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[p. 299a]

### ‘The Next Step to Socialism. Dr. A. R. Wallace’s Remedy for Unemployment.’

There are two great fields of service for Socialists to-day. The first is to go out in the highways and bye-ways, at street corners and in public parks, at monster demonstrations and at drawing-room meetings, and unceasingly preach the one hope of the workers. Everywhere the clarion note must be sounded that the present haphazard, chaotic conditions, where the few hold the means of life that are necessary for all, and use that privileged position for their own selfish profit at the expense of the crushed lives of the great mass of the people—that such a mad and wicked state of affairs must be replaced by a sane and ordered industrial system, controlled and owned by the whole people, and used to develop the life of every individual to its highest and best. We must first convince the people of the necessity for this change. That is the first field of service. And the second is this. Socialists must give their best thought and most careful consideration to the constructive side of their policy. We must be sure of our line of advance. Some plan of immediate procedure must be agreed upon.

What is to be the next great step? What shall be our concentration point? These questions are continually being asked. Thousands of people are convinced of the truth of the Socialist ideal, but are groping in the dark as far as practical issues are concerned. Their eyes have been opened as to the nature of the disease, they realise the cure, but they blindly seek the prescription.

I believe the greatest advance to Socialism lies in the solution of our greatest social evil. The present industrial system demands a surplus of labour. During the period of most marked national prosperity there is always a margin of unemployed men and women. Mr. Winston Churchill has admitted that this outcast community is essential to the upkeep of capitalism. The degradation of the man-in-the-gutter is necessary to the vulgar luxury of the West End. The profits and dividends of the rich are based on the suffering of starving families. If every unemployed man and woman were emigrated to Canada to-morrow, with all those dependent upon them, there would be thousands more unemployed within a week. As things are we cannot do without the unemployed.

But public opinion is quickly ripening, and urging the divine right of every man to demand work. The great majority of men cannot obtain the necessaries of life except by the sale of the power of their muscle and brain. Then if the community denies the right of men and women to demand opportunities to sell that power, it also denies their right to live. In other words it denies their right to be born at all. The unassailable logic of this argument is everywhere being realised. Work is seen to be the birthright of every human being, and the people are demanding some scheme by which the principle of the “right to work” shall be recognised by the State. In that demand the people are also crying for the death of our present industrial system.

How are we to respond to that call? The Labour Party introduced a Bill into the House of Commons which provided that local unemployment authorities should either find work for registered unemployed, or give maintenance for them and for those depending upon them. To me this measure has always seemed clumsy and unstatesmanlike. There would be no unity of action. Different authorities would commence

completely different schemes, and thus the whole country would be split up into isolated and chaotic attempts to solve the problem. Even if the work commenced were of national benefit, such as afforestation, reclamation of foreshores, roads, etc., only a mere fraction of the unemployed would be utilised by it, and when these schemes were completed the problem would be left exactly where it was when they were commenced. There are two essentials to any adequate proposals. First, unemployment is a national disease, and it must be dealt with from the national standpoint; second, the work given must be of a permanent character, and it must not interfere with ordinary trade.

There is only one method which will satisfy these needs. *The unemployed must be so organised that they shall produce for themselves the first necessities of life.* Thus both their immediate and permanent demands shall be met. Is this possible? Undoubtedly. Those who cannot find a place in our system of society as at present constituted should be grouped in co-operative, self-supporting colonies, where a proper proportion of those who have been engaged in the production of the different necessities of life might form a nucleus for the training of others for similar work. I was recently studying the returns of unemployed from the various trade unions of our land, and I was impressed by this one fact above all others—those figures show that just about the proportion of men and women are unemployed in the different trades as would be necessary for such a scheme as I have indicated.

This plan has been outlined in great detail by Mr. Herbert V. Mills in his work, "Poverty and the State of Work for the Unemployed" (Kegan Paul, Trench and Co. 1s. 1889); and Dr. Alfred Russel Wallace, O.M., F.R.S., has long advocated this solution of the unemployed problem. In his pamphlet, "The Remedy for Unemployment," published by the "Clarion," Dr. Wallace makes out what seems to be an unanswerable case, whilst Mr. John Richardson urges the same scheme in his booklet on "Work and Wealth for All."

