribute is to continue. The external conditions, the influences acting from without, are forced upon the attention of all engaged and interested in the production and sale of coal.

The actual and the *potential* demand for coal is still enormous despite the resort to oil and the growth of hydro-electric power. Unemployment is the main cause responsible for the collapse both of the home and the foreign market; it reacts powerfully upon the sale of coal abroad by the inability of our own people to buy the imported wares that alone can pay for the coal that might be exported. The remedy must not only cure the troubles peculiar to the coal industry; it must remove the causes that have thrown 1,300,000 people out of work, including 300,000 miners, and discover why it is that these people, able to employ one another and exchange the products of their labour, are deprived of the chance of making a living.

The poverty and low wages of all the possible consumers of coal, in its uses in countless directions, are factors that have been all too much overlooked in this narrow and unavailing quarrel over profits and wages in the mines themselves. The miner may not lose sight of the fact that if a fellow-countryman is shut out from any occupation and is therefore unable to buy goods, the market for coal has thereby lost a customer somewhere, in some part of the country, or it may be across the seas. In the final analysis, reducing the great complex of national and international exchange to its simple elements, it is the worker as consumer of one article who employs the worker as producer of another—a fact that the Trade Union movement has thus far failed fully to appreciate, as it seems also to have underrated the intimate relation of wages in one occupation with wages in another.

The attempt has been made through joint action and a solid front in face of the "employer" to lift a trade by its own bootstraps, and the lamentable failure has been proved only too abundantly in the case of the coal industry. Wages cannot be raised in that way, but only by the way that gives a

satisfactory reply to these questions, which the miner may well ask: "What prevents me from deserting those mines that cannot pay their way? Is there no possible alternative employment? Why do you from the country come here to the pit-head to compete with me for my job at a starvation wage? Where did you come from that employment is so scarce? Why is it, that in the new districts where new mines are being opened employment is being found not for skilled miners but for agricultural labourers and the unemployed in the towns? Is that the 'operation of purely economic forces' referred to by the Court of Inquiry as the thing that is 'determining the fate' of the coal industry? Why cannot this order of things be reversed so that I can, if I like, seek and find a holding in the country and cultivate with an assured return some of those deserted acres?" No, the trend has always been in the opposite direction. The source of the trouble is the landlessness of the agricultural labourer and his poverty, driving him from farm and fields to the towns, the railways, the mines, in the hope of a job wherever he sees a smoking chimney.

Another condition affecting the coal industry—from without—is the possible or probable holding of extensive coal fields from use. Mr. Wm. Straker, the veteran secretary of the Northumberland miners, has made a statement that the Commission must investigate thoroughly every matter concerned with the industry, with a view to "a radical re-organization from top to bottom of all its parts, productive and distributive." He mentions many details, but there is never a word about investigating whether, where and to what extent the industry is denied access to coal seams which could be exploited at less cost than at the pits that have been run at a loss or have had to close. The allegation has been made repeatedly that monopoly holds to ransom many a deposit of rich and easily worked coal; monopoly forces the industry beyond the margin, back upon poor coal or deep seams, and obliges it to continue working old pits far from the face, under all sorts of disadvantages, at an ever increasing loss. Why have the Miners' Federation failed so largely to direct attention to that handicap or insist that such an abuse, if it obtains, shall be ruthlessly exposed and brought to an end?

The report of the Court of Inquiry has suggested that if all the pits which do not pay their way were to close down, the consequences not only to the discharged miners but to the economic balance of the country would be disastrous. This is altogether meaningless. It is the continued working of pits at a loss that has brought about the disaster that faces us; and it is baffled thought on the reason and remedy for unemployment that has dictated a public act of charity for the sake of the miners who are shepherded around the pits, denied other opportunities for a livelihood and locked up as in a cage.

The subsidy that is to be given to support this most unnatural state of affairs during the next nine months—and who can vouch for it ending then?—is estimated to be anything from £7,000,000 to £25,000,000 or more, a sum that represents not so much money just thrown away, but the equivalent of national wealth actually destroyed. The price can only be compensated by a revelation of the truth, so that right action may follow right thought.

The Commission will have done nothing and led nowhere if this question of the ownership of coal, worked and unworked, and the terms upon which access may be had to it, as well as to land on the surface for all necessary works and housing accommodation, is not probed to its roots.

There is enough evidence available to show that the complaint in regard to the withholding of coal seams is no mere allegation. In his statements before the Coal Industry Commission in 1919, Sir Richard Redmayne, Chief Inspector of Mines, gave many proven instances of landlord obstruction. He had before him a hundred cases indicating that the ownership of minerals ought to be altered. "A number of cases have been brought to my notice of either absolute refusal to lease mines or the demand of prohibitive and unreasonable terms. . . . I have a case of divided ownership of minerals where one joint owner out of five is preventing coal being leased and the main headings of a colliery are standing at the coal in question. . . . I have frequently met with cases where the prospective lessor has known that his particular area of coal was of vital moment to a colliery company and opportunity has been availed of to extract extortionate terms."

Protests against the toll taken by landowners in royalties, wayleaves and dead rents, have no doubt their proper place in the politics of the Miners' Federation. But it is not enough to pillory the landowning system on that ground. Royalties represent what landowners receive without service or return *where coal is got*. The bigger question is the amount of wealth that is lost to the nation, the poverty and unemployment that are caused, by the power of monopoly to hold land out of use at will, and prevent coal or anything else being produced. That question is supreme over everything that the Commission is called on to consider, and if the Miners' Federation would press it, they would do more than has yet been done by themselves or any Trade Union in the struggle to raise the condition of labour.

A. W. M.

The existence of a rich coalfield under Sherwood Forest has been proved by the Butterley Colliery Company, which has struck a 6 ft. seam of excellent quality at Ollerton, at a depth of 1,578 ft. The development of this area is necessitating a good deal of house construction, and the Notts Education Committee is being pressed through having to find so much extra school accommodation. It is anticipated there will be a population increase of 50,000 in the Mansfield area in the next seven years.—MANCHESTER GUARDIAN, 3rd August.

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The news of the discovery of anthracite in Devon will be received with mixed feelings. It is a lovely county, and coal has a depressing effect on landscape. . . . A devout Devonian writes to inquire whether, at a time when pits (at Ammanford and elsewhere) are being closed down, we cannot inaugurate the Bideford seam by closing it down and so save a lot of trouble to everybody.—OBSERVER, 16th August.

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The estimated total amount paid in coal royalties in Great Britain during 1924 was £6,430,000, which represents an average royalty of 5½d. per ton of coal raised.—Colonel Lane-Fox, House of Commons, 2nd July.