

THE FRIENDS AND THE LAND QUESTION

The War and Social Order Committee of the Society of Friends, meeting in Conference at Woodbrook, Birmingham, on 27th April, adopted the following Minute to be submitted to the forthcoming Annual Meeting of the Society in London:—

"We have seen that the private ownership of land is a direct cause of unemployment, and realising that the land is the gift of God, we think that social arrangements should be such as will enable all His children to share equally in its benefits."

On behalf of Group 3 of the Unemployment Investigation of War and Social Order Committee, Messrs. Chas. H. Smithson and Wm. Thompson, assisted by Mr. Joseph Smithson and Mr. John Robson had prepared for the Conference a report on "the extent to which unemployment is dependent upon the result of our present system of land ownership, tenure and use, and the consideration of any remedies which have been put forward."

A condensation of the Report has been contributed by Mr. Chas. H. Smithson to THE FRIEND of 19th May, and we have great pleasure in reprinting the statement for the benefit of our readers.

LAND IN RELATION TO EMPLOYMENT

Everything fashioned by the hand of man comes, in the first place, from land. The men engaged in the two primary industries of mining and agriculture supply materials for those employed in all other industries. Anything therefore which restricts the use of land restricts employment over the whole field of industry. And, since the starting point of all employment is the land, reason suggests that the study of the tenure and use of land should also be the starting point of any investigation into the problem of unemployment.

Nature lays on man the injunction to labour to satisfy his needs, and at the same time supplies the land from which man can produce all that is necessary for his physical requirements. But where land is all privately owned, the landless man finds himself unjustly deprived of the natural opportunity to obey Nature's law, and consequently he finds himself absolutely dependent upon some one else to "find him work." Those who possess the legal power to control the land can determine how much, or how little, employment shall be given to the landless men; and since, under the private ownership of land, it frequently pays to get less produce with a minimum of labour than a larger produce, where the increase would be mainly absorbed in wages, it follows that the minimum of labour is employed. If land, with security of tenure, was available for all who could profitably use it for more intensive culture, a large amount of additional employment would be found; a new negotiating basis for wages would be established throughout the whole field of industry; a check would be given to the yearly migration from the country into the towns; unemployment in the towns would be lessened, and an expanding home market would be created for the product of the towns.

Let us turn to the mining areas. Here also the so-called "owners" of "mining rights" can determine the conditions upon which the employment of hundreds of thousands of miners depends. The late Lord Penrhyn demonstrated how complete and arbitrary might be the use of this power by closing a mountainside of slate against labour. Slate, iron, coal, stone, etc., are the free gifts of the Creator to all His children, all of whom are equal in His sight; and no man ought to have the power to withhold the use of God's bounty from others. This raises the question as to how the equal right to the use of the Creator's gifts can equitably be secured.

Before discussing this question, it may be well to draw attention to the fundamental distinction between land and everything else. Everything, except land, to which value attaches is produced by man; *land is the creation of God.*

Part of the confusion of thought, on this subject, arises from the fact that in most forms of what is called "real property" there is a value that is produced by man, because it is traceable to the private expenditure of labour and capital upon the land. This value, which should be described as the value of "improvements," to distinguish it from "land value," should belong to the individual who has made the improvements, or to the individual to whom he has transferred his right by gift or sale. But, after making full allowance for all unexhausted improvements, there remains a value which attaches to something which is God's gift to all His children, and it is this value which should be made common property.

Not much more than a century ago public opinion, shared by members of religious bodies, including members of the Society of Friends, saw no injustice in regarding flesh and blood as legitimate property, because human law had sanctioned the sale and transfer of the chattel slave. To-day it seems incredible that such a view could prevail among people who acknowledged the universal Fatherhood of God. Some day it may seem equally inconceivable that enlightened men and women, professing a belief in the Fatherhood of God, could ever have acquiesced in treating the free gifts of the Creator to all His children as the private property of a few; giving to those few the power to say who should enjoy the use of the Creator's gifts. When it is also seen that the ownership of land involves the enslavement of men by robbing them of their freedom to employ themselves, the present attitude of the Churches towards this question will seem beyond explanation.

There is only one just method of putting men on an equality in reference to the bounty of Nature. The free gifts of the Creator must be regarded as the common property of all, and each holder should pay to the community a ground rent equivalent to the advantage he enjoys. This ground rent should be paid, whether the land is used or not. This would ensure the most effective use of the land, without the hampering interference of governmental control, because it would not be profitable to hold land idle, which was subject to a ground rent. It would operate like the "dead rent" clause in a mining lease. Even a partial application of the principle, through the absorption of a part of the communal ground rent by the rating and taxation of land values, would have a powerful economic effect in bringing unused, or partially used, land into full use. Countless additional opportunities for the employment of labour would be opened up and the problem of unemployment would no longer present insuperable difficulties.

The fact that such a simple remedy should have far-reaching beneficial results is no mystery to those who have realised the profound philosophic truth, proclaimed by Henry George, namely, that before there can be a healthy social organism, man-made law must conform to Nature's law—the Divine law. When we disobey a human law we may escape the penalty if we are not found out; but we cannot violate a law of God without suffering the consequences. The sins of the fathers are visited upon the children, and it matters not whether we sin deliberately or in ignorance, the price to be paid is just the same. In regard to unemployment, the violation of God's law is the legalised power of the few to control God's gifts. This power is the necessary accompaniment of our system of private ownership of land, and it is this interference with God's law for which we are all equally responsible in a democratically governed State, unless we are raising our voices against the continuance of the sin.

If, after serious consideration of this fundamental question, we recognise that the present system of treating natural resources as private property is not in accordance with what we perceive to be God's will, it is our duty, as individuals and collectively as members of a Christian Church, to raise our voices and exercise our influence against the continuance of this great iniquity.

CHARLES H. SMITHSON.