

## The Doctrine of Minimums

It is Obvious that the Principle of the Minimum does not Attempt to Fix Wages or Hours or Conditions of Labor -- It Confines Itself to Minimums.

By J. W. MACMILLAN.

"The first principle of the Labor party—in significant contrast with those of the capitalist system, whether expressed by the Liberal or the Conservative party—is the securing to every member of the community, in good times and bad alike (and not only to the strong and able, the well-born and the fortunate) of all the requisites of healthy life and worthy citizenship."

Such is the first sentence of the assertion in the British Labor Programme of the first of the "four pillars of the house." It marks the official acceptance by organized labor of a principle in legislation which it has been inclined to view with suspicion. And it is the most outstanding claim yet made on behalf of a principle which has been coming into prominence during the last thirty years. The social thinking of the future will be much concerned with the doctrine of minimums.

One may note a certain resemblance between the conception of essential minimums and that of the medieval doctrine of a just price. But there is no historical connection. The conditions of labor of to-day sink their roots no deeper into the soil of the ages than serves to reach the period of the industrial revolution of a hundred and fifty years ago. In the excited days which beheld so many mechanical inventions, the building of huge factories, the concentration of capital, and the massing of laborers, all the familiar customs of earlier methods of production vanished. Philosophical theory came to support the abolition of all restraints upon the superior power of money in bargaining with flesh and blood. Freedom of contract became the watchword, and almost the religion, of the new era. It was declared to be not only just and wise, but absolutely imperative for the success of industry; that there should be no outside interference with its operations. The capitalist, strong with the power of money, and the worker, with his weakness revealed in his bare hands and his empty pockets, were to come to agreement between themselves. The inevitable consequence soon appeared. Capital got the best of the bargain, and was encouraged by the assurances of the philosophers to use his superior strength mercilessly. The early decades of the nineteenth century saw such an exploitation and degradation of the laboring classes as it revolts one to read of.

Such revolting conditions of human life and labor could not last. Mankind is not so base as to continue to flog parish apprentices into tending machines for fifteen hours a day, or to force women to crawl on hands and knees through the galleries of subterranean coal mines, hauling heavily-loaded cars by chains around their waists. Not even philosophy could so hypnotize humanity. Little by little, partially through the efforts of humane leaders of thought, and partially through rough battles between employers and their workers, conditions became improved. Hours of labor were shortened, limits were set on the ages of employees, and wages were increased. But for long no distinct principle emerged. The gains for the workers were no more than bits of terrain won by fighting, whether the fight was carried on in parliament or where committees of strikers met with their employers. The agreement was still for the least that the laborer could be induced to take. He got more because his bargaining strength had increased, but as yet no discernible relation between what he was to get and what he ought to get had appeared.

Gradually there emerged the notion of a minimum to be calculated by the cost of decent living. The method of approach to the problem was reversed. Instead of asking how much the industry could afford to allot for wages, it asked how little the workers could afford to take as human beings. It put persons first, and property second. Instead of saying to the labor force, "You must be content with little, because the industry cannot afford more," it said to the industry, "You must pay enough to maintain your labor force after a wholesome fashion or cease to employ them." It asserted that machinery was made for the service of man, even that man which tended it, and not man for the service of machinery.

The first crystallization of this principle into prac-

tice occurred in New Zealand in 1894. It was an incidental result of the agreements come to between employers and employees under the Industrial Disputes Act, the decisions of which were based on this notion of what should be the least the laborer should be asked to take. The province of Victoria, Australia, two years later framed the first strictly Minimum Wage law, which has since been copied, with considerable amendments and variations, in Britain, the United States, France and Canada. Its first appearance in Britain was in the settlement of the Welsh coal miners' strike in 1908. Very soon afterwards machinery was set up by parliament by which it might be applied to other trades. The war halted the natural extension of this law among the trades, but the management of industry by the government to meet the exigencies of the war situation proceeded steadily along lines in accordance with the principle. And now comes the demand from the Labor party for its universal application.

Let us try to understand its meaning. It is founded on the essential sacredness of human life, the same principle that underlies the law against murder. It asserts the right to live, for each living person. This is held to be a natural and inalienable right, not dependent upon the character or ability or serviceableness of the person. It is murder to kill any human being. The victim may be worthless to society, or even harmful to society, but it is none the less a hanging matter to take his life. He may be a syphilitic infant, an incorrigible idler, a ferocious brigand, a hopeless cripple. It may be demonstrable that his life is a burden on society and a torment to himself. Nevertheless he must not be slain, for he is a human being. The essential guilt of the crime of murder is sacrilege. It is not the shedding of blood which makes the guilt, but the shedding of human blood. Beneath all considerations of use and value in the individual lies this fact, that he is a sacred being, inherently precious, with rights which belong to him independent of all the accidents and fortitudes of fate or chance. He has the right to live for the strongest of all reasons, because he is a man.

Let this thought be carried one step farther, and we have the right of every person not only to live but to live after a decent fashion, if it is unworthy

of man's noble nature to lose his life, it is also unworthy that his life should be straitened and afflicted. To live means more than just to exist. Life demands certain conditions in order that it realize itself. It demands liberty, nutrition, opportunity. Every person has a right to these things, and it is a crime for any one to prevent him gaining them.

