

THE WORKERS' DREADNOUGHT

For International Socialism.

Vol. V.—No. 23

SATURDAY, AUGUST 31st, 1918

Price Twopence.

THE EMBARGO. By J. T. Murphy.

An open letter to Skilled Workers

BROTHERS,—The extension of the "embargo" is suspended pending an inquiry. What "the inquiry" is going to effect I do not know; but we ought to proceed with an inquiry of our own. The embargo is what? The prevention of the employment of further skilled men at certain firms in order to give a drift to skilled labour in the direction of other firms. To achieve this an Order was issued by the Minister of Munitions.

WHY WAS THE ORDER POSTED?

Strange to relate, the Order was communicated to the workers. Had this not been done a crisis might not have developed at all. The workers would have gone to another firm, as they usually do when an employer ceases to want them, and it would have been some considerable time ere they discovered the move to be deliberate.

At first glance this generous disclosure of an Order for the direction of the commodity, labour through the channels of the labour market would appear to be one of those unique events which illustrate the "mutuality of interest" of employers and employees; but there is a fly in the ointment for, our Coventry comrades inform us that they were told by their capitalist "brothers" in industry: "This is *your* funeral, not ours." We are compelled, therefore, to look for another explanation of the incident. A little research into company reports and reconstruction publications will reveal the fact that many of the rank and file of the capitalist class, like the rank and file of the trade unions, object to executive control, and are ever "kicking against the pricks" of State interference. Seeing that the "mutual interest" explanation has fallen through, the accusing finger points to an old time trick of the employing class, namely, the use of the workers and their grievances to fight the battles of individual employers and groups of employers, while they enjoy "our funeral."

WHEN LABOUR IS SCARCE WAGES NATURALLY RISE, BUT EMBARGO PREVENTS WAGES RISING.

Now let us turn to the embargo. First of all it prevents the raising of wages through what is known as the normal action of the market. When labour is scarce, wages rise, and the effect of the shortage of 60,000 to 70,000 skilled men would naturally have been to induce employers who urgently wanted men to offer better terms in order to attract men from other employers. But there is a war on—and the Government being in need, as we are told, of munitions, &c., steps into the arena to help those who are short of labour.

ONLY THE MINIMUM IS GUARANTEED.

There is a guarantee that district rates shall be paid; hence it is asserted that wages are not lowered. This is very plausible, but the day-rate is the minimum which is guaranteed, and the existence of piece-work and bonus systems, &c., provides great scope for variations in earnings. The firms which offer the best conditions are usually well supplied. Thus the embargo coerces men into shops indirectly, without the corresponding return which the open market would have

brought to them under the stress of the shortage of labour. Again, the "mutuality of interest" theory breaks down and the employers reap the advantage of the interference.

EMPLOYERS WHO ARE SHORT OF LABOUR GET LABOUR; THOSE WHO HAVE LABOUR GET THE MEANS TO COERCE IT.

Those who are short of labour get their labour, and those who have their supply possess the weapon of coercion over their workmen. In the latter case it works as follows: "Well, if you are not satisfied you know you are at liberty to leave." The language is clear, the tone may be pleasant, the twinkle in the employer's eye may be merry, and the position of the worker appears cheerful. Actually, however, the worker has to choose between a worse employer and the Army. In these glorious days of "patriotism" even the man with a grievance grins and prefers to "endure the ills he has, &c."

EMBARGO AND LEAVING CERTIFICATES BOTH MEAN INDUSTRIAL CONSCRIPTION.

Extended far enough this coercion is undoubtedly a kind of Industrial Conscription. We sampled one kind of industrial conscription when the "leaving certificate" was in vogue. The difference between the leaving certificate scheme and the embargo scheme is as follows: The leaving certificate scheme was of a passive character and the embargo scheme is of an active character.

LEAVING CERTIFICATES CHECK, EMBARGO AFFECTS MOBILITY OF LABOUR.

The first was introduced and enforced to check the mobility of labour, its tendency to move in search of better jobs. The embargo is introduced to affect the mobility of labour, to coerce it into moving in the direction desired by the employing class

LEAVING CERTIFICATES IMMEDIATE, EMBARGO GRADUAL IN EFFECT.

The first was made general at once. The second is more indirect and will be fully achieved only after a considerable time. Nevertheless the coercion is there and of a very contemptible kind.

