

THE LABOUR PARTY AND AGRICULTURAL LAND

By Fredk. Verinder

(From a searching analysis published in the *Middleton Guardian* of 25th September.)

Whatever else the pretentious "Labour Policy on Agriculture" offers to the working tiller of the soil, it does not offer him what he most sorely needs—his economic freedom.

It does not free him from the exactions of the landlord. True, it professes (p. 5) to substitute "on the Appointed Day," "Public Ownership for the present landlord system in agricultural holdings," except in certain classes of holdings, which are certainly, as it admits, "important," viz., "those in semi-urban areas with substantial site-value, together with the special case of occupying owners, including smallholders."

The expropriated landlords are to be compensated (p. 6) by Land Bonds "on the basis of Schedule A Annual Value of the holding. . . . redeemable by a Sinking Fund, provided from the economic rent of the land." (*Nothing is said as to the number of years' purchase.*)

"These Land Bonds," the report claims, "would in no sense increase the real debt of the State," as they would be met out of the increasing value of the land; so it is clearly the intention of the report that the tenants of the nationalized holdings are to provide the whole of the price of getting rid of our "outworn land system."

One would hardly have expected the Labour Party to conceive, as its first duty towards the working cultivator, the release of the landlord from the trouble and expense of management, and the providing him with a State-guaranteed fixed income at the cost of his former tenants.

But whatever the intention may be, it is not likely to be fulfilled. The events and legislation of the last 10 or 12 years have inflated the agricultural land values which the report proposes to buy on State guarantee. Unless the proposed Land Courts follow the landlords' example by charging monopoly rents and raising the rents on the State tenants' improvements there will be no "increasing value of land" for perhaps a long time. If the Courts fix "fair rents," there will be a deficit which the State will have to make up; and, anyway, we have been led to believe that, in the opinion of the Labour Party, the "economic rent" belongs to the people.

The tenants of these "nationalized" lands, thus expensively released from landlord control, are to be immediately subjected to the control of a huge bureaucracy. The proposals for this enormous addition to an already overgrown Civil Service are produced, one by one, under the most various headings, on page after page of the report. County Agricultural Committees are to be set up, the out-of-pocket expenses and loss of wages incurred by their members in attending meetings being "met out of public funds" (p. 7). These will work through a number of Sub-Committees dealing respectively with lettings, equipment, the proper use of land, the collection of rents and dues, agricultural education, livestock, fertilizers and feeding stuffs, transport and marketing (p. 7) and the "control of game."

The same Committees are also to make "all financial provisions" for the supply of "long term credits for the permanent improvement or equipment of farms" (p. 28).

The labourer's wages are to be fixed by Local Wages Committees subject to revision by a Central Wages

Board, and the Government and various local authorities will continue to deal with his housing.

In addition an Import Board, presided over by a Minister, is to control "the purchasing, transporting and distributing in bulk the whole import of wheat" (p. 21) and other cereals, including barley and malting and brewing (p. 25); and the milling industry is to be nationalized. The "local authorities" are to "control or organize the baking and price of bread" (p. 23) under the direction of the Central Food Council.

Another Imports Board is to have similar powers over the whole meat supply, with the "local authorities" again organizing distribution and fixing retail prices. The wholesale distribution of milk is to be nationalized (p. 24), and the distribution of fruit and vegetables controlled by the State (p. 25).

Over the County Committees there will be a "National Agricultural Commission" of experts, presided over by the Minister of Agriculture. The powers of these experts are set out at length (pp. 7, 8); and, side by side with the County Committees, there are to be County Land Courts to "fix rents alike for privately and publicly owned holdings" with a special Appeal Tribunal to revise their decisions (p. 7).

The cost of all these organizations, with their office staffs and horde of inspectors and, of course, "advisory Committees," and "inquiries," will necessarily make a heavy addition to the already colossal burden of taxation and rating. If this scheme is intended, as it obviously is, to win the farmers' votes for the Labour Party, it is fore-doomed to failure, even though the farmer is promised security in the possession of his holding—provided that the various Committees, etc., are satisfied with his methods of farming. How long will it take the cultivator to discover that what little freedom the old landlord left him has been taken away by the new bureaucracy?

The framers of this scheme state that:—

The object of the Labour movement is to secure the fullest possible use of land for the community by the most economical and effective means. . . . If we are to increase our home supply of food every obstacle to good cultivation must be removed, and every facility which it is within the power of the State to offer must be provided for better farming (p. 8).

The policy which the Labour movement is to be asked to accept is not in the least likely to realize this object: It is, as we have seen, far from "economical," and our long experience of Government management, national and local, holds out no hope of its being "effective."

