

A LETTER TO THE LABOUR PARTY.

(BY DEAN KITCHIN.)

A small pamphlet entitled "A Letter to the Labour Party," by Dean Kitchin, has recently been published by Mr. Arthur C. Fifield (price 3d.)

The essence of the Dean's message is a plea for better education of the working classes, whereby he urges they will be enabled to take a broader and less selfish view of politics and social questions.

There is much in the pamphlet with which all true social reformers will greatly sympathise, but like so many of its kind, it fails to touch upon the one great reform which must precede all others.

We give below copy of a letter sent to Dean Kitchin by Mr. C. E. Crompton, together with the Dean's reply.

A REPLY TO DEAN KITCHIN.

By CHARLES E. CROMPTON.

(Author of "Am I a Protectionist or a Free Trader?")

I.

DEAR SIR,—I have been reading with great interest your letter to the Labour Party, and as one deeply interested in the question, I am taking the liberty of addressing you on the subject.

I understand that the present social position appears to you to be very unsatisfactory, and your suggestion for improving it consists in trying to get the Labour Party to rightly understand the true direction in which their interests lie. In order that they may do this, you suggest that our present system of education must be greatly improved, and that, when this is accomplished, you believe it will be possible for the mass of the people to work out their own salvation.

You rightly point out how restless is the present age, how home questions press themselves more and more upon us, how reluctant we all are to study in earnest the problem of our own well-being, how suspicious we are of the various palliatives offered us, how education and the Universities are affording no help, how indifferent is labour to education, how inefficient is education itself, and you conclude by pointing out how bitter is the present-day competition and how it seems to be leading civilization to degeneracy and untold evils.

Now in all this I quite agree with you, but I cannot help thinking there is really a cause for this unhappy state of affairs, which you do not perceive, or at least you do not mention. It is to draw your attention to this point that I am taking the liberty of writing to you.

Whilst I believe that better education and general enlightenment will result in better social conditions, I maintain that there is one social condition now so wrong, that until it is put right, no other reforms, either in education or anything else can avail.

The impression your letter gives me is that you believe reform is possible, but you give no indication as to what direction it should take, but merely hint that we shall find it out when we have become more educated.

But surely those of us who have had the good fortune to receive a good education cannot remain idle and wait for others to reach our own standard of enlightenment before we take action. As you point out there are plenty of people who "want nothing save the pleasure of seeing a better and merrier England," and I have no doubt you will agree to the substitution of the word "world" in the place of "England."

Now for a long time the so called "Labour Problem" has interested and puzzled me, the question why men so often can find no work to do, why wages are so low, and why trade rises and falls in the way it does.

Looked at from a purely academic point of view the question is interesting enough, but when one realises that this question of employment and the condition of trade is affecting the most primary condition of nine-tenths of our fellow-men, then the interest becomes absorbing and haunts one until some solution is found.

The fact that most are indifferent to it, that many regard any suggestion put forward with suspicion is of small consequence compared with the question itself. The question is presenting itself to all those who have to earn their livelihood by means of work, not only to those commonly associated with the "Labour Party" *i.e.*, manual workers and trade unionists, but clerks, tradesmen, managers, and professional men generally. And the problem is this; what is the primary cause affecting the opportunities to labour, and what determines the remuneration such labour shall receive?

In a right understanding of those points the solution can alone be found.

II.

Now there are two facts which, I think, all will agree, stand out in a most glaring way at the present time, firstly, that the population of this country has increased enormously during the last fifty years, and secondly, that the use of labour-saving machinery has increased even more so.

Have these two facts anything to do with the difficulty of men getting employment, and do they in any way affect the wages which workers get? A great many people apparently hold that they do, in fact that they constitute the principal cause of the present lack of employment and consequent distress. In holding this belief they seem to me to get very far from the truth.

The complaint one so often hears, the problem with which the Labour leaders imagine they have to deal, is, how can "work" be found for an ever increasing population in the face of labour-saving machinery and the power of capital?

The whole misconception appears to me to come from an unnatural importance attributed to "work." The idea in the minds of the Labour leaders seems to be that by means of "work" wages are to be obtained from Capital, or some other illusory source, the exact nature of which they have no very clear ideas. And with this notion in their minds they have come to believe that "work" is in itself the important thing, the end to seek for.

Now the true view of work is I believe something quite different; it is in fact the obtaining from nature the various requirements of mankind.

The various things which man requires can only come from nature, and the operation of obtaining them is work or labour. Man's requirements are almost infinite, and so long as his wants are unsatisfied there should be no reason why he should not find work to do.

There is only one thing that can prevent men capable of work from working, and that is to prevent them by unjust laws.

If the satisfaction of human wants is the object of labour everything that tends to make this labour more effective and less irksome should be for the common good. The greater should be the amount of wealth produced, and greater the general prosperity.

But Labour leaders hold that general prosperity does not come from the use of labour-saving appliances, and the ever-increasing population seems to them to decrease the opportunities of the individual to labour. And they endeavour to arrange things so that each worker shall produce as little as possible, and at the same time they oppose as hard as they can every improvement in machinery or manufacture.

These Labour leaders imagine that only a limited demand for labour is possible, and they try to bring it the greatest return by opposing labour-saving appliances, and curtailing as far as possible the number of men who shall work at any given trade.

And there are thousands of people homeless, without clothes, and starving!

