

The Great Parliamentary Conspiracy

By FRANCIS NEILSON

There was no such thing as a poor law in England until the people were driven away from the lands to make room for the sheep. A commission of the year 1517 reports wholesale depopulation, owing to the break-up of the villages and the spread of sheep farming. An act of Parliament of the time refers to "greedy and covetous people who accumulate in their hands such great portions of the lands of the realm from the occupying of the poor husbandman, because of the great profit that cometh from sheep". Poor law legislation was enacted in the days of Elizabeth as a means of coping with the evils of poverty. Is it a mere coincidence that legislation against "cutthroats, thieves, and vagrants" was enacted about the time it was found necessary to introduce palliative measures dealing with the poor?

Though there were short periods after the time of Elizabeth when the people enjoyed comparative abundance, economic principles saw their best days before the time of the Tudors. In what has been called the Golden Age, a peasant could earn enough in fifteen weeks' work to keep himself, wife and children in food for a year. We do know that even the serfs under the feudal system held from twenty to twenty-four acres of land and a hut for which they paid little or nothing in rent; a half-penny per annum or a day's service in spring or at harvest. We know from the records of an Oxford College that in the Middle Ages seven men and horses had food and lodging for twenty-seven cents a day. A glance at Thorold Rogers' "Six Centuries of Work and Wages" will convince anybody that with all our boasted civilization we do not begin to compare with the long ago for high wage and short hours.

In 1351 the first Statute of Laborers was imposed upon the people. Under the provisions of this detestable act unemployment was made a penal offence; every employer was given the right to demand the labor

"There are two fundamentally opposed means whereby man, requiring sustenance, is impelled to obtain the necessary means for satisfying his desires. These are work and robbery, one's own labor and the forcible appropriation of the labor of others . . . I propose in the following discussion to call one's own labor and the equivalent exchange of one's own labor for the labor of others, the 'economic means' for the satisfaction of needs, while the unrequited appropriation of the labor of others will be called the 'political means.'—Franz Oppenheimer, THE STATE

of any unemployed man. For the first time in Britain an act of Parliament fixed wages and hours. The laborer was forbidden to leave his parish in search of better paid employment, on pain of imprisonment and outlawry. The peasantry rose in revolt.

Then in 1360 there came one who preached what seemed, to the ruling class, to be a new doctrine. John Ball, "a mad priest of Kent," as Froissart calls him, preached his strange sermons on equal rights and opportunities for twenty years in the Kentish churchyards, where the stout yeomen gathered to hear him, in defiance of interdict and imprisonment. The peasant revolt of Ball's day is one of the most interesting uprisings of labor that is recorded.

The conflict went on for centuries. One hundred years later Hugh Latimer, one of the noblest characters in English history, tells us in one of his sermons that his "father was a yeoman and had no lands of his own, only he had a farm of three or four pounds a year at the utmost, and hereupon he tilled as much as kept half a dozen men. He had walked for one hundred sheep, and my mother milked thirty kine. He kept me to school; or else I had not been able to preach before the King's Majesty now. He married my sisters with five pounds, or twenty nobles apiece; so that he brought them up in godliness and the fear of God. He kept hospitality for his poor neigh-

bors, and some alms he gave to the poor." That is how it was when Bishop Latimer was a boy. When he became a man the old farm had passed to a new tenant and so great was the economic change in that short time that Latimer tells us the new tenant "is not able to do anything for his prince, nor for his children, nor give a cup of drink to the poor."

The reign of Henry VIII yields us information which is indispensable to an understanding of economic change. The spoliation of the abbey is undoubtedly the first chapter of the story of the monopolization of natural resources in England. Some of the greatest land-owning families rose from obscurity through the enormous grants of church lands made by Henry VIII. It was in his reign that a commission was appointed, in 1517, to inquire into the question of enclosing land by force, but it was not until the time of Queen Anne that enclosure of land was legalized by Parliament. From that time on until this day the economic woe of the people has dogged the heels of every British statesman.

According to the estimate of Froude, the historian, Ministers of the Crown and their friends had appropriated estates worth in modern currency about five million sterling, and divided them among themselves; yet it was about this time an act was passed by Parliament against "idleness and vagabondrie." The Act states that "idleness and vagabondrie is the mother and root of all thefts, robberies, and all evil acts and other mischiefs." In this phrase we notice how far Parliament had departed from its tradition and procedure.

I wish to point out the way this act is worded and drawn up, because it marks the beginning of the great conspiracy of the ruling class against the English people, by legislation. For a long period before this enactment many attempts had been made to use the political

means—legislation—to the full in the landlord's interest to enslave the people; but, despite the Statute of Laborers, and the revolts of the peasants in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, it was not shown until now to be a full-fledged political conspiracy of a Parliament of landlords determined to wrest all common land from the people and enclose and add it to their estates. They saw that so long as the serfs were free to use the common fields and wastes, wages must be high and prices low. So long as peasants had an alternative they would not enter the labor market and compete with one another for jobs and depress wages. This consciousness of the economic power of labor over landlords, so long as the peasants were free to use the land, is most noticeable in the uprisings of the middle of the sixteenth century.

