

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

Colonel Josiah C. Wedgwood on Unemployment

(Extract from a speech in the House of Commons, 9th February, on the Labour Party Amendment to the Address.)

What is it that has stopped all strikes during the last six months? It is fear on the part of the workers of this country. They are afraid. There is a reign of terror in this country to-day. These people are afraid. What are they afraid of? They are afraid of losing their job, and joining the ranks of the unemployed. Every week, as Friday comes round, every man in the workshops is wondering, "Will the foreman give me my notice this week?" The fear of unemployment is the scourge of the worker. The fear of unemployment is the whip used by the capitalist system on the workers of this country. Therefore, I think it is hardly likely that the Government will do away with unemployment or go to the cause of unemployment. They and their predecessors have always done all they could to make this necessary unemployment decent, tolerable, or, at least, not too unpleasant to look at. You will keep their heads above water by insuring them—largely with their own money; but abolish unemployment? That would be too radical.

Hitherto the best effort of this Government, whenever unemployment has been discussed, has been to find insurance benefit for the unemployed. They have even gone so far as to institute a poll-tax in this country upon all people who are employed, even though they are employed only for two or three days a week, and to make them pay the money for those who are not so fortunate as to be employed. A poll-tax, which in the old days brought Wat Tyler on to the scene, is, apparently, accepted as the natural thing; but they have never gone into the question whether it is possible to provide useful productive work. You take £1 from the taxpayer, and therefore the taxpayer is not able to buy the goods which he wants; and that £1 which the taxpayer would spend in buying goods which he requires to have made by some one will be spent instead by the right hon. Gentleman—that is to say, the surplus, after his Department has been paid—on making work which is not so much needed.

What we require, therefore, is to see that any work that is done is useful productive work—not digging holes one day and filling them up the next. I observed rather the other day that the Corporation of Canterbury—an ecclesiastical city governed strictly on Coalition principles—are blessed with a corporation farm, and that they decided, in view of the amount of unemployment in the borough, to dig up their farm with spades instead of using ploughs. That is one way of making work, but it does not solve the problem in the least. It merely creates more unemployment than you get rid of.

What we have to confine ourselves to, if we really want to solve the problem of unemployment, is the increase of useful productive work to which we draw attention in this Amendment. What is useful productive work? It is any sort of useful work which plays a part in the conversion of land and raw materials into finished articles where you want them and when you want them—I include the retail and distributing trades. For instance, in the trade with which my name is associated—and I wish my cash was—useful productive work converts the raw clay from Cornwall and Devon to cups and saucers on your tea-table, and the very best cups and saucers they are too.

Useful productive work converts agricultural land into ham sandwiches. It converts Thirlmere into Manchester drinking water. It converts the raw coal and iron under ground into bicycles or locomotives. Those are all examples of useful productive work. They all consist in the conversion of land and raw materials into finished articles. They all begin by the application of labour to land. If the work you want to increase depends in the first place upon the application of labour to land there is one perfectly simple way of increasing that work that we want to increase. That is to make it easier for labour to apply itself to the land. There at present, on one side of a brick wall, is the man able, anxious and willing to work, and on the other side of the wall is the raw material with which alone you can start work. In between there is that wall, and the two right hon. Gentlemen there keep on piling that wall higher and higher so as to prevent the man from getting work. We know the way to get work. Break that wall down. Make it easy for the primary trades—the building trade, the mining and quarrying trade, the agricultural trade—to get at their raw materials and they in turn will call upon the services of all the other workers in the community to complete the processes of manufacture which they have begun.

The right hon. Gentleman who is taking notes now knows as well as I know that if to-morrow he could break the land monopoly, if to-morrow he would merely introduce a change in the basis of rating which would knock the bottom out of the land market, he would do more for unemployment than all the doles the other right hon. Gentleman will ever screw out of the Treasury from now to Kingdom come. He will not do it because it would hit his friends. He will not do it because if you find work for the unemployed, or better still, if the unemployed can find work for themselves, the capitalist system, upon which he thrives, will go under and cheap labour, sweated labour, slave labour will cease to exist.