HUMAN BEINGS TREATED AS COMMODITIES.

The trouble arises because human beings are treated as commodities. On no previous occasion have the workers had their commodity status thrust so insultingly in their faces. "We have rationed butter, meat, sugar, and other commodities, therefore we must ration labour." The men were, and are, anxious to be treated as commodities in an open market with a shortage of labour, but are not prepared to be so treated when the commodities require controlling. We can't have it both ways.

STRIKERS AND FIGHTERS.

This confusion is no new thing. It is because we of the working class are *human* commodities that this confusion exists. It explains the difference in the attitude of the employing class

towards us when we apply for an advance in wages, and when we are going to win a war. In the first instance, our wages are our prices as commodities, and the employer does not like the price of his commodities to rise any more than we like the price of bread to go up. Hence when we strike, the employers view us as the "unruly mob," the "ignorant crowd led by youthful agitators." In the second instance we are the men and women of a great Empire, which the employing classes own and, as they do not want to lose it, and, in fact, may win some handsome prizes by fighting, we are viewed as heroes and heroines of a great race.

APPROVAL OF THE WAR IMPLIES RESPONSIBILITY TO PROSECUTE IT

There is a war on now and the workers of this country acquiesce in its prosecution. Such agreement implies responsibility, and when the governing body responsible for the conduct of the war makes certain demands upon them, they are faced with certain courses of action. They have either (a) to prove that the reasons advanced in support of the demands are not tenable; (b) to repudiate the prosecution of the war and accept responsibility for such a course; (c) to assent to the Government's demands; (d) to promise an alternative scheme for effecting the objects of the Government. No one has attempted to show that there is not a shortage of 60,000 to 70,000 skilled men and a need for more efficient distribution; nor have the workers adopted the other three courses. So we are in the midst of contradictions, an acceptance of the war policy and a refusal of responsibility. We have observed that a number of obnoxious consequences are involved in the embargo; but they do not justify an attitude of all round negation. So long as the human tragedy continues such an attitude is contemptible.

THE WAR V THE TRADE

But we are told the engineers are concerned for the future of their trade. So the issue changes to the war *versus* the trade. Let us face this issue squarely. The engineers along with the rest of the working class have acquiesced in the war and the existence of the War Cabinet to conduct it. That body has declared the war to be primary, the trade secondary. The workers have not objected. The engineers have agreed and acquiesced in the dilution of their trade by agreement. They have agreed to youths up to 23 years of age being taken for the army, all for the prosecution of the war. These are deadly facts to meet now with the plea of trade interests. So long as the war continues with the agreement of the workers the problems which arise will have to be accepted with all their consequences. That fact can never be forgotten.

THE CONTINUANCE OF THE WAR MEANS THE DEPRECIATION OF THE TRADE.

The only way in which this immediate problem can be solved is by the efficient distribution of the skilled labour which exists and the extension of dilution. The consequences are not to be forgotten either. They are the further depreciation of the trade and the possibility of a further withdrawal of skilled labour for the Army.

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THE EMBARGO

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THE PROBLEM IS TO REPLACE THE LABOUR OF 70,000 SKILLED MEN.

The problem in essence is this—to obtain the rate of production which would be possible if there existed another 60,000 or 70,000 skilled men.

THE MONOPOLY POSITION OF THE TRADE GONE.

This achieved, the further extension of the process is a natural development resulting from the call for more men for the Army, the return of the discharged men, and the increasing employment of women. The monopoly position of tradesmen has gone never to return. Rapidly passing prior to the war, the war has accelerated every process and the sectional struggles against the process are as futile as an attempt to restore the Middle Ages.

TRADE UNIONISM BELONGS TO A PAST ERA.

In conclusion I must now ask whether the time has not arrived when we should face the facts boldly and realise that we are members of the working class which can never have real freedom so long as we are prepared to maintain methods of organisation and points of view which weaken instead of strengthen our position? Trade unionism belongs to an era that is past. We of the working class have nothing to gain by retaining obsolete weapons. The struggle is the workers' struggle. The weapon to wage the struggle efficiently is a workers' organisation. Let us, therefore, turn our attention to the building of the Workers' Committee, which must put on one side the recognition of particular unions and regard all questions from a new standpoint. Ask not "How does this affect my trade?" but "How does this affect *my class*?" Along these lines we march to the "Workers' Republic."—Yours fraternally.