

THE LABOUR QUESTION IN JAMAICA

By W. R. LESTER, M.A.

Three weeks' stay on the island scarcely qualifies for writing a treatise on Jamaica and its inhabitants, but as most of the time was spent in a real attempt to get at facts as to the conditions under which the native lives and works in this year of Grace, 1920, perhaps they may be of some interest to readers of LAND & LIBERTY.

The Aborigines who inhabited the island when found by Columbus have totally disappeared, and their place is taken by the descendants of slaves imported from Africa, and half-castes; also a sprinkling of Chinamen, coolies, and white men. The last form now about 1 per cent. of the population, and the proportion has for long been steadily falling. The hot and enervating climate puts anything like hard work by Europeans out of the question, so that their function is purely to superintend the black. On the sea passage to and from Jamaica there is ample opportunity to get the white man's views on things in general and on the native in particular. We hear from them that things have of late looked up in the island, especially since the stoppage of the beet supply brought cane sugar into demand, and since the fruit trade has developed. The white planter is making money quickly—and spending it in London. Things, in fact, are humming for him. But there is a fly in the ointment—the native. On him they depend to cultivate the plantations. He has from all time been bad, lazy and inefficient, but since the war has been worse than ever. Steady work is not now to be got out of him, he is dissatisfied with his condition, is getting independent in his ideas and truculent in his bearing. All this is bitterly resented by these representatives of the dominant race whose conviction is unshakeable that the black man's supreme function in life is to serve the white. But it is just on this very point that the native is showing strong signs of disagreement. They tell us he will not work the full week, or anything like it. A large part of the week he spends either in idleness, gambling or thieving. True, his pay is but 1s. 6d. to 2s. a day (1s. before the war), but then he is not worth more and his needs are few. To the newcomer their advice is: keep the native, and still more the half-caste, at arm's length; by all means be kind, but never be familiar, and always show you are master. If you fail in this, trouble, truculence and unpleasantness will be your reward. In general, never forget your position as a member of the higher race. To all such advice, it seemed well that a novice should listen respectfully, but retain the open mind.

Once landed on the island, a very short experience must impress the visitor with three outstanding facts: the wonderful fertility of the soil, the poverty of the people, and the amount of unused land. One also finds it generally admitted both by black and white that wages are low; that many natives are lazy; that theft is very general, that natives are less docile than they used to be, and that discontent with their position is on the increase.

Personally, I confess to greater interest in what the native himself thinks of his lot, his defects, and his virtues than in his masters' opinions on these points. The latter are urged on one daily in the course of ordinary intercourse with one's own kind: the former can be extracted from the native only with some little trouble and artifice. I therefore made it my special aim to chat with common black people, sometimes to the unconcealed amusement, and even disapproval of friends, who charged me with raising questions which may some day lead to trouble for the dominant race. I chatted with blacks on large plantations, with small cultivators of an acre or two, with small storekeepers and even with newsvendors on the street. I wished to find out

why wages are low, whether the native is really lazy and a thief, and if so, why? Conversations with common blacks ran on some such lines as this:—

"This is a fine country and things flourish wonderfully. Sugar, coffee, oranges, bananas, all seem to grow well."

"Oh, yes, sir."

"So I suppose the black man is doing very well, too?"

"Oh, no sir, Very few are comfortable and most are very poor."

"Why is that?"

"Because wages are very low. It is hard to live."

"But why are wages low?"

"Don't know, sir."

"Well, but you are tilling a bit of land on your own. Cannot you live comfortably on the sale of your own produce?"

"No. The holding is too small—only one acre, so I have to find work outside part of the time."

"Then why don't you enlarge your building?"

"Impossible, sir."

"But I see plenty of untilled land round about your bit. Why don't you get some of it?"

"Because the owner will not sell or lease a yard more."

"Does he do nothing with it himself?"

"Oh no, he is rich and does not need to till."

"Is that a common thing here?"

"Very, very common. It is difficult for the poor man to get any land though there is plenty of it."

"If you could get a few acres, would you be able to live comfortably without competing part of your time with others for a 2s. wage?"

"Certainly I could, sir."

"And then perhaps other men's wages would rise higher if you were no longer competing with them?"

"I think that certain."

"But what would the big men say to that, do you think?"

"They would not like to have to pay black men more money."

"Then do you think they refuse you enough land in order to keep you dependent on them, and your wages low?"

