

Fascism, Landownership's Masque

Who benefits from fascism so much that he is willing to tolerate a system so destructive of all human values? When the costs of the Ethiopian campaign raised the Italian price level—and therefore the level of rent—in Italy, Premier Mussolini refurbished a crust-bare treasury by taking in taxation a portion of the increase in land values.

This would indicate no sympathy with the landowner. Mussolini followed with a 10 per cent capital levy, no boon to the capitalist. The effect of fascism in forcing down Italian wage scales is well known here through the writings of Gaetano Salvemini and others. Who benefits? Dr. Carl E. Schmidt gives the answer in "The Plough and the Sword: Labor, Land and Property in Fascist Italy" (Columbia University Press, \$2.50).

The large landowners, and in some measure the industrial monopolists of Italy, have been the beneficiaries of fascism, Dr. Schmidt reports. Dr. Schmidt studied the consequences of fascist policies on the life of the Italian rural masses during a year's sojourn in Italy as a fellow of the Social Science Research Council and in several hundred documents.

The economic life of Italy is basically rural with nearly half of the people still getting their living directly from the soil, he points out. The extreme concentration of land ownership in relatively few hands is shown by the agricultural census of 1930, which put the total number

of farm enterprises in Italy at about 4,200,000, he says, reporting:

"Of these 1,500,000 (35.7 per cent) are one hectare (2.47 acres) or less in size, and therefore ought to be classed as dwarf holdings rather than farms; 2,300,000 (54.6 per cent) are more than one and less than ten hectares in area; roughly 400,000 (9.7 per cent) cover more than ten hectares. The 3,800,000 dwarf and small holdings comprise but 32.7 per cent of all the farm land in the country, whereas the 400,000 large farms control 67.3 per cent thereof."

Dr. Schmidt shows how the great army of industrial and agricultural wage earners have been the cannon fodder of the famed "Battle for Wheat" through the imposition of the wheat tariff.

"The extraordinarily large number of share-tenants and small peasant proprietors means that insofar as a wheat tariff is a help to agriculture, such help goes predominantly to the land-owning class," he says. "The mass of agricultural wageworkers are interested in wheat essentially as consumers. For them the tariff is only a factor in higher living costs—all the more burdensome because of the great importance of bread in their diet."

He calculates that in the years 1925—35 Italian consumers paid a premium on their wheat of roughly 32,000,000,000 lire—a premium that benefited chiefly the large and medium-sized landowners.

He makes a valuable contribution to understanding of Italian fascism when he shows how the reclamation

projects of which D Duce is so proud, undertaken ostensibly to satisfy the land hunger of the peasants, do not change the property status of the land, so that "whoever happens to own the land when its increased value is realizable will profit from the government subsidies" although "most of the costs are borne by the treasury."

In tax policy, also, fascism shows similar discrimination. The tax outlays of all classes, he reports, have been rising since the advent of fascism, with the total burden "becoming one of the heaviest in the world." But even though the big landowners succeeded in 1923 in obtaining a revision of the cadastral survey (land assessment) which gave them undervaluations on the big estates and overvaluation of peasant land holdings, and in winning an agricultural income tax which discriminates in wage bill exemptions, they were not satisfied. The base of the income tax was lowered. Indirect taxes have risen markedly. But still more and more subsidies are planned for the landowners.

The result? Growing poverty among the working classes and conditions close to serfdom among the rural classes, Dr. Schmidt reports. The data with which his 197 pages are crammed make his book indispensable to anyone who wishes to obtain intelligently digested facts on the land question in Italy today. His fundamental approach makes the study a model of scholarship.

—W. L.