

THE FABIAN SOCIETY,

17, OSNABURGH STREET, REGENT'S PARK.

FABIAN TRACTS, No. 1.

Why are the Many Poor?

“Wherefore it may not be gainsayed, that the fruit of this man's long taking of counsel—and (by the many so deemed) untimeous delay—was the safe-holding for all men, his fellow-citizens, of the Common Weal.”

“For the right moment you must wait, as FABIUS did most patiently, when warring against HANNIBAL, though many censured his delays; but when the time comes you must strike hard, as FABIUS did, or your waiting will be in vain, and fruitless.”

LONDON:

GEO. STANDRING, 8 & 9, FINSBURY STREET, E.C.

1884

WHY ARE THE MANY POOR?

WE live under a competitive system with Capital in the hands of individuals. What are the results? A few are very rich, some well off, the MAJORITY IN POVERTY, and a large number in misery.

Is it a just and wise system, worthy of humanity? Can we or can we not alter it?

Hitherto the system has escaped condemnation only because we are so ready to accept established custom—and because such general ignorance prevails both as to the evils to which this state of things inevitably gives rise—and as to our power of altering it.

The competitive system—which leaves each to struggle against each, and allows a few to appropriate the wealth of the community—is a rough-hewn expedient which perpetuates many of the evils of mere brute force supplemented by tricks of trade so vile and contemptible that words cannot adequately denounce them.

The victims of brute force attract attention by the sensational character of their misfortunes. It is not thus with the victims of competition. In their case the descent in the social struggle for existence is so gradual that no notice is taken of it until its effects reveal themselves in a seething mass of discontent, misery, despair and crime.

What can be said in favour of a system of social life which develops and tolerates the leisured “masher,” who lives without doing a stroke of useful work; the workers, who toil but do not live human lives; the abject pauper and the Ishmael-minded criminal; which makes inevitable and constant a three-cornered duel of dishonesty between the producer, the middleman, and the consumer?

What is capital?

It is the wealth made by the work of former years. Its use is

to be found in devoting it to the benefit of all ; its abuse in leaving it in the hands of a few who waste it for their own personal gratification. The present system gives to the few the benefits and advantages that flow from the possession of the wealth produced by former generations.

What does it give to the many ?

Their portion is poverty. This is the inevitable outcome of competition, and none know so well as the workers what are the full effects of that terrible and long-continued demoralisation which is brought about, not merely by the poverty of a generation, but by generations of poverty. With the smallest of chances the poor are expected to display the greatest of virtues. On scant and uncertain wages they are expected to maintain the independence, self-respect, and honesty of men and women, and to put by something for the rainy day that is sure to come.

Let the least fluctuation take place in the labour market, and the worker is pitted against his fellow. The poverty of one is underbid by the greater need of another, and the competition for work reduces the lowest wage of all and the highest wage of some occupations to a pittance just above the starvation point, and then the least failure of health or of work leads to pauperism.

This happens to nearly every worker, but the capitalist often retires with a fortune on which he, his children and his children's children live without working. Here is one out of many instances. The son of an owner of ironworks is now in the House of Lords ; he has a fine town house and two or three country mansions, his children are brought up in ease and luxury. But where are the children of those whose work made the fortune ? They toil from morning to night for a bare living as their fathers did before them.

And thus labour and toil goes on creating more wealth for those already rich, until extreme wealth enables a privileged minority to look down with utter indifference on the struggle for existence that goes on beneath them.

Have labourers no rights under the sun but to work when the capitalists think fit and on such terms as competition may determine ? If the competitive standard of wage be the true one, why is it not applied all round ? What, for instance, would be the competitive value of a Duke, of a Bishop, or of a Lord-in-Waiting ?

Do economists, reformers and sociologists stand hopeless before

this problem of Poverty? Must workers continue in their misery whilst doctrinaire economists and political parties split straws and wrangle over trifles?

No! for the workers must and will shake off their blind faith in the Commercial god Competition, and realise the responsibility of their unused powers.

If Capital be socialised, Labour will benefit by it fully; but while Capital is left in the hands of the few, Poverty must be the lot of the many.

Teach, preach, and pray to all eternity in your schools and churches—it will avail nothing until you have swept away this living swindle of competition, this misuse of Capital in the hands of individuals.

You who live dainty and pleasant lives, reflect that your ease and luxury are paid for by the misery and want of others! Your superfluities are the parents of their poverty. Surely all humanity is not burnt out of you by the gold your fathers left you!

Come out from your ease and superfluities and help us!

You who suffer, think of this also, and help forward the only cure for these evils. The time approaches when Capital can be made social, and be no longer left at the disposal of the few, but belong to the community for the benefit of all. You can do it—and without you it cannot be done. The power is in your hands, and soon the chance of using that power will be yours also. Neglect that chance, and you and your children will remain the victims of Competition—ever struggling—ever poor!