

ZEALANDIA FELIX

Being a series of letters on Socialism and its relation to the Labour Problem, addressed to Tom Brown, a Wellington Workman.

[BY FABIAN BLACK.]

DEAR MR. BROWN.—The Labour problem has two distinct phases. The first is: the existence and steady increase of an unemployed class; the second is, the almost universal complaint made by the brain and manual labourers of all nations, of the insufficiency of the reward, or wages of labour. The latter is, of course, the effect of the former. No man can expect to get more than a bare subsistence wage, while hundreds of others are willing to take his place on the same terms. It is, therefore, very necessary for us to sweep away the conditions or the system which produce an unemployed class. While we are fighting for the unemployed we are fighting for ourselves.

Professor Thorold Rogers says:—

“There is no expedient beyond bringing about a scarcity of labour which will raise wages, and no special or local scarcity will raise general wages. If the persons who engage in a particular calling agree to limit their own numbers, they may perhaps raise their own wages; but they will do so only by driving a larger number of persons into other callings, and so lowering the wages in other callings.”

He is of course speaking of labour under our present system, where men are compelled to sell it as a marketable commodity.

Now, Socialism is the only method which will successfully solve the unemployed question and the wages question. What is Socialism? you ask. “It is the extension to industry and economics of the free self-governing principles recognised in democracy.” It means that the people shall control and direct their own industry. It means that the instruments of production, distribution, and exchange shall belong to the people collectively. It means that food, clothing, and all the necessaries of life shall be produced because they are wanted for all, and not merely to afford profit to those who do not work. Socialism asserts the right of every man to live by work, and denies the right of any to live without it. “Unless a man work, neither shall he eat,” is one of its most fundamental principles. Who is to direct and organise all this? you ask. Why, the State. But you say—Will not the State be as hard a master as the private capitalist? The State, Tom, is the people themselves. The ministers, members, officials, and directors are merely the servants of the people. The people have even now such power that they could make this country one of the happiest in the world, only, like Samson, they are blind. Years ago a certain French king said—“I am the State.” When the landlords of England ruled England they were the “State,” and now democracy rules New Zealand, the people are the State. Socialism means that the people would employ themselves, just as Democratic Government means that they govern themselves. But if they do not own their own land, their own machines and implements, and their own money, they cannot employ themselves. They can attain all these things without robbing anybody. But how is it to be brought about, you ask? Simply enough; through the ballot box. There is no necessity for bloodshed, riot, confiscation, or revolution. They have simply to make it understood that the State must employ those people whom private enterprise cannot employ, and to vote against any candidates who will not pledge themselves to carry this into effect; and in a very short time the State industries will be extended and new ones spring up. If they, at the next election, say we will not be dependent on the European or British money lender, but will have a National Currency of our own, there is nothing in the world can stop them. And the means of exchange will be nationalised. It will not be robbing the money-lender, it will be simply discontinuing to deal with him. We shall be merely exercising the “freedom of contract” so glibly talked about to half-starving people. The change will come

gradually, but it will come. The trend of economic change is moving rapidly in that direction. We who see it coming, and are trying to assist and hasten it, are not the motive power. In a community where every man was certain of employment at 8s. or 10s. per day, and where an opportunity of laying something by for old age existed, Socialism would not be heard of. Where every man can own his own little plot of ground and his own home, land nationalisation and single tax would find no voice. It is poverty, misery, helplessness, uncertainty of employment which impel these movements. It is these things which give rise to Socialism, first as a criticism and an enquiry into the economic conditions, and the system; then as an idea; and, finally, as a passion of such power and strength of conviction that it carries all before it, and becomes steadily realised, changing the old order for new.

The objections which are made to Socialism, which Socialists have to refute, are generally raised against a misconceived notion of what Socialism really is. People who have never studied the subject oppose it through ignorance. To begin with: thousands of people never think that our present state of civilisation can be improved on. They unconsciously accept it as the highest possible state. They look back and say “how much better off we are than previous generations”—which is open to argument. Every generation has no doubt thought that. Even Lord Macaulay expressed himself so. Indeed, there is little doubt that the cattle-raiding Highland chief and the feudal lord could not have imagined a state of society in which “money” not “arms” would “boss the show.” When he had the Jew imprisoned in the “deepest dungeon beneath the castle moat” (and drew a tooth out of his head each morning unless he parted some of his shakels) he could not have been persuaded that the time was coming when the descendants of the Jew would control nations simply by monopolising financial power. And the ancient economists could not see how slavery could be dispensed with. So many of us cannot see how wage-slavery and capitalism can be superseded by an improved state. The first error that many of our opponents run into is that Socialism involves a periodical sharing-out of property, and that those who were strong, capable, intelligent, and vigorous would have to share with the lazy, the idle, and the improvident. I will let that independent and impartial critic, Dr. Schaffle, reply to that. He says:—

“It implies collective ownership of the means of production; direct provision for the maintenance of public departments out of returns to collective labour instead of by taxation, distribution of the remaining wealth among individual producers in proportion to their work as private income and private property! It is then absolutely false to say that Socialism is the system of periodical redistribution of private possessions. That is absolute nonsense, and every page of a Socialistic journal rightly condemns such an account of the matter as the result of gross ignorance.”

Then, again they say, no matter how you reconstructed or improved society the same thing would happen again. In a short time a few would have all the wealth. The same argument may no doubt have been used when it was first proposed to restrain the physically strong man in the days of barbarism. For a time the strong man did oppress the physically weak, but numbers rebelled against him, passed laws, raised soldiers and police to control him. It is, therefore, likely that some dissentients said: “It is no good if you restrain him: the next strongest will prevail, might has always ruled, it will never be otherwise.” But it has not proved the case. Each successive power which has threatened the liberty of the community, has been