If the satisfaction of human wants is the object of labour, why do not these unfortunate people set to work and produce what they require—food, clothing, and shelter? And the answer one always gets is that trade is bad, that workers are not wanted, that the population is too great, that there is no opportunity or opening for labour.

But this answer when examined is far from satisfactory. If one thinks of human life long, long ago, all men must have been in this same homeless, starving state, but some how or other they must have overcome their difficulties, or else the race would long since have died out.

The men of long ago hunted for their food, raised crops, and lived in caves or rude huts. By their labour they kept themselves alive and nature answered to their call.

Then why do not the people of to-day, situated in the same way as their hungry ancestors, do likewise.

The only answer one can think of is that circumstances have changed. Yes circumstances have changed, but it is man that has changed them, not nature.

Human wants are unsatisfied because the opportunities to satisfy them are curtailed by unjust and cruel laws, as I will endeavour to show.

III.

If there is one thing of which all British people are justly proud it is that they live under the sacred flag of freedom, under which every man is free to do what he likes provided he does not inflict injury on his neighbours or fellow-men.

This principle, dear to the heart of every British man, should (one would think) apply with strongest force to the opportunity of every individual to keep himself alive.

Now it is this right of every free man which is being denied to most people in all civilised countries. It arises from a strange misconception about the "sacred rights of property" which has unconsciously grown upon us through long generations.

So slowly but surely has this misconception taken hold of us that it is now very difficult to realise its enormity, and not recognising it we have got ourselves into difficulties from which there seems no escape.

And the misconception consists in this: namely, that the right of private property is being recognised, where morally no such right can or ever did exist. I mean the private property in land.

Our present laws permit private individuals to hold as their own the fundamental source from which alone mankind can obtain the means of livelihood. The ownership of land by private individuals confers upon them the power to levy toll upon all those who live upon or utilise their land. And as land is required for the most primitive as well as for the most complicated phases of human life and industry, it follows that under our present system the opportunity to labour is held by owners of land to the disadvantage of the rest of mankind.

Here, in Great Britain, is a toiling mass of workers, busily employed in producing wealth in quantities undreamt of by people of fifty years ago.

And what is the result of all this toil, all this production of wealth? Are those who produce it rolling in wealth and luxury?

By no means. The majority are very very poor, some, a great many, are on the point of starvation though they work for 13 hours a day, and many cannot even get the opportunity to do this.

Then who is benefitting by the production of all this wealth? The labour leaders say it is capital.

But it is not so. Capital is very nearly as badly off as labour. There are thousands of unfortunate persons, widows and orphans, whose precious savings and investments bring them little or no return. Any person who has ever had the opportunity of investing money knows how difficult it is to do so with security and advantage.

But there is one class of people who are benefitting by the industry of all the workers, and these people are the landowners.

Everywhere where population is the thickest, everywhere where industry is the most industrious the land has its greatest value, and in every case that value is paid to him who owns the land.

In the shape of rent the landowner compels all people using land to pay him a large portion of the produce of their labour.

From whatever wage the employer pays is deducted an amount which under the present system must go to enrich the owner of the land upon which the business is carried on.

Little wonder that labour and capital get so small a return!

But there is no escape, and if the business carried on will not stand the landlord's claims it must cease to exist, and the demand for labour will be correspondingly decreased.

This demand for labour will continue to be limited until this unjust system is done away with.

Wealth now being produced by the workers is going to enrich those who own the land upon which it is produced, and trade rises and falls as the land monopoly directs.

Until it is recognised that this land monopoly is the real cause of our present troubles, until it is recognised that the value of land is produced by the industry of its inhabitants and rightly belongs to those who produce it and no one else, no reform of any kind can avail.

When this wrong is set right, when labour and capital get the value they produce, all will have the opportunity to work which labour leaders are now vainly looking for in another direction.

I trust you will pardon this somewhat lengthy letter, but your pamphlet and the thoughts it aroused in me must be my excuse.—Yours truly,

(Signed) CHAS. E. CROMPTON.

THE DEAN'S REPLY TO MR. CROMPTON.

Deanery, Durham.

MY DEAR SIR,—My best thanks for your interesting letter.

I confess that in writing my paper to the workers, I purposely left out all political questions; and amongst them that most important matter, the true nature of work, and the awful hindrances put in the way of it by legislation, and the selfishness of our legislators.

I am in happy agreement with you on the great importance of going to nature for the satisfaction of most of man's wants.

And the incidence of taxation keeps working folk off the land in a terrible way.

Of course, men would find, were the land equally distributed that labour would be hard and often ill-paying. But it is in fact what the country needs more than anything else. That the labourer should always be worthy of his hire, and that hire should be his FREE labour and its produce is after Scripture and common sense the right rule of life. But we are very far from even the beginnings of such a state of things, and meanwhile we languidly go round the "Unemployed Problem" or the "Housing Problem," unconscious that the causes of these evils are all within our own selfishness.

We are paying a great penalty for living in a state of many centuries of constitutional growth. I have often been in Denmark and Norway, and have been moved with delight at seeing the distribution of rentless land among the workers, and the intelligence, good government, and content of the families are a revelation to those who know our slum life.

It seems to us like an Utopia, it might have some disastrous results to it, but the true good of mankind lies in the earth, and in the end such work is blessed not cursed.

I shall treasure your letter and wish it might have more circulation.—Yours sincerely,

(Signed) G. W. KITCHIN.