"That is just what most of us do think. They do not want us to be independent of them. They want us to work cheap and do what they say."

"So do you think you ought to be allowed to till more land on your own?"

"Most certainly, sir."

"Well, how can it be managed?"

"We don't know how, and the Government will not help us because till the election last December only the masters have been in the Government."

"Supposing men who will not allow land to be tilled were taxed, would they be more likely to let you get the land?"

"Yes, if the tax were strong enough. That would be a good way to do it."

"But I hear there is much Crown land. Why cannot you get some of that?"

"Because the Government will only sell or let on long lease on which a large deposit is demanded. Poor men cannot pay this, so have to go without the land."

"But they tell me the black man is very lazy, and will only work two or three days in the week. I am also told they thieve a great deal."

"Well, that is true of many, though almost all would work hard if they could only see something decent for their labour. But for 2s. most will not work hard. They work a few days and steal for the rest of the time for a living. It is the curse of the island, but would stop if men were decently paid."

"Perhaps they feel that in this way they are getting the better of a world which has for so long, and in so many ways, got the better of them?"

"Yes, I think that may be true, sir."

"When natives have holdings large enough to support them comfortably, do they work hard and stop stealing?"

"Certainly they do, sir, though there will always be bad ones."

"I hear it said that petty theft is so general that planters often dare not allow bananas and oranges to ripen on the trees for fear they disappear, and so they harvest them too green. Is there any truth in that?"

"In some cases it is so, for poverty has demoralized many black men. But then we have a saying: 'Black boy him steal bananas—buckra (white man) him steal whole property.'"

"So it seems another case of:—

"Why prosecute the man or woman
Who steals the goose from off the common,
And leave the greater felon loose
Who steals the common from the goose?"

So do you think that if natives could get the land they need they would make a good living for themselves, and that wages of black and white in the towns would rise too because there would be less competition for jobs?"

"I am quite sure of it, sir. And blacks would work hard and stop thieving."

"I hear great complaints that food is scarce and dear here. Would prices go down if natives could get plenty of land to cultivate?"

"I think they certainly would."

The above is a fair sample of many talks during my stay, and the natives were quite unanimous in their views. Now follows one with a representative white planter which I carefully noted. It is a fair expression of the white man's opinions in Jamaica.

"How are things in this island just now?"

"Very good. Planters are making money. It is not uncommon to clear as much as £90 an acre, and sugar which used to sell at £5 a ton now fetches £70."

"What about labour? Can you get enough of it?"

"Well, that is the great trouble. The native never would work, and is worse than ever now. He is lazy, inefficient, truculent, and steals all he can lay his hands on. Of course, his pay is low, but he is not worth a cent more."

"But I hear they are offering him much more to go to Cuba and Panama. I see advertisements offering 15s. a day on Cuban plantations, and hear that natives are leaving in large numbers."

"Yes, that is true, although we need them badly here."

"Then why don't you keep them here by paying them as well as they do in Cuba?"

"Why should we pay them more than 2s. when they are not worth more? Besides, we may be relieved of the necessity, for a movement is afoot in the Legislative Assembly to censor native emigration."

"Would not that be practical slavery?"

"Perhaps, but it ought to be done."

"But if the labour is as inefficient, as you say it is, why are you anxious to keep it?"

(No coherent answer.)

"Would you not get better work if it were better paid?"

"If we pay better, are you in England prepared to subsidize us?"

"Well really! That's the limit! You have just told me that planters are coining money so quickly that they are selling out at high prices and retiring from business! Might not wages be raised by letting the natives get more land?"

"Perhaps so, but it would do the native no good. He would only squander the money, and he is so inefficient that he does not work the land properly, even

when he does get it. It is in the blood. 'Once a nigger always a nigger,' and no change in the conditions under which he works will make the slightest difference. They are an inferior race and nothing will alter that fact. They must be kept down. Besides, if they could get land freely they would be quite independent of us, for there would be no surplus labour. The plantations need cheap labour, and how can they get it if natives can freely cultivate land on their own? It sounds hard, I know, but every practical man will tell you that labour in Jamaica must be kept in its place."

"I came across a small colony of coolies (survivors of 'indentured labour' imported from East India some years ago), who were growing tobacco on small patches surrounded by rough grass land and bush. They said they paid a rent of 24s. per acre for what little rough land they could get, while herds of cattle monopolise the better lands round about. They asserted that in that district the small cultivator is pushed on to the poorer land, and has to pay this high rent for it. As to housing conditions, they simply beggar description."

