



## CHAPTER V

### *Farm Colonies: Laidon*

THE CAUSE OF LABOUR in Britain in its struggle toward political expression and representation has had its martyrs and heroes, also its due proportion of the stupid and time-serving. The struggle culminated in 1893 in the formation of the Independent Labour Party. Its avowed purpose was political action, apart from, and independent of, the two historic Parties. During the first ten years of its existence men and women of all classes were attracted to its banner, although its chief support was naturally found among the workers. Like all new movements, it was full of enthusiasm and courage. These qualities prompted it at times to enter into political campaigns that were beyond its strength, but it appeared to thrive on its defeats. Toward the end of 1900 it was seen by those who led this new political movement that, before any further real progress could be made, there must be allied to it the great force of organised labour as represented by the Trade Unions. This alliance was ultimately accomplished, and among those who made it

possible was J. Keir Hardie. Joseph was already acquainted with "Keir." He had visited us in our home at Philadelphia when, on the loss of his seat in West Ham in 1895, he came to America at the invitation of the American Labour Unions. Then too we first met Frank Smith who accompanied him. He remains closely associated with my life to this day, rare good man that he is, wholly unselfish. As the chief, and, for a long time, the only spokesman for Labour in the House of Commons, Keir Hardie displayed a devotion and a courage which will receive a greater appreciation in the future than even his colleagues are able at present to accord. These sterling qualities commended him to us and gave him a warm place in our hearts.

When this new political combination unexpectedly found its strength in 1906 with a relatively imposing representation in Parliament, and knew that henceforth it was a power in politics to be reckoned with, it faced the difficulty of reducing to a measurable programme of action the multitudinous discontents of the labour world, and somehow discovered enough agreement to present a solid front to political opponents. Unfortunately the independence of many of its representatives in the parliamentary area was to a large extent nullified by the adoption of orthodox political machinery. It became, as everyone knows, a "Party." Its representatives were disciplined to the

orders of a "whip", and the expression of their views duly arranged and officialised.

Joseph took a keen interest in the rise and progress of the Labour Party. He hoped it would justify its existence, growing up untrammelled by methods which shackled the orthodox parties. The early enthusiasm and success of this new political force gave promise that this would be so. He was encouraged when it appeared that its object was to attack fundamental evils, and not to follow the ordinary political labyrinth in which so many hopeful causes and striking personalities of the past have lost their way. The British House of Commons has too often proved a cemetery for effectively burying both causes and reputations. Although the Labour Party has not accomplished all that its founders and friends hoped for, Joseph believed that the salvation of the working classes would be found in their unitedly attacking the fundamental cause of poverty—which to him was represented by the monopoly of the land, which creates a privileged class.

The year 1903 in other ways brought hope and encouragement to Joseph. It was in this year that he came in contact with Mr. George Lansbury, and formed that partnership in social and political work which has left its enduring mark upon this generation. When they first met, Mr. Lansbury had not yet entered the House of Commons as a member; he, like

some others, had been content to pioneer and make it possible for the workers to secure direct representation. Mr. Lansbury entered politics because he felt he had a special work to perform, but it is doubtful if the dull fetters of membership of the House of Commons gave him a wider or more useful scope than he had enjoyed as a private citizen of the East End of London. He had become one of the most expert Poor Law Administrators in the country, having served a long period on the Poplar Board of Guardians, where he endeavoured to extend the scope of relief in a way to alter materially the limitations of the prevailing methods. As one of the Commissioners on the Reform of the Poor Law he gave his knowledge and experience to the framing of the Minority Report. He is one of the men, rare enough in or out of public life, who may be trusted to pursue, unflinchingly, the right as he sees it. We know that when, later, party loyalty came in conflict with his convictions he preferred the loss of his seat to a sacrifice of his principles.

Joseph was at this time busy advocating the establishment of small holdings and farm labour colonies, and, as usual, was ever on the look-out for men who were "doing things." One day he read a speech delivered by George Lansbury at a meeting of the Poplar Board. Its human note rang true and he immediately resolved to know the speaker. He tele-

phoned to the Clerk of the Board inquiring for Mr. Lansbury's address, and at once went to see him. Association with such a man was most helpful, and their connection and co-operation covered an uninterrupted period of eleven years. During his first visit to Mr. Lansbury at his home in Bow the conversation turned upon the utilisation of land as a mode of solving the problem of unemployment, a subject upon which Joseph found him intensely keen.

Mr. Lansbury was impressed by the business-like energy of his new friend and his desire to do rather than to talk. Hardly a day passed without their meeting. Mr. Lansbury's greatest concern was that in Poplar, one of the poorest of the East-End districts, the problem of unemployment had reached an acute point. The workhouse was inadequate for the accommodation of those who wished to enter, and great distress was being experienced by many others in the district who were not applying to the Guardians for relief. Joseph's sympathies were aroused and he urged on, and gave support to, a vigorous agitation. A procession of a thousand women was organised and marched from Mile End to Westminster. From among these, a deputation of working-class women was chosen to go to the House of Commons. It is an interesting fact that this was the first deputation of its kind to enter the House, and probably gave to the Suffragettes their idea of petitioning in the same man-

ner. On this occasion only working-class women waited upon Mr. Balfour and Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman. A number of members were interviewed the same afternoon. Nothing, however, was done by those in authority during that session.

