

Dr. A. R. Wallace on Unemployment.

WITH every inclination to accord to Dr. Wallace the respect which is due to so distinguished a scientist it is impossible to congratulate him upon this essay of his in social politics.* Indeed, it is difficult to take it seriously at all, and one would gladly avoid making the attempt. But in his letter published in *THE NEW AGE* of January 14 Dr. Wallace specially requested that his proposals should be criticised in these columns, and his request is the sole explanation for the appearance of this article.

Dr. Wallace does not profess to be the originator of the scheme which he advocates. He writes this pamphlet merely to call attention to a hitherto neglected work upon poverty and unemployment written by Herbert V. Mills and published about twenty years ago. It does not seem very surprising that the book has been neglected, since, to judge from Dr. Wallace's account of it, it must have been several decades out of date when it was first published.

The scheme has, however, the merit of simplicity, a quality which more modern treatises upon the subject certainly cannot boast. It is easily described. Each Local Authority is to purchase 2,000 acres or more of land and to provide upon it suitable houses to accommodate 4,000 or 5,000 of the unemployed, together with sufficient tools, machines, and buildings to provide the whole community with the necessaries of life. All such necessaries are to be produced within the boundaries of the colony so that it may be entirely self-supporting. It would grow its own wheat and its own flax, weave its own wool, make its own clothes, and its own paper and drain pipes. It would even produce its own sugar from home-grown beet-root. When its home-reared sheep and cattle had passed through the butcher's hands, there would be an ample supply of skins to provide employment for "tanners, curriers, saddlers, shoemakers, etc." Whilst "the bones and horns might be used to make handles of domestic cutlery and for old-fashioned but useful lanthorns." Nothing would be wasted, not even "the refuse fat," which "would be made into soap for the use of the community." The power necessary for the various kinds of machinery, for electric light, and for cooking and heating purposes would be provided "by water or wind mills (or both)." No money would be paid, but every worker would receive an "abundance" of good food, fuel, clothing, etc., from the common stock. Finally the organisation of the whole community would be in the hands of a "despotic" director, whose rule would continue until the inhabitants were sufficiently trained to be trusted with self-government. Dr. Wallace points out that the selection of suitable directors would be of vital importance, and suggests that such a post "would be congenial to many of our broad-minded clergy," also "to such sympathetic writers about the poor as Mr. Whiteing and Mr. Zangwill."

This brief outline will, I hope, convey to the reader something of the spirit as well as the letter of Dr. Wallace's proposals. The difficulty is to know where to begin to criticise them. Dr. Wallace has refused in advance to accept the criticism that his scheme "would

* "The Remedy for Unemployment." By A. R. Wallace, O.M., F.R.S. "Pass on Pamphlets," No. 8. (Clarion Press. id.)

not work" unless the critic is prepared to give exact details as to where it has been tried and failed under the conditions which Mr. Mills and he have laid down. Certainly I am not prepared to do that. I do not suppose it ever has been tried, and I feel sure that it never will be. It is unthinkable that such closely "protected" colonies should ever be set up in the midst of a great industrial community like ours; and close protection, to prevent competition from outside industries, is the most vital feature of the whole scheme. Nothing is to be imported which can be produced inside the colony, and only one-fifth at most of the produce of the colony is to be exported in exchange for such necessities as tea and coal and iron.

The fiscal problem is thus raised in its most elementary and acute form. Suppose, after the colony has become "self-governing," it finds that it can obtain cheaper bread by using all its land for grazing purposes and exchanging its surplus cattle for foreign-grown wheat. Or suppose it found (as it almost invariably would find) that it could obtain a very much cheaper supply of electric power by exchanging its surplus cotton goods (say) for current supplied from some large outside power works whose machinery was more efficient than windmills. Who would forbid the exchange? or enforce the prohibition? The Local Government Board? If so, where is the "self-government" gone? On the other hand, if the exchange were allowed, free competition with outside industries would quickly ensue, the economic basis of the whole scheme would be destroyed, and the colony would "go under"; for by hypothesis the colonies consist of the dregs of the industrial population, and could not be expected to hold their own with the outside world even if their moral and physical regeneration were such as to satisfy Dr. Wallace's most sanguine estimate.

This brings us to another great difficulty. Dr. Wallace hopefully asserts that "the 'unemployable' are in reality by no means numerous." The assertion is vague and apparently groundless. But even supposing Dr. Wallace were right, it remains a fact that on the one hand the majority of the unemployed who are to be absorbed by his scheme are unskilled industrial town-dwellers whilst on the other hand the colonies (if they are to be anything like self-supporting) will be almost entirely agricultural, and the mode of life in them will for a very long time be excessively primitive. How many of the original colonists would stay for a year? and what is to become of the deserters who we are told "could not again be admitted"?

Two examples of successful co-operative communities are cited by Dr. Wallace. One at Ralahine in Ireland, and the other at Frederiksoord in Holland. The first was composed of agricultural labourers, and the second (we are told by Mr. J. A. Hobson) costs the Dutch nation £23 per head per annum. Neither, therefore, is of much value.

Dr. Wallace further assures us that his scheme would make Old Age Pensions and workhouses unnecessary, since it would abolish pauperism altogether. How he reaches this conclusion he does not explain, and one is left to wonder how the widows, orphans, infirm, cripples, and insane, who constitute the mass of our existing paupers, are to be provided for when the poor rate is no more.

To be quite blunt, Dr. Wallace's scheme is no scheme at all. It not only does not solve the problem of unemployment, it does not even touch it. The two great causes which lie at the root of the problem, trade fluctuations and the casual labour system, are not so much as referred to. The proposals outlined only profess to deal with the permanently unemployed, who may be counted in tens of thousands; they offer nothing for the intermittently employed, who may be counted in millions. And our chief concern should surely be for the latter—to save them from the demoralisation of "the kerb," before it is too late. The 1,500,000 British wage-earners who were in work in 1907, are unemployed now, and will possibly be in work again by 1910, find no place in Dr. Wallace's scheme, and, therefore, even if it were sound to the limit of its pro-

fessions, it would still have no claim to the title of "The Remedy for Unemployment."

It is, indeed, difficult to understand how this pamphlet ever came to be written by such a man as Dr. Wallace. To say that its manner and method are utterly "unscientific" is to put the case mildly. Some light is thrown upon the point, however, by a sentence at the end, where the author informs us that his qualifications consist of "a considerable acquaintance with the literature of this subject." He has studied books—where the problem has not yet been even efficiently stated—instead of studying the unemployed. Perhaps that is why he wants them to make the bones and horns into "old-fashioned but useful lanterns."

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