Talking of housing it may interest readers of LAND & LIBERTY to note that this month the newly-elected Legislative Council of Jamaica held its first session, and that one of the Bills foreshadowed by the Governor in his opening speech is to provide that "No taxes be levied on improvements on dwellings, in order that such improvements be encouraged." Taxation of Land Values, the natural corollary of this, is however, not mentioned, and instead a Bill for higher taxation of incomes is foreshadowed.

Besides the land, there is a shipping monopoly from which Jamaica suffers—the monopoly wielded by the Allied Shipping interests who control the trade to America and Britain. So complete is this that fruit growers, large or small, have no market except through them, for the combine refuses to ship anything which is not purchased by their own buyers. As they are the only companies shipping they can practically name their own prices when buying produce. For oranges, the price varies from 6d. to 1s. per hundred, while in England they are selling at from 2d. to 4d. a piece. As his does not pay the grower, oranges have become very scarce indeed, in Jamaica. It pays better to skin the oranges, throw away the inside, and extract a kind of oil from the skin. Here is another example of how monopoly breeds scarcity. The shipping companies reply that they are forced to keep control of the fruit supply, as growers are too unenterprising to put a good uniform quality on the market if left to themselves. And so the game goes merrily on.

To return to the native and his economic conditions, I specially recall one talk with a party of land workers and small tradesmen. Without exception they held that their first need was larger holdings and more of them. They saw easily that, this secured, the general wage level in all trades would rise while prices would fall owing to increased production, and that they themselves would be freed from the tyranny of hard taskmasters. Feeling on this point, said they, ran high but they had never known *how* to get the thing done. I asked them what they thought would happen if men who look land against labour were heavily taxed, and they at once answered that they would soon be tumbling over each other to find tenants, and that rents would therefore fall. This led up to a little homily on land values and taxation as a solution of their troubles. They listened intently like intelligent children. After a parley among themselves they asked what part of the island I might come from, and on hearing that my home was 5,000 miles over the sea, they wanted to know how long I might be staying in Jamaica, as they would like me to speak to them at some meetings and have this thing made clear to the people. Their disappointment was great when

told my ship was almost due to sail. All I could do was to take the names of some of the small crowd and promise to send them literature, showing how without violence, though with absolute certainty, the thing can be done. I pointed out that all agitation is futile unless backed by knowledge of *how* to attain the aim. They replied that this I had certainly shown them, and they only wished to know more about it.

A few days more saw a dangerous agitator quitting the island for good, with the feeling that in his short stay he had gleaned some grain at least of truth, and with an overwhelming sense of how the most lavish bounties of nature designed by Providence to bring plenty, contentment and independence to all, have been degraded by man's ignorance and greed till a whole people are both impoverished and enslaved.

TWO LETTERS

Business and Protection

The FORUM, a monthly journal published by the Works Committee of Messrs. Cochran & Co., Boiler-makers, Newbie, Scotland, prints the following circular letter issued to business firms by the EMPIRE MAIL and the reply of Mr. Charles E. Crompton, director of Messrs. Cochran. The protectionist sympathies of the EMPIRE MAIL meet here with a proper response from a radical land reformer and Free Trader.

"EMPIRE MAIL" Offices,
212, High Holborn, London, W.C.1.
December 8th, 1919.

DEAR SIRS,

No matter how busy you may be, I would ask you, alike in Imperial as in your own business interests, to give your immediate consideration to the points in this letter, and to favour me with your quick reply.

Mr. Lloyd George, speaking at Sheffield on October 18th, said:—"You must increase the national income, and you can only do that by largely increasing the national production." Since these words were spoken, the plea for production, as England's only hope for salvation, has been echoed from north to south and from east to west by one Member of the Government and another.

In view of this general appeal, I shall greatly appreciate a succinct expression of opinion from you on the following points:—

1. On the most effective steps which should be taken by the Government to hasten the reconstruction of your particular branch of trade;
2. On the present state of your industry;
3. On the trade outlook for 1920;
4. On the possibilities of developing British trade with the Dominions and other countries, and the danger to manufacturers of delaying action in this connection.