QUESTIONS IN PARLIAMENT

14th February

HOUSING SCHEMES

Sir A. MOND informed Mr. Betterton that the number of houses (in England and Wales) completed by local authorities and private builders up to the 1st February was 111,833. In addition, 3,174 other dwellings had been provided by the conversion of houses into flats, or by the conversion of huts and hostels. The number of houses in course of erection was 79,208.

Mr. MUNRO informed Sir D. Maclean that on 31st December last the Scottish Board of Health had approved tenders for the erection by local authorities and public utility societies in Scotland of 21,344 houses, and 5,272 of these had been completed, 4,963 had been occupied, 11,849 were in course of erection, and 4,223 were not commenced. In addition, 3,167 certificates of approval of houses under the private builders' subsidy scheme had been issued, and 1,221 of these houses had been completed.

16th February

RENT OF SMALL HOLDINGS

Mr. G. EDWARDS asked the Minister of Agriculture if he had received a request from the Norfolk Smallholdings Committee for permission to at once make a reduction in the rents of the smallholders to save them from absolute ruin.

Sir A. BOSCAWEN replied he had received copy of the resolution, and it would be necessary to make inquiries before he could decide what action, if any, he would take.

Mr. T. GRIFFITHS asked the Minister of Agriculture whether he has received a petition from the Bournemouth and District Smallholdings and Allotment Society protesting against the high rents charged for holdings; whether he is aware that, prior to the purchase of the land by the county council, the society rented the land at 35s. per acre, and now the average rent is £4 per acre; that this rent is vastly above the value of the land and that the rent paid by farmers for adjoining farms is still only 30s. per acre.

Sir A. BOSCAWEN said he had received the petition. The rents were revised a year ago. "It was not to be expected that the rents for small holdings should be at the same figure paid by farmers for their land, as small holdings invariably command a high rent per acre."

[The truth is that landowners always charge a higher price for land for small-holdings.—ED. LAND & LIBERTY.]

21st February

SMALLHOLDERS (Scotland)

Mr. MUNRO informed Major Mackenzie Wood that the numbers of applicants for smallholdings settled by the Board of Agriculture for Scotland in the years 1919, 1920 and 1921, were 396, 317 and 722 respectively. The number of applications outstanding at present was 11,463 comprising 6,857 for new holdings and 4,606 for enlargements.

22nd February

COST OF LAND SETTLEMENT

Sir A. BOSCAWEN informed Sir C. Kinloch-Cooke that the present total capital commitments of county councils and councils of county boroughs, for the purpose of the Land Settlement Scheme in England and Wales, was estimated at £15,466,992. Since 20th December, 1918, the applicants that were provided with holdings numbered 17,275 and a further 2770 would be settled on land already acquired. The average annual loss per holding would be £28 16s. The average capital cost per settler was £824.

On 16th January last the approved applicants not yet provided with holdings numbered 9,413 and in addition 2,284 applicants were awaiting interview or their applications were standing over.

UNEMPLOYMENT

Dr. MACNAMARA informed Capt. Bagley that the number of persons in the United Kingdom drawing unemployment benefit was approximately 2,087,000, of whom 1,800,000 were wholly unemployed, and 287,000 were on short time. Of this total of 2,087,000, about 689,900 were also drawing grants in respect of dependents, covering about 619,000 wives and housekeepers (or invalided husbands), and about 1,023,000 children.

THE STATE AS JERRY BUILDER

Mr. Alfred T. DAVIES asked Sir J. Gilmour, as representing the First Commissioner of Works, whether he was aware that the ceilings in 28 newly-erected houses under the office of works at Wragley Road, Lincoln, had recently been condemned, and whether the tenants had to remove while the repairs were being done.

Sir J. GILMOUR replied that the answer was in the affirmative, but the number of houses affected was 22, not 28. The First Commissioner was not aware that any compensation was payable.