The society in which we live is organized economically under the wage system. This may not be the best system possible. Some day it may be discarded. But for the present we must take it and use it. It presumes that each sound, sane and mature person gives his services and receives in return such wages as are fit. The principle of the minimum declares that no wage is fit which does not allow him to live in the fashion becoming a man. The apostle Paul said that they who preached the gospel should live by the gospel. So should it be for those who hammer rivets, or sell ribbons, or launder shirts. The work should maintain them in a manner worthy of their human nature. If it lessens their vitality, physical or mental, it commits a crime analogous to murder. It commits sacrilege against these sacred persons. If any industry cannot support its workers in this fitting manner it has no right to live, for they are more important than it, and it cannot be suffered that a thing of wood and iron, or of gold and silver, should distress and insult humanity.

It is obvious that the principle of the minimum does not attempt to fix wages or hours or conditions of labor. It confines itself to minimums. It says, "Here you must begin. You may go as much higher as you please, but you must not go lower." It has nothing to say to any claim that reasonings from political economy may advance. It treats them as a jury would treat the plea of an alleged murderer that his victim was better dead than alive. Its answer is, "You degrade human life when you presume to talk of it as if it were a machine or a brute. Man is essentially sacred. He is not a thing, and must not be treated as a thing."

To those who see in this principle anything socialistic it may be interesting to learn that it has behind it the authority of the Roman Catholic church, which is certainly no friend to socialism. It is plainly avowed in the Encyclical on Labor of Leo XIII, put forth in 1891. It was championed by Cardinal Manning. Its chief exponent in America is Rev. John A. Ryan, Professor of Ethics and Economics at the Catholic University of Washington. In fact, it is not class legislation at all. It is broadly human. And while legitimate differences of opinion may arise as to the mode of its enactment and enforcement, it does not seem possible that a world which remains sensible of the dignity of mankind can refuse to admit its truth.

## Building in March

A pronounced revival in the building trades throughout the Dominion is noted in records covering the issuance of permits in 35 of the largest cities in Canada during March, when there was a substantial increase as compared with the previous month. The total value of permits rose from \$901,933 in February, to \$2,133,781 in March, an increase of \$1,231,848, or 136.6 per cent. Alberta was the only Province to report a decline. Large gains were made in Saskatchewan, Manitoba, Ontario and Quebec. As compared with the corresponding month of 1917, there was a decline of 13.3 per cent., the value for March, 1917, being 2,461,162. In this comparison gains were shown in Nova Scotia, Saskatchewan, Alberta and British Columbia.

Of the larger cities Toronto and Vancouver recorded gains both as compared with February, 1918, and with March, 1917. Montreal, Maisonneuve and Winnipeg reported increases in comparison with the preceding months, and declines as compared with March of last year. Of the smaller centres, Sydney, Fort William, Ottawa, and Regina all showed considerable increases in both cases.

The estimated cost of building work as indicated by building permits for these 35 cities is as follows:

City.	February, 1918.	March, 1918.	March, 1917.
Nova Scotia .. . . .	\$ 71,594	\$ 93,426	\$ 87,153
Halifax .. . . .	68,075	47,763	68,475
Sydney .. . . .	3,508	45,653	18,683
New Brunswick .. . . .	.....	45,829	277,200
Moncton .. . . .	.....	1,500	.....
St. John .. . . .	.....	44,100	277,200
Quebec .. . . .	134,692	271,139	610,234
Montreal-Maison-			

neuve .. . . .	77,045	241,660	470,840
Quebec .. . . .	25,147	22,329	129,609
Sherbrooke .. . . .	.....	.....	5,200
Three Rivers .. . . .	17,000	7,200	3,795
Westmount .. . . .	15,500	.....	750
Ontario .. . . .	492,492	1,001,699	1,234,530
Brantford .. . . .	10,000	8,925	13,260
Pt. William .. . . .	.....	97,450	2,150
Guelph .. . . .	2,800	11,820	14,369
Hamilton .. . . .	65,890	94,625	287,130
Kingston .. . . .	.....	5,660	11,040
Kitchener .. . . .	425	14,970	15,480
London .. . . .	16,560	29,615	46,300
Ottawa .. . . .	15,800	94,470	63,175
Peterboro' .. . . .	1,230	3,250	4,945
Port Arthur .. . . .	530	3,015	220,745
Stratford .. . . .	575	1,670	11,253
St. Catharines .. . . .	7,675	32,805	22,835
St. Thomas .. . . .	550	1,975	1,170
Toronto .. . . .	347,282	529,665	414,508
Windsor .. . . .	23,175	72,285	106,115
Manitoba .. . . .	54,900	137,902	159,610
Brandon .. . . .	250	2,252	2,060
Edmonton .. . . .	15,650	4,410	4,600
Winnipeg .. . . .	54,650	135,650	157,550
Saskatchewan .. . . .	29,225	459,100	23,300
Regina .. . . .	3,650	442,150	6,885
Moose Jaw .. . . .	18,600	7,300	5,200
Saskatoon .. . . .	6,975	9,650	11,215
Alberta .. . . .	47,850	27,410	18,900
Calgary .. . . .	32,200	23,000	14,300
British Columbia .. . . .	71,190	97,455	50,180
New Westminster .. . . .	3,900	4,300	14,185
Vancouver .. . . .	55,415	79,170	33,715
Victoria .. . . .	11,875	13,985	2,280
Total—35 cities .. . . .	\$901,930	\$2,133,781	\$2,461,162