

A Practical Solution

Practical Solution, A

Freedom Press

November, 1887

A HUNDRED and thirty thousand unemployed, in this city alone--such is the result of the parliamentary and private inquiries. Ninety-one thousand paupers; six hundred thousand at least of men, women, and children, out of the 4 1/2 million inhabitants of London in want of food, shelter, and clothes. Such is the result of aristocracy and middle-class rule. Our masters say that we must keep them, and provide them a rich living, because they alone are capable of organizing our industries and trade. And that is the way in which they *have* organized them. Plenty of luxury for themselves; sheer misery for the masses.

One hundred and thirty thousand men, ready to work, but prevented from working; ready to till the fields and to grow for themselves the food they want, ready to build for themselves decent houses to lodge in, to extract coal for themselves to warm their modest homes, to weave and to sew for themselves the clothes to wear. But--prevented from tilling and growing, from building and weaving, by the landowner, the money-lender, the owner of the manufactory and the shopkeeper.

All kinds of means are proposed every day for finding useful employment for those who are now unemployed. Some of the schemes might be a boon for humanity--not a sheer useless waste of human efforts and a new source of evils. But none of the good means can be put into practice, because everywhere the landlord, the banker, the capitalist stand in the way.

Suppose that any organized body of Socialists, who obviously enjoy the confidence of the workers, should distribute tickets in each house in London, and ask every unemployed person to write on his ticket what he is able and willing to do. Everyone would answer that he is ready to do some kind of useful work. The answers would be: "I am ready to work on a farm" or "Ready to work in a cotton mill," or at brick-laying, or at a cutlery, or boot, or cloth, or glass manufactory, and so on. In short, everybody would state his willingness to do something necessary for humanity.

By the way, if like tickets were distributed among those rich people who treat the unemployed as loafers and idlers, what would be *their* answers? "I am ready to preach patience to the workers, provided I have dined well myself"; "Ready to write leaders in newspapers, and to pronounce speeches, in order to prove that myself and my friends are the only people who can save England from an outbreak of the laborers "; " Ready to spend five afternoons in shopping and the sixth in visiting the poor "; " Ready to play the piano for two hours a-day and to dance till daylight."

Such would be the answers we should get from the West-end. While the East-end would testify its willingness to work, the West-end would testify its willingness to squander the produce of the East-end's labor.

Suppose, further, that a summons be issued to all the unemployed of London; that all those who are willing to work but have no work be invited to gather on a given day at some of the rich clubs which adorn the region of Piccadilly and Pall Mall: those who are ready to till the soil, at the Carlton and Constitutional Clubs; the bricklayers at the Reform Club; the carpenters at the National Liberal Club and so on. (Let us hope, of course, that the very democratic Tories and the very radical Liberals will be happy to receive the unemployed in their marble halls.) And suppose, further, that each of the trades agree together to start for themselves some useful work. Suppose that the laborers have sent their delegation to Sussex, and that their delegation reports that there are, on the estates of Lord Do-Nothing some three hundred acres of land, rented to London gentlemen for pheasant-shooting, or kept by the noble lord for the same noble purpose; which acres, if properly cleared, drained, and tilled, would, with proper instruments, yield (at forty bushels the acre) the food for no less than 1,200 persons, and the double of that if some of them were cultivated according to the rules of the scientific culture of modern gardeners. Suppose they agree also with their neighbors of the Reform Club-- the bricklayers and carpenters--as to the building, close by to said land, of two hundred cottages to shelter the human inhabitants who may choose to take the place of the noble lord's pheasants and deer, and make up their minds to prove what England can produce, without compelling the Hindus to sell their wheat for nothing and to starve themselves.

Immediately the noble lord would exclaim: "This land is mine! If you will till it you must buy it, and pay me a hundred pounds or more the acre." The owners of the Middlesex clay-fields would exclaim: "This clay is ours, and unless you pay so much for it we shan't permit you to make bricks of it." And the agricultural implement maker would say: "You may be right in saying that this spade has cost only sixpence paid in wages, since the iron ore was extracted from the earth until it took the shape of a spade. You may speak the truth, or even go beyond the mark; but I have paid so much in royalties, and so much to my money-lender, and I must have so much benefit for myself to teach my lade how to rule you, and my lasses how to dance and receive high-born ladies at our next dinner party." And finally, although there is within London itself plenty of food to feed all Londoners during at least eighteen months, it all belongs to somebody; and the future agricultural colony may promise and swear to the corn-dealers, and grocers, and all the merchants of Mincing Lane and the butchers of Smithfield that they will repay within a year the whole amount of the food advanced to them, they will have no food advanced by the said dealers and merchants unless they undertake also the obligations of providing the families of at least two or three scores of corn-merchants and butchers with pretty carriages, fine horses, Persian carpets, Lyons silks, Brussels lace, French and Spanish wines, --plenty of those wines, because the corn-merchants and butchers are not drunkards of the same sort as the hungry woman condemned the other day to fourteen days' hard labor for refusing to go to the work-house: they never drink twopenny-worth of gin at a public-house.

