

## COL JOSIAH C. WEDGWOOD ON UNEMPLOYMENT

*Speaking in the Debate on the Address, House of Commons, 15th November, the Rt Hon Col Josiah C. Wedgwood, M.P., said :*

During two days of this Debate every speaker has been asking the Government to organize, control and subsidize the export trade, the import trade, bacon, oats, the unemployed, the employed, housing, and so on. In fact, the Debate has resolved itself into a universal invitation to the Government to do something—for Heaven's sake, do something.

All that has been talked about and complained of to-day is due to poverty. To what is poverty due? It is due to unemployment and to nothing else—compulsory unemployment. There was once a man called Karl Marx who laid down what he called "the iron law of wages," and according to him it is this: that so long as there are two men after one job and those two men have no alternative between getting that job or starving on the dole, so long as these two men all unwittingly are engaged in undercutting each other's wages, wages will inevitably tend to sink to subsistence level.

Can we break this iron law? I would not be in politics if I did not believe that the iron law could be broken.

Let me give an experience of my own. It was after that picnic in South Africa which we used to call a war before we appreciated what a war really was. I stopped on in that country as Resident Magistrate of a district in the Transvaal about the size of Yorkshire, or perhaps the size and population of Ross and Cromarty. I was the absolute ruler of that district. I was head of the judiciary, head of the executive, head of the police, and I was even head of the Church. I was faced there with the old familiar unemployment problem. Men took their discharge, particularly from the irregular corps after the war, thinking that South Africa would be a better country to stop in than England. And they came into my town of Ermelo looking for work. There was no Poor Law in South Africa and there was no dole either. If you cannot get work in South Africa you go to gaol. By the mercy of Providence I ruled in a province where they had blown up the gaol.

Fortunately, all round this town in South Africa—the early Boers having more sense than our ancestors—there were large areas of public lands. Around the town of Ermelo there were 7,000 acres of town land, public land, and on this town land there was an open coal seam—you did not have to go down a shaft, you picked it out of the hill side—and also a disused brick-field. I said to these ex-service men: "As long as I rule here you can have an acre each of this town land; you can get coal out of the coal seam and make bricks in the brick-field, and nobody will charge you any nonsense in the way of rents, rates or royalties. Carry on the good work." They soon got barbed wire from the block-house line and erected fences, and they solved their housing problem for themselves by biscuit tins and corrugated iron, and they borrowed picks and shovels after dark. You know what ex-service men are.

I did not allow ex-service men only to go on to the town land. I said, "The more the merrier. Let them all come." Anybody in Ermelo could go and work on the town land for himself and get for himself the full reward of his labour. He was not robbed by anyone. That was not the end of it. Shortly afterwards I had a deputation from the builders and manufacturers in the town of Ermelo, who came with long faces and said: "Captain Wedgwood, how can you expect us to make this a land fit for heroes to live in; how can you

expect us to reconstruct civilization here in Ermelo when the wages of unskilled labour are £1 a day and the rascals will not do anything for it?" What had happened? Every working man in that town could look his employer between the eyes and say: "If you do not like to pay me the wages I want for the job I will go and work for myself on the town land and I will not work for less for you than I can get working for myself in freedom." That was a long time ago, but it is a small example which everyone might apply to-day.

What is it we want to put an end to? Compulsory unemployment. Let us be quite certain that what we want is useful, not useless work. I do not believe in digging up fields with spades instead of ploughing them. We want useful productive work, and opportunities for useful productive work. What is useful productive work? It consists always in the conversion of land and raw materials into finished articles. There is no form of useful productive work that does not take some part in the conversion of land and raw materials into what we want to use—goods; and if the primary trades, such as building, agriculture, mining and quarrying trades, are allowed to get their raw materials and start the job, they will pass on the job, after they have done their bit, to all other trades in the community to complete the processes of manufacture and to distribute the goods; but if the primary trades which deal with the land and nature are robbed of their opportunity of starting work, then all the other trades in the community will suffer from unemployment in due course. Unemployment, as I have always maintained, is essentially a land question. Break down the land monopoly. See that land which is not used is made available for the use of all. If land is not used to its best capacity, and if somebody else will make it more productive, see that he has a chance of doing so.

I wish I could make the House see the position as clearly as I see it. On one side of a wall are men able, anxious and willing to work and to employ others, and on the other side of the wall is the raw material with which alone they can start work. Between them is this wall, a wall built up during the centuries by landlord and capitalist rule, a wall built up in order to keep people idle, because the more people there are compulsorily unemployed, the lower will be the wages they need pay to those whom they employ. Compulsory unemployment is the key of the capitalist power to exploit the workers. What I ask the House to do—it is no good asking the Government—what I ask my colleagues to agree with me is the right thing to do, is to break down that wall, to make land cheaper, to break down the price of land and to see that land which is not used shall be open to all men to use.

This can be done simply, either by a general tax on all land values or by allowing the local authorities to levy rates on land values. One of the things which the London County Council are bringing before the House at this time is the permission to allow them to levy their rates on the basis of land value without taking into account in the least the house on the land or the use to which the land is put. Tackle the problem in that way, and what will happen? People holding land idle will not hold it so against the pressure of rates. They will be bound to throw it on to the market, and so the price of land in the market everywhere will fall. If you want the unemployed to get work, if you want that wall to be lowered, you must face the fact that the only way of doing it is by making the land cheap so that the people who want to use it can get on with the job.