

ALFRED RUSSEL WALLACE

THE REMEDY FOR
UNEMPLOYMENT

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The Remedy for Unemployment

THE REMEDY FOR UNEMPLOYMENT

BY DR. ALFRED R. WALLACE

The reason why I wrote the present pamphlet (which first appeared in the “Socialist Review,” and is now reprinted in a slightly modified form) was that, although there is a small body of avowed Socialists in Parliament, not one of them has, so far as I am aware, upheld any of the fundamental principles of Socialism as a means of dealing with the greatest of present-day problems—that of chronic unemployment and starvation all over our land. Let me illustrate what I mean by a few examples. Perhaps the most fundamental and universally admitted axiom of Socialism is that all production should be, primarily, *for use and not for profit*; and the next in importance is that the true or proper *wages of labour* is *the whole product of that labour*.

But neither in Parliament nor out of it has a single voice been raised to show that these principles *must* be adopted in any permanent solution of the problem, or to explain how they *can* be applied far more easily and economically than any of the suggested alleviations. All the talk has hitherto been of securing trade union rates of wages for out-of-works of every kind; and the underlying idea has always been that of the non-Socialist worker—that the Government provision of work must *not* be looked upon as permanent, but only as enabling the worker to live till the capitalist employer again requires him.

An equally non-Socialist view was put forth by one of the most respected Socialists in Parliament when he advocated the immediate construction of light railways all over the country in order that when labour was brought back to the land the products could be carried economically to market, implying that the “products” were to be sold, thus competing in the market with those of other producers, lowering prices, and altogether ignoring the great Socialist principle of “production for use.” In the discussion of this question it has been totally overlooked that by a proper organisation of the labour of the permanently or temporarily unemployed, as well as of all those whose employment does not supply them with the means of a thoroughly sufficient and healthy existence, all the necessities and comforts of life can be produced in our own country, just as they were produced down to a few centuries ago. I will now proceed to the exposition of the whole subject.

In order that those who have not read the Labour Party’s Unemployed Workmen Bill may understand why it could not have succeeded, a short statement of its essential provisions may here be given.

The first clause provides that the “Local Unemployment Authority” under this Bill shall be the council of every borough or district of over 20,000 inhabitants, and for the rest of the county the “County Council.” Clause 3 declares that “it shall be the duty of the Local Unemployment Authority to provide work for him” (any workman registered as unemployed) in connection with one or other of the “schemes” hereinafter provided, “or otherwise,” or failing the provision of work, “to provide maintenance, should necessity exist, for that person and for those depending on that person.”

This is the essential part of the clause, with a condition that the wages are to be “not lower than those that are standard to the work in the locality.” Then there is to be a Central Unemployment Committee to “frame schemes,” and generally look after the Local Unemployment Committees, which are to be established by every local authority, and are also to “frame schemes”; and the “schemes” of the four or five hundred local authorities are all to be submitted to the Local Government

Board for revisal or approval. Nowhere is any guide given to the essential principles which should underlie these hundreds of schemes, and we can easily imagine the delay, the confusion, the cost, and the almost certain failure of “schemes” initiated in so haphazard a manner.

The whole conception of the Bill is, in my opinion, wrong. Unemployment is not a local phenomenon, but national, and even world-wide. It is a symptom of disease in our existing civilisation, and must be treated, if with any chance of success, on broad national lines, and with national resources. Even the one definite suggestion in the Bill—that “schemes of national utility” might be undertaken to employ the out-of-works—however good in itself, was here altogether out of place. For such schemes—afforestation, reclamation of foreshores, drainage works, roads, etc.—are all either not reproductive at all, or not for many years, in the meantime increasing taxation, and thus perhaps producing further unemployment; while they could only employ a mere fraction of those in distress (none of the women) and, when completed, would leave the problem exactly where it was when they were started.

The discussion in Parliament showed a clear recognition of the fact that it is quite impossible to remedy such chronic and widespread unemployment as exists now by finding work for the half-starved population in the hundreds of different occupations at which they have been engaged; but, strange to say, no one seemed to be aware that it is by no means impossible—that it is, in fact, comparatively easy—to enable these same people to *produce for themselves the primary necessities of life* which are their *immediate* and *permanent* need. What is required is to organise and combine the whole of the unemployed into local groups, each group or community being primarily made up of a due proportion of workers who have been engaged in the production of some of these *necessaries*, and who will form a nucleus for the training of others for similar work. These various occupations are comparatively primitive, and there is every reason to believe that they will be found among the unemployed in about the same proportions as in the whole population. The thorough organisation and careful supervision needed cannot, however, be left to the random, and often antagonistic, opinions of hundreds of local authorities, but must be undertaken by the Central Government itself, and that only when the guiding *principles* and the practical *procedure* have been carefully thought out, clearly defined, and fully discussed in Parliament, before being embodied in law. It is pre-eminently a work to be devised and carried out by the Executive Government itself.