It is beginning to be realised that unemployment cannot be remedied by setting those who are out of work to make or mend roads, chop firewood, or break stones, as has often been done in the past. Nor will matters be helped by putting the unemployed on schemes of work that will interfere with the open market. The only economic and scientific method of dealing with the problem is to organise the surplus of labour on a co-operative basis. Those who are now out of work and suffering from want of food, proper clothing, and adequate housing should be grouped in colonies so that they may supply each other with food, clothes, and dwellings. With the exception of raw cotton and tropical fruits the communities could be practically self-contained and self-supporting. With their labour properly organised the workers could produce far more wealth than they could possibly consume, so that there would be no difficulty in finding the small proportion that would be required to exchange for these necessities.

Land would in the first place be purchased in different parts of the country and be provided with the necessary plant and machinery for the accommodation of about 4,000 or 5,000 people. The workers would at once be absorbed in scores of different trades and occupations, all being employed in supplying directly the wants of the community of which each formed a part. Says Dr. Wallace:—

The wheat grown for food would employ millers, machinists, sack-makers, bakers, etc., the sheep and cattle, supplying the meat, milk, butter, and cheese for all, would also, by the intervention of tanners, curriers, saddlers, shoemakers, etc., supply all the leather goods; while the dairy outfit would require the work of tinmen and other skilled mechanics for the pans, pails, churns, presses, etc. The bones and horns might be used to make handles of domestic cutlery and for old-fashioned but useful lanthorns; perhaps

combs and brushes might also be made, while the refuse fat would be made into soap for the use of the community. Wherever suitable clay occurred bricks and tiles would be made, as well as drain pipes and coarse pottery for various domestic uses. Even unlimited sugar for a population of 5,000 might be produced from home-grown beet-root with suitable pressing, boiling, and refining machinery. The wool of the sheep would be cleaned, spun, and woven into all the chief forms of clothing and household articles required; while flax grown, prepared, spun, and woven at home would supply the needful under-clothing and linen of various kinds. Artificers in wood and iron would be occupied in the supply and repair of carts, wagons, ploughs, and the simpler agricultural machines; while water or wind mills (or both) would give the power for the various kinds of machinery, for electric light and power transmission, and probably also for warming and cooking purposes.

All these various industries would require a considerable engineering plant and a body of trained workers, while a staff of joiners, cabinet-makers, plumbers, painters, and paper-makers, and, in smaller numbers, compositors, printers, and bookbinders, with storekeepers, clerks, and porters, would find constant occasional work; and there would be comparatively few workers of any kind who would not be able to learn some one or other of these occupations, even if their own special skill in some less familiar industry was not called for. And, besides all these, a considerable body of labourers would be wanted; and all adults as well as the older children would at times of pressure be called to assist in some of the varied forms of simple farm and garden work, such as hay-making, fruit-gathering and harvesting.

The effects of such a scheme as this upon the ordinary course of industry would be to create a social revolution. Apart from the fact that all the surplus labour would be swallowed up, it would mean that the standard of wages of the workers would be universally raised. If a firm desired to keep its employees it would at least have to treat them as well as the workers in the co-operative colonies fared, or else they would desert the capitalist firms and join the self-supporting settlements. Imagine the extraordinary change that would come over our industrial life. Sweating, starvation, bad housing, long hours, as well as the evil of unemployment would cease. Dr. Wallace does not claim too much when he says his scheme will abolish the hideous features of modern civilisation.

The cost of this policy is insignificant compared with the grandeur of the work it would accomplish. We have now about 1,500,000 persons unemployed. To provide the necessary land, plant, and machinery for such, a national credit (not cash) £80,000,000 would be required. This appears to be a large amount, but it is hardly more than twice the sum actually spent every year on our paupers and criminals. And these items would practically disappear from our budget with the extinction of poverty.

A. Fenner Brockway.

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*The Alfred Russel Wallace Page*, Charles H. Smith, 2015.