Take one after the other any of the relief schemes proposed during the last fortnight, and everywhere you will find the same: the landlord refuses the land; the manufacturer refuses the implements of labor, the coal-pit owner, access to the mine, the City merchant, the food. And nothing remains for the unemployed but to starve--unless they take possession of the land, the

mine, the manufactories, and the food which all belong to them, because all that is due to the labor of the whole of the nation, not to the few land and capital-owners.

No relief works can relieve the present misery unless the work done is some useful reproductive work. Of course, some vestry may set some of the unemployed to build a bridge across the canal, but 130,000 unemployed will not find employment in building a bridge. The Board of Works and the War Office may erect fortifications around London; but they know perfectly well that those fortifications, useless against the foreigner, will be intended only to bombard London itself on the day when its workers shall overthrow their present rulers and try to start a new society without land grabbers and capitalist loafers. They can do so, because they know that such relief works will not cost them a penny from their own pockets, and will be paid for by those who only can pay for anything--namely, the workers who produce anything not those who live themselves on the workman's labor.

But whatever may be the useful work that may be proposed for the unemployed, everywhere the landowner, the usurer, the capitalist, and the merchant will stand in the way. If we propose to increase the crops of this country by cultivating the parks of the idlers, we are told that we should thus reduce the incomes of the farmers; and if we venture to say that there would be no harm in that because the landlords would be compelled to reduce their rents, we are told that these poor creatures are already almost ruined, and would be so completely if their incomes were reduced from ten thousand pounds a year to only two thousand.

If we propose to raise coal for those who have none in their cold black dens of Chelsea and Whitechapel, we are told that the incomes of the coal-owners are already so low that they would be compelled to abandon the extraction of coal. And if we add that that would be precisely what we want, because then the miners would take possession of the mines, and work them for the benefit of the nation, we are treated as revolutionists, and reminded that our comrade Mowbray has made acquaintance with the inside of a jail precisely for having indulged in such language.

If we finally point out that in the laborer's dwelling there is a positive want of clothes and furniture--not to speak of anything that might bring a gleam of light and cheerfulness into his home--and if we propose to start workshops for supplying the laborer with cheap furniture and clothes, cheap reading and the like, we are told that the poor furniture kings, one of whom died the other day leaving two million pounds to his widow and children, would be ruined, that the woolen cloth manufacturers would be compelled to abandon their manufactures and emigrate to better countries, like India, where they first starve the people and then make them work for four pence a day. And if we say again that to relieve us of their presence would be the very best thing they could do, and that the workmen taking possession of the manufactories would manage them much better, and produce precisely what their fellows are in want of, we are dryly answered, "Perish your unemployed, we don't care a brass farthing for them. We care for the furniture kings and the cotton lords."

And so, again and again, wherever we try to find an issue from the present conditions, we come to this. The workers *must* take possession of the land, the mines, and the machinery and must make use of them themselves for the benefit of all society. That means, of course, a revolution, but every day proves with new facts and new arguments the necessity, the advisability, of such a revolution.

We are often told that the English are too businesslike a people for revolutions. But we think, on the contrary, that precisely because they are a business people they can indulge no longer in mere talk, in fallacious schemes of relief, and in measures which bring no relief at all and

merely render the situation worse. Because the English are a business people they will take the bull by the horns, they will suggest practical measures. But as soon as they consider any measure really *practical*, and consider it under its really *practical* aspects, they find the landlord and the capitalist standing in the way and preventing society from taking any practical measure at all, and precisely because they are business-like and practical they are brought to the necessity of getting rid of them. We come to the necessity of a revolution, but instead of making it for the mere *words* of Equality, Liberty, and Fraternity--however grand these words are--the English will approach it in a business-like fashion, by discussing how to provide work for 50,000 laborers, for 10,000 miners, for 10,000 workers thrown out of the factories, and so on. And they will conduct it in a business like fashion--not by merely nominating a few men to do their business, but by trying to do it themselves for themselves.

The Anarchist Library
Anti-Copyright



Freedom Press
A Practical Solution
Practical Solution, A
November, 1887

Freedom: A Journal of Anarchist Socialism, Vol. 2, No. 14, online source RevoltLib.com,
retrieved on May 1, 2020.
Freedom Press (ed.)

theanarchistlibrary.org