Moreover, in spite of the apparent completeness of its survey of the agricultural problem, the report entirely ignores one of the most general and most generally recognized "obstacles to good cultivation." Even such Tory landlords as the Duke of Bedford and Lord Bledisloe see in the present rating system a great and outstanding "obstacle to good cultivation." They

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have had experience of it. The Labour Party pledged itself to the Taxation and Rating of Land Values as recently as at its last annual conference (Liverpool, 1925), and advocated it "primarily as a means of (1) collecting the economic rent for the community; (2) deflating land values, and so cheapening land; (3) promoting the most profitable use of land; and (4) facilitating the acquisition of land by public authorities." All these considerations are fundamental to the problem which the concocters of the new policy had to consider, but they are all completely ignored. The economic rent of the "nationalized" farms is to furnish compensation for landlords. There is not a word of reference to the hostile tariff against the good use of land which we call local rates. The very few and casual references to rates in the report clearly imply the continuance of the existing system.

The writers of the report admit (p. 5) that public improvements and State encouragement or assistance increase land values: "They all in part are in the nature of gratuitous subsidies to the partner who," in spite of the fact that he "invests neither brains nor energy in the business," is to be compensated. They must also know that land wholly withheld from use is not rated; that the artificial scarcity of land thus created, in the face of "the increasing competition for farms" (p. 8), restricts access to land and inflates its price, while the putting of land to good use, whether for food-growing, or for housing, or for the extraction of building material or coal or other minerals, is penalized by a heavy burden of rates; and that the better the land is used the heavier is the rate-burden. They ought to know that, if farm land is converted into fox-coverts, to the detriment of agriculture and poultry-farming, the sporting landlord can get his assessment reduced; but if waste land is made into fruit-gardens, or covered with labourers' cottages, or if a neglected farm is put into good heart, or dilapidated cottages are made habitable, the rates are increased, and often very largely increased.

The taxation and rating of land values and the unrating of improvements are as vital to the solution of the agricultural problem as they are to the economic troubles of our towns. So only can the two greatest "obstacles to good cultivation" and to good housing—dear land and high rates—be removed.

LABOUR'S AGRICULTURAL PROGRAMME

By the Rt. Hon. Col. Josiah P. Wedgwood, M.P.

(Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster in the late Labour Administration)

In the course of a letter to the *Manchester Guardian* of 19th October, Col. Wedgwood writes:—

"While the agricultural policies of the Labour and Liberal Parties differ in some respects, they agree in two cardinal points. They both involve an infinitude of bureaucratic inspection and direction; they both make land not more but less accessible to common people. The shutting off of man from nature's storehouse is measured by the price or rent asked of the man who, having no land, wants to use some. Neither Labour nor Liberal breaks down the fence; both lay themselves out to please and help those who at present have the right to use the land, and ignore those clamouring for a share on the other side of the fence.

"Both point to that magic word nationalization; both

fail to see that it is only a word, and that the nation are still outside the fence—landless and workless. *Beati possidentes*—the present tenant farmer is made secure in his sole right to use the agricultural land. His rents are fixed, his tenure secured, his investment of capital encouraged, his industry subsidized; he, truly, 'need fear nothing.' The nation may 'own' the land, but the nation is to part with the real ownership again in return for quit rents paid by the new and real owners. It is to meet this criticism that both Labour and Liberal devise their checks and inspection to try to ensure that these secure tenant farmers do better in future; to try to ensure that the 'bad' man makes way for a 'good' man; to try to find a corner where the new man may creep into the old machine; to try, above all, to stimulate and correct and even inspire the new real owners. Instead of cheap land and free land, with its inevitable expansion and weeding-out by law of nature, the State is to regulate and coerce and take the place of nature.

"It is, I suppose, realized now that the State is the reverse of freedom. But it is still almost heresy in the Labour or Liberal Party to say that the State is not the friend but the enemy of the worker; that the State maintains the existing system of exploitation and the existing vested interests. They say in the Liberal Party that the State maintains justice and protects the worker. They say in the Labour Party that it is only the State under a capitalist Government which denies his just rights to man and fails to protect the worker. Both still rely on their own make of State to do all. Neither yet can realize that the State is always the perfect machine of civilized society by which we 'slowly broaden down from precedent to precedent,' every precedent involving fresh direction of mankind, but no precedent ever allowing the right of man to use the earth in freedom and to govern himself.

"A great deal can always be said for dictatorship against democracy. This feature will be popular in all Parties. Only a few cranks will despair.

"I do not know that they need despair. Perhaps we have to go through this stage to see its folly; this is as good an example of 'State' as we are likely to get. Or perhaps there are already too many libertarians who have found out 'the State.' Or perhaps the machine will be more difficult to make than the projectors imagine. I have known so many statesmen who wished to direct others and increase the efficiency of the machine fail when it came to drafting the Bill."

The *Christian Science Monitor* (Boston), of 14th September, published an extensive notice of the International Conference in Copenhagen and reprinted a large portion of Charles O'Connor Hennessy's Presidential Address. The same issue of the paper gave publicity to the Municipal Conference convened by the Glasgow Corporation for 18th November.

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A. S., Wier, Holland, writes: "Please send me five more copies of the September *Land & Liberty*. Also I should like to be favoured with two copies of the July-August number. The article and the letter from the daughter of Tolstoi are of the greatest interest to us. We have put it in the Press throughout Holland."

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