But Mr. Fels was not content to wait. He proceeded to worry the Local Government Board, and persuaded Mr. Walter Long to sanction the use of some land he was ready to buy and lend to the Poplar Board of Guardians. This proposal was, of course, supported by Mr. Lansbury's vigorous agitation outside. About one hundred acres were bought at Laindon, and the first Farm Colony for the unemployed was established. It is noteworthy that in connection with this purchase some one of the Guardians disclosed the fact that the farm in question was to be secured, and in consequence the price was increased more than £500. The arrangement was that the farm should be let to the Poplar Guardians for the term of three years at the rent of one peppercorn, and that the Guardians should have the option of purchase at any time during their tenancy for the original price paid. Possession was taken in March, 1904, and one hundred able-bodied paupers were set to work. Temporary structures for dormitories, kitchen, laundry, and lavatory were added, and a reservoir for water supply was immediately built.

The Colony was visited by a large number of pub-

lic men and social reformers; among others, the Rt. Hon. Gerald W. Balfour—who succeeded Mr. Walter Long as President of the Local Government Board—Canon Barnett, Sir Horace Plunkett, Sir John Gorst, Sir William Mather, and Mr. Percy Alden. In addition to these, representatives from County Councils, Boards of Guardians, and other public local authorities went to investigate the experiment. Many newspaper correspondents also visited the Farm Colony, and thus the work became widely known. The prevailing idea that the class of people who find their way to the workhouse do so because they are either useless, or “work-shy”, was disproved by the report presented by the Farm Superintendent, in which he stated that 40 of the 100 men then employed would be acceptable as workers anywhere if he were the employer. A large number of the men were old soldiers of at least 10 years’ service, and all but one had stripes and medals; not one had a pension. In contrast with the degenerative restrictions of the workhouse, the men were given great freedom. Papers, books, and games were provided, and Joseph sent down a piano. The success of the Colony was immediately manifest to all except those who believed that the workhouse test was a foundation of the British Empire.

The policy accepted and made effective by the Poplar Board of Guardians seemed to Joseph to offer that combination of public authority and private en-

terprise which would solve his problem. He therefore proceeded with the acquisition of farm properties and at the same time approached the various metropolitan Boards of Guardians and extended his offer generally to all parts of the kingdom. At first these bodies seemed eager and many of them invited him to attend and explain the terms of his offer. Public bodies are as acquisitive as individuals, and the glory of their administrative achievement is measured inversely to the scale of expense. No amelioration of the lot of the poor is creditable if it increases the rate. Public feeling shudders at starvation but does not in the least mind permanent destitution.

As a result of vigorous agitation the country was at last so aroused that an investigation into the working of the Poor Law had to be made. A Royal Commission was set up, upon which Mr. George Lansbury was appointed a member. A long and laborious enquiry followed, and investigations—so loved by those who, never poor themselves, are unable to understand why it is that others are poor—were made.

The conclusions arrived at by the majority of the Commissioners did not suggest any drastic reform; did not propose to touch fundamental causes; they, at best, simply perpetuated the policy of relief rather than aimed at the prevention of poverty. Needless to say, Mr. Lansbury did not share in these conclusions. He, together with Mrs. Sidney Webb, the Rev. Rus-



sell Wakefield—who afterwards became Bishop of Birmingham—and Mr. F. Chandler, presented a "Minority Report", which proposed the complete break-up of the Poor Law system, and the setting up of machinery for the purpose of preventing destitution arising from bad social conditions.

The close and local responsibility of guardians to ratepayers, with its necessary consequence in the kind of personnel thus selected, explains the reception which Joseph met with in his efforts to help the poor to help themselves. There was also another explanation. In Britain charity is understood, and business is understood, but few appear to understand that the two can in any way be combined. The provision of land to form labour colonies seemed at first glance the act of the amiable philanthropist to be fully exploited and rewarded with the usual fatuous vote of thanks. The moment the conditions were disclosed, the whole transaction appeared to discerning guardians as a wolf in sheep's clothing, business parading as philanthropy. Here was Mr. Fels, a sharp business man, an American and a Jew, trying to extricate himself from bad land deals at the public expense, or else proposing to seize the three years' improvement which the colony might give to the land. Joseph, of course, had no desire for the cheap glory of the philanthropist which comes of relieving others of work and responsibility; his desire was to facilitate a new *modus operandi* in

dealing with unemployment. He was willing to risk losses to achieve his object, but he saw, as always, that to be permanently beneficial a plan must stand on its own feet and not live on the passing bounty of any individual.