Also, having in mind the remarks of Sir Auckland Geddes concerning the objections voiced by British manufacturers to the "Open Door" policy, and his accusations of suppressed production, I ask you, (bearing in mind the Anti-Dumping Bill) for a brief statement of your views upon the threatened German trade invasion and the known trade-preparedness of America and Japan. I draw your special attention to the fact that the current issue of the EMPIRE MAIL, herewith, contains very important pronouncements by leading trade associations and manufacturers, and a critical leader on this vital subject.

I am asking you to give your expert opinion on the foregoing subjects of Imperial interest, so that I may incorporate them in the special Peace Trade Reconstruction Number of the EMPIRE MAIL to be issued early in the new year. This number will have a world-wide circulation of great magnitude, and your views will aid us greatly in our mission, which is the furtherance of the trade of the Empire.

Yours faithfully,

THEO. FIELDEN,
Editor-in-Chief.

The Editor, THE EMPIRE MAIL,
212, High Holborn, London, W.C.1.

DEAR SIR, December 22nd, 1919.

In reply to your letter of the 8th inst., we are in complete agreement with Mr. Lloyd George that the only way to increase National Income is to increase National Production.

Answering your questions seriatim:—

1. The most effective steps the present Government could take to restore trade would be:—

(A) To give up the silly idea of controlling trade, and leave it to the merchants and manufacturers of the country;

(B) To remove taxation from trade and industry, and raise the National Revenue from vested interests and monopolies.

2. The present state of our industry (boilermaking) is excellent, so far as the demand for goods is concerned. Our only anxiety is the supply of raw materials, which the flippant attitude of the present Government renders most precarious.

3. The trade outlook for next year (1920) is splendid, subject to our getting the necessary raw materials.

4. The possibilities of developing British trade, both with the Dominions and elsewhere, are infinite, provided merchants, manufacturers, and workmen are left alone to attend to their business.

In elaboration of the foregoing replies, we would say that the precarious condition into which British trade has fallen since the war is due to the absurd idea that Government can better carry on the trade of a country than its merchants, and manufacturers.

We cannot urge too strongly the importance of getting rid of all Government control of Industry, and especially of all those persons who would control public interests without financial risk to themselves.

Clean government and honest statesmanship are essential to the welfare of the community, and so also is healthy trade conducted by honest traders.

In our own business we have a Works Industrial Council in which Employers and Employed meet every fortnight on the most friendly terms to adjust satisfactorily all questions of Wages and Employment.

Left to ourselves, we feel quite competent to carry on our business.

The only enemy or disturbing factor is the Government, consisting of amiable amateurs with socialistic theories and the flotsam and jetsam of the commercial world who have drifted into paid Government jobs.

We would clear out the whole lot, and leave affairs of State to Statesmen and Commerce to the Traders.

In conclusion, we are Free Traders. We have no fear of foreign competition from any quarter, and are perfectly prepared to hold our own against all comers.

Yours faithfully,

CHARLES E. CROMPTON,
Director, Cochran & Co.

The EDINBURGH EVENING DISPATCH of March 13th reports that judgment was given in the First Division of the Court of Session in favour of the North British Railway Company which had sued the Corporation of Edinburgh for declarator that the latter were bound in all time coming to exempt and relieve the pursuers and their successors in the subjects situated at the east end of Princes Street, known as 10, 11, 12, 13 and 14 Princes Street, and 2, 4, 6, and 8 West Register Street, from all public burdens now imposed, or hereafter to be imposed upon the subjects in question, and in particular from Burgh Assessments, poor and school rates, and Lunacy Assessment. The pursuers also sued for payment of £932 2s. 4d.

The pursuers acquired the subjects in 1891 for £85,000. The feus were given off by the defenders in 1769 as part of a transaction which enabled a beginning to be made with a general plan of feuing the New Town.

According to the original charters, the ground was to be held, "free of all town's burdens, burrow, and county cess, stents, taxations, and all other public burdens of whatever kind now imposed or hereafter to be imposed," excepting "the yearly feu-duty of a penny Scots money if asked allanarly in full of every exaction or demand whatever." Down to 1915 the defenders recognised and implemented their obligation to exempt and relieve the owners of the property from all town's and public burdens. In that year the Burgh, Poor, School, and Lunacy rates were demanded, and the pursuers paid tenants' and owners' taxes in respect of 1915-16. The sum paid was £932 2s. 4d., the sum sued for.