

The Single Tax, June, 1896

The Living- Wage.

One of the foremost results of the present universal awakening to the fact that the foundations of our social structure are not laid in justice and equity seems to be a tendency, on the part of the more aggressive of our social reformers, to cling to every apparently plausible palliative, in the hope of being able to mitigate the suffering and privation endured by the unfortunates who, often through no fault of their own, find themselves in the lowest and least lucrative positions in the industrial army. And while we are not unconscious of the earnestness of purpose that this (to our mind) mistaken policy betokens, we cannot help regretting that such is the case. For this reason we propose to offer some criticism on this Living Wage proposal.

At the outset we are confronted with the question as to what constitutes a Living Wage, the phrase itself failing to supply any adequate conception of its meaning. This being so, we have to rely for a definition on the supporters of the proposal. From what we have gathered from its advocates, we are led to believe that the Living Wage is not a wage that has any scientific basis. For instance, it is not pretended that it is the lowest amount on which people can live; neither is it considered a sufficient wage to enable people to live well.

In brief, it is just a minimum wage fixed somewhat above the sum that competition would give. At best it can only benefit a very few, as its most sanguine supporters have no hope of forcing its universal adoption. All they can hope for is, that public bodies may be induced to pay it—not, however, to all their servants, but only to such as can be conveniently classed as "able-bodied."

The wisdom of such a proposal is more than questionable. To secure its adoption as much agitation would be required as would be necessary to bring about reforms of much more importance, and which would have such far-reaching effects as no one who values his reputation for sanity would venture to claim for it. It is in its nature a proposal to assist those who, in the class to which they belong, are least in need of assistance. If charity is to be given—for everything

that is given over and above what is earned by any individual under prevailing conditions is charity—it should be given to those who are not able-bodied.

Another thing which ought to be taken into account in connection with this question is the relative position of public servants with those who employ them. The horny-handed democrat is often met with the argument that he should do unto others as he would have others do unto him. In other words, if he wishes wages raised he should begin by striving to raise the wages of those who serve him. The fallacy of such an argument will be found in its extreme narrowness. A wider view will show that the public servant is as much the employer of the ordinary citizen as the latter is his employer.

The public servant spends his wages on the things which the ordinary citizen produces. In doing so he contrives to spend those wages to the best advantage. He refuses to reduce his own purchasing power by paying 1/6 for a 1/ worth of goods, regardless of whether the payment of the extra 6d. would enable the manufacturer to increase the wages of his employes. What does concern him is that he would be reducing his own wages by such improvident methods. This being so, why should the sweated worker be taunted with the charge that he is himself an unjust employer. For him to give to his neighbour privileges which he does not himself possess, is not to love his neighbour as himself; it is to love him even better.

But we might be induced to waive such objections as the foregoing if it could be shewn that this proposal would really raise anybody's wages. That it would, we believe, is too readily assumed. Take for instance a public body which engages servants at an average wage of 18/ per week. Let such a body decree that in future the minimum wage be 21/, and what will happen? Will not better and abler men be induced to compete for the jobs? Will not every labourer with 19/ and £1, who before had no inducement to compete, have such an inducement? We are inclined to think they would, and as the best men would be chosen it is quite conceivable that the change might take place without increasing the wages bill by one farthing. What could and what would probably take place is that 21 men at 18/ per week would be displaced to make room for 18 men at 21/.

Having said so much in criticism of the proposal itself, our next duty is to look at the arguments in its favour. We will begin by admitting that 21/ per week is not a

princely income, and by expressing our belief that this and much more might be got by every worker, although we do not believe it can be got in this particular way.

It is quite true that by striking out the word able-bodied from any resolution in favour of a minimum wage, and by the exercise of "eternal vigilance," the servants of any public body might be preserved against the rigours of competition; but what would that amount to? It would mean that a privileged class of labourers would be maintained, the entrance into which class could only be secured by the influence of those in authority.

But all this time the problem to be solved would remain as far from a solution as ever. For have not Privilege and Monopoly in the past pointed to the privileged ones among the labouring classes as an example of what might be obtained by all. Have they not pointed to Friendly Societies, Building Societies, Savings Banks, and Peasant Proprietary, as bulwarks against poverty, knowing full well that they were the very bulwarks that guarded their privileges. It is not the function of a public body to create privileges for any class; its true function is to secure the same conditions for all.

This brings us to the last stronghold of the living wage advocates. They affect to believe that its effects will not be sectional, but will be felt all round. They argue that public bodies can set an example to private employers by being themselves model employers. That they can need not be disputed, but that this example could have the effect of raising wages is absurd. Wages are not fixed by example, they are fixed by competition. The lowest amount that any class of labourers will work for is their wages. If more is to be got it can only be got by a lessening of competition, and this can not be brought about by a method such as this. To bring it about is, we believe, possible, and our propaganda is directed towards that end.

To those who care to give some study to the wages question it will soon be made apparent that the reason why wages are low is because land is a close monopoly. Those who complain of the so called inhumanity and injustice of buying labour at the cheapest price, forget for the moment that such a custom neither invalidates the right nor eliminates the desire of the average labourer to sell his labour at the dearest price. What is wanted is the power to make that desire felt.

This, we believe, cannot be done so long as the avenues of employment which exist in the land are barred against the labourer. Every piece of land which is kept out of use deprives some one of an opportunity for work, and keeps someone hungry who might be fed. Every labourer who is deprived of work is a source of menace to those who have work, for his hunger compels him to compete for the lowest wages.

What we insist on is, that the unemployed are the cause of low wages, and that land monopoly is the cause of the unemployed. No example will be likely to induce employers of labour to raise wages while there are always a number of men willing to work for the lowest wages. Something more drastic is required. What must, and what ought to be done speedily is to break down the barriers that shut the labourer out from the source of all employment.

Land which is kept out of use should be forced into use, for its use is required for those who are out of work. This could be secured by placing a tax, however partial, on the values of land. Landowners only keep land idle now because it pays them to do so. When it ceases to pay them to keep it idle, they will let it out for use. This is why we urge that a tax should be placed on the values of land whether used or unused. Landowners use their land to put money in their pockets, not to take it out, and a tax on their unused land would soon bring them to their senses.

This putting of unused land into use would provide employment for those unemployed. With the disappearance of the unemployed would come the power to raise wages. Then people having a choice of employments may naturally be expected to refuse to work for low wages. Under such conditions we might expect to hear people clamouring for a maximum wage to be fixed, which after all would be no more out of place than the fixing of a minimum wage.

In case we be accused of frivolity we may call attention to the fact, well known in history, that at the time when wages were good in this country Parliament was prevailed on to interfere in the matter. This it tried to do and failed, and just for the same reason that the advocates of the living wage will fail, namely, that conditions were against them. Parliament could not keep wages low while people were willing to pay high wages. No more can Parliament raise wages while people are willing to work for low wages.

At the time we speak of, when wages were getting so high that parliament saw fit to interfere, access to land was comparatively free, and employment was plentiful. This is the condition that the Single Tax seeks to revive. It will find its way to the lowest strata of labour, and press all equally upward. It will create equal conditions for all and privileges for none. In its upward sweep, it will not discriminate between those who are able-bodied and those who are not. It will make necessity, and not example, the lever that will raise wages. In fine, it will make the product of labour the basis of wages, and end discussion as to what constitutes a fair wage.