In the year 1549 we see the nobles in strife with the Lord Protector, Somerset. The King and Somerset had striven to avert the dangers of rebellion. Green says:

"The agrarian discontent, now heightened by economic changes, woke again in the general disorder. Twenty thousand men gathered round the 'oak of Reformation' near Norwich and, repulsing the royal troops in a desperate engagement renewed the old cries for the removal of evil counsellors, a prohibition of enclosures, and redress for the grievances of the poor. Revolt was stamped out in blood; but the weakness which the Protector had shown in presence of the danger, his tampering with popular demands, and the anger of the nobles at his resolve to enforce the laws against enclosures and evictions, ended in his fall."

Although Sir Thomas More, Gilpin and others realized there was a conspiracy afoot to deprive the peasant of his natural rights, it is, however, to Thorold Rogers, Drummond Professor of Political Economy at Oxford, that we owe a great debt for clearly indicating the conspiracy in his minute and masterly work, entitled, "Six Centuries of Work and Wages." He says:

"I contend that from 1563 to 1824 a conspiracy, concocted by the law and carried out by parties interested in its success, was entered into to cheat the English workman of his wages, to tie him to the soil, to deprive him of hope, and to degrade him into irremediable poverty. For more than two centuries and a half the English law, and those who

administered the law, were engaged in grinding the English workman down to the lowest pittance, in stamping down every oppression or act which indicated any organized discontent, and in multiplying penalties upon him when he thought of his natural rights."

Here Rogers has put the case clearly. He leaves no doubt as to methods the political means used to exploit the economic means. It was the use of force and restrictive legislation which reduced the English laborer to "irremediable poverty." The legislative and administrative departments worked together to do this wrong. The Act against "idleness and vagabondrie" shows how desperately the political means were used to disinherit and degrade the peasants. The Act states "that if any man or woman, able to work, should refuse to labor, and live idly for three days, that he or she should be branded with a red hot iron on the breast with the letter V and be adjudged a slave for two years, of any person who should inform against such idler." Then it goes on to direct the master to feed his slave with bread and water and such refuse meat as he should think proper, "and to cause his slave to work by beating, chaining or otherwise, in such work, however vile it be, as he should put him unto."

Employers were empowered to sell, bequeath or let out on hire the ser-

vices of their slaves. Furthermore, the act permitted employers, "to put a ring of iron about the neck, arm or leg of the slaves." If a slave ran away from his master for fourteen days, he was to be branded on the cheek, and became a slave for life. Magistrates had power given them "to look out for persons who had been idle for three days, brand them with a V on the breast, and to send them to the place of their birth, there to be kept in chains or otherwise, in amending highways or other service."

During Elizabeth's reign there was some reform and a slight attempt to force landlords back to tillage and employ more laborers upon the land. An act was passed ordering those in rural districts not "to build any manner of cottage or dwelling unless the same person do assign and lay to the same cottage or building four acres of ground at the least. Any one building a cottage without this provision shall be fined forty shillings for every month the cottage is so continued."

In Elizabeth's time many of the people of the European countries sought in England a refuge from religious tyranny, and introduced arts and crafts to the people of their new home. This industrial change marks the beginning of a new epoch



By Charles Johnson Post

in production. During this reign vast improvements were made in agriculture, and the foundations of England's maritime power were securely laid in a sea-faring class which has an unbroken record of building and manning the greatest fleets for war and commerce.

These changes were bound to affect and better the conditions of labor, but it would be unwise to lose sight for a moment of the principle which had been at work affecting the economic condition of the people since the days of the land-free men. It was not the sudden change from agricultural to manufacturing pursuits which caused the economic woe. It was the use of the political means by a ruling class to exploit labor; hundreds of years before an act of Parliament legalized enclosure of

land the political means acted through restrictive legislation while enclosure was carried on by force. It is so necessary to understand this if we are sincere in our desire to grasp the fundamentals of this problem which we call labor-and-capital.

I emphasize this point especially, for we have reached the period in our history when so many historians and economists lose sight of the great principle of English liberty—equal opportunity. Long before the introduction of the factory system, long before Boulton and Watt perfected their invention and mill-owners "went steam engine mad," as Boulton said, the people had been driven from the land and vast hordes of them roamed the highways utterly destitute. During the Commonwealth we read in the Moderate In-

telligencer "that hundreds of thousands in England have a livelihood which gives them food in the summer and little or none in the winter; that a third part of the people in most of the parishes stand in need of relief, that thousands of families have no work, and those who have, can earn bread only. There are many thousands near to this city of London who have no other sustenance but beer meals—neither roots or other necessities are they able to buy, and of meal not sufficient."

After the time of Cromwell the ruling class began to speed up the political means and for the next hundred years the work of destroying every vestige of economic liberty was carried on without much protest.