I will now endeavour to show in some detail how this can be done, what will be its results, and what are the various facts and arguments which render its success a certainty if it is fully and honestly carried out.

The recent discussion of the problem of unemployment, both in Parliament and in the Press, affords a remarkable proof of how difficult it is to enforce attention to new methods of dealing with great social problems, if such proposals are made a little before their time. Thus only can it be explained that not one Liberal, Labour, or Socialist Member of Parliament seems to be aware that a thorough and carefully-worked out scheme for dealing with the unemployed problem was published about twenty years ago, was re-issued a year or two later in a cheap edition by a well-known London publisher, was widely read and greatly admired, and—as was to be expected at *that time*—was very soon forgotten. I feel sure that this book must be in many public and private libraries, especially those of Liberal or Radical Clubs, but neither by Members of Parliament nor by any writers in the reviews have I once seen it referred to. Yet its title alone should have caused it to be read at this time, since it so fully and clearly states the problem which has received so much attention, but no solution, during the last few years. It is as follows: *Poverty and the State, or Work for the Unemployed; An Inquiry into the Causes and Extent of Enforced Idleness, together with a Statement of a Remedy Practicable Here and Now*. By Herbert V. Mills. London. Kegan, Paul, Trench, and Co. Price one shilling. 1889.

Now, this book is pre-eminently a practical one, and the bold claim in its title is fully justified by its contents. Mr. Mills was a Poor Law Guardian in Liverpool for many years, where there were nearly three thousand inmates of the workhouse. He thus had unusual opportunities of becoming

acquainted with the poor, and of studying the various problems of pauperism, such as unemployment, food-supply, the various occupations of paupers, and other matters. He further obtained information and advice from experts in agriculture, and in the various trades and occupations of the men who came under his notice, and has thus been able to give us detailed estimates and calculations of the greatest value in formulating practical methods of utilising the labour of the unemployed to the greatest advantage, for their own benefit. He also visited and carefully inquired into the detailed working of the various Dutch Beggar and Labour Colonies, and obtained from them valuable information as to the methods that tend to success, as well as of those that either diminish the success or lead to failure.

Having myself encountered many disappointments in books, claiming to expound new and important ideas both in physical and economic science, I was fully prepared for another failure here. But I quickly found that this was really what it claimed to be, and I at once did all I could to call public attention to it, first in one of my annual addresses to the Land Nationalisation Society (in 1892), and much more fully in a chapter I wrote for Edward Carpenter's *Forecasts of the Coming Century*, published in 1897. This chapter I republished, with some important additional facts and arguments, in 1900, in my *Studies, Scientific and Social*; yet all appears to have been in vain. If the authors of the "Unemployed Workmen Bill" had drawn it so as to follow closely Mr. Mills' scheme, and had fully explained this scheme in their speeches by means of the facts, illustrations, and methods so well and concisely given in his book, I feel sure that the result of the debate would have been very different, and that not only Socialists, but the whole body of Labour Members, a large majority of Liberals, and even many Conservatives, would have voted in its favour; in which case the Government would have been obliged either to adopt it, or to bring in a Bill of their own on similar lines.

The chief reason why Mr. Mills' scheme, if embodied in a Bill, should, and I think would, receive the support of a large majority in the present House of Commons is, that it utilises and combines in an admirable manner the most important, and at the same time the least disputable, methods of both Socialism and Individualism. To illustrate this I will give a few condensed extracts from his summary of the main features of his proposals, with some remarks of my own.

(1) In each county or union, tracts of land from 2,000 acres upwards shall be purchased or taken over by the State or Local Authority, and be prepared with suitable houses, buildings, tools, machines, etc., for the accommodation of about 4,000 or 5,000 occupants, men, women, and children; with skilled foremen and organisers to carry out the various operations of agriculture, and the trades and manufactures required to produce food, clothing, and other necessities for the inhabitants.

(2) It is shown, by the facts and calculations of experts, that the labour of a properly assorted population, for four hours daily, will, when in full working order (say after a year), produce *all* the necessities of life in abundance. One hour more is added for the costs of skilled supervision and another hour for the maintenance and schooling of the children, and for the support of the aged and the sick as they arise.

(3) In order to effect this the ordinary methods and rules of the best kinds of industrial work must be adopted; but, after working hours, all will be as completely free from control by the various industrial officials as the people of any prosperous and well-ordered town or village.

(4) That the director of each of the Co-operative estates shall encourage the workers to make their homes and work-places as healthful, convenient, and beautiful as possible, giving them *advice* as to how this can best be done, and *assistance* in doing it.

(5) That for work done co-operatively no money wages shall be paid, the equivalent of such work being the *whole net produce* of the labour. This will be—the provision of comfortable homes, abundance of good food and fuel, with a good supply of clothing, the latter being chosen by each person from a variety of suitable material and design kept in the stores. In addition to this, the children would all receive the best education, and as they grew up would each be trained in accordance with their faculties or tastes, in two or three useful occupations.

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