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Labor and the Tariff

A REPLY TO A FREE TRADE CRITIC

By the Rt. Hon. John Wheatley, M.P.

(Late Minister of Health in the British Labor Government)

If I were free to devote myself exclusively to the controversy which many articles on Free Trade and Protection have aroused, I could find sufficient material for enjoyment in the writings of my critics.

Free Trade means free competition. The German traders and the Chinese traders are to be free to compete, without let or hindrance, regulation or restriction, with British traders. And within Britain the employer of "scab" labor is to have the same amount of freedom in competing with the employer of Trade Union labor.

This is the state of affairs that made Trade Unionism necessary. Trade unions exist for the express purpose of preventing free competition. If free competition as a means of raising wages is bad, it is good for trade unionism. If it is good for trade unionism, it is bad for the nation that an employer should be free to purchase labor where he can find it cheapest, by importing it from China. It should be a condition of any trade union that it should not interfere with his activities. But the scandalous conditions of labor produced in the early days of free competition as a means of raising wages forced the workers, in self-protection, to adopt Trade Unionism. In doing so they gave the first step back to the principle of free competition. Since then, in notoriously created industries where Trade Unionism was not sufficiently strong, the State has stepped in and by Trade Boards restricted free competition as the method of fixing wages. Free Traders, if consistent and courageous, would go out to smash Trade Unionism and abolish Trade Boards.

We in Britain are centuries ahead of certain peoples, and although, with our aid, they may complete the journey to our stage at a quicker rate than we traveled, we cannot sit still while they arrive.

I submit that no employer of labor, whether a private Capitalist or a Socialist community, could continue to pay more to the workers than the product of their labor would bring on the market. If the product of unskilled labor is to be admitted to the market, whether it comes from abroad or from a black spot in Britain, it will determine the price at which state-produced goods will be sold. It is necessary to get £4 for a suit of clothes in order to give the state tailor a decent standard of living. How is this £4 to be got if an employer of Chinese labor can offer a similar suit for £3?

I submit that partial Socialism under such conditions would be a farce. The sweeper, not the Socialist, would determine the standard of living. Fundamentally, the issue here is whether the individual or the community is to rule. I am submitting that as we must establish Socialist and Socialist conditions by degrees, that which we have built must be sheltered from the selfish profit-seeker and greedy bargain-hunter while we are completing the structure. The question of what we would do in a State where complete Socialism had been established or in a world federation of Socialist States is not now practical politics.

Competition and Purchasing Power
Mr. Villiers reminds me that my theory that rails purchased from Middlesbrough by Glasgow would be paid for in goods in the same way as would rails from Belgium is as old as Adam Smith. He might have gone farther and said it was as old as trade. He states that Glasgow is only able to indulge in buying dear rails from Middlesbrough because Glasgow is rich enough, but that, normally, when price is raised demand is reduced. We know from the experience of war time and what happens in America that price alone does not determine the amount of demand. The purchasing power of the people is a determining factor of equal importance. If the old competitionist view stood by itself it would teach us that when the price of rails was half the present standard the demand for rails would be double. Or there would be a surplus of purchasing power available for other things. It is a characteristic Free Trade view that as prices fall, and fall, the quantities of goods which the workers receive fall and rise and rise.

What the competitionist always left out of account was that the very circumstances which brought down the price of a commodity brought down automatically the price of the labor that produced the commodity. They did not recognize that Labor-power was a commodity, the price of which was determined, as we have all pointed out at the street corners, in exactly the same way as the price of butter and eggs.

Mr. Villiers does take into account the effect of purchasing power when dealing with my case. He points out that if Glasgow spends more on Middlesbrough rails than the sum at which it would buy the rails from Belgium it has less money left to spend on boots and shoes.

I admit that so far Mr. Villiers is correct, but I want to point out how short a distance this takes us. It is worth noting how readily he adopts the position of Free Trade individualist by pointing out that it is no business of Glasgow's to provide employment for the workers of Middlesbrough—that Glasgow's first and indeed only consideration should be its own rates and its welfare. It is not its brother's keeper. That contention was as sound as it was selfish in pre-war days. Then no one outside of the parish was his unemployed brother's keeper. Now unemployment is largely a national charge, and it is part of the policy of the Labor Party to make it entirely a national charge.

Losses and Gains
It follows as good business that Glasgow should be more interested in finding employment for men in Middlesbrough than in finding employment for men in Belgium, for whom, so far, it has no responsibility. Therefore, it becomes a mere matter of calculation whether or not it would pay us better to buy the cheaper Belgian rails. This is just one of the points which we have in mind when we claim that the trade of a national should be considered and regulated by a Committee representing the nation, which could view it from the national interest only.

Now, looking at this particular problem from the national interest only, what do we find? If we send the order to Belgium twenty men will be employed there in producing our rails, and twenty will be unemployed in Middlesbrough, for want of the order. The amount which we would save in price by sending it to Belgium, is, say, ten per cent. We decide to sacrifice this saving and to send the order to Middlesbrough and thus remove unemployment as far as the twenty men are concerned. It has cost us the ten per cent, but we have gained in employment one hundred per cent. Nationally we are ninety per cent. to the good. Mr. Villiers is not consistent when he argues that because it may cost us 10 per cent we are therefore on wrong lines.

High Wages and Cheap Commodities
My critic seems to agree that we can get high wages through the protection of Trade Unionism, and at the same time have cheap commodities through free competition in trade. Again he is correct, but only to a trifling extent. In so far as we are purchasing commodities in which British labor is not employed the cheaper we get them, if we have no moral considerations, the better. In such rare cases the price does not influence British wages, except to the extent that all wages tend to fall to the cost of subsistence. But take the case of Mr. Villier's overcoat, which "protects" him from the weather. How could he get cheap overcoats and high wages for overcoat makers? Quite clearly if the price of his overcoat is low because he has

succeeded in securing the product of Asiatic or East London labor, no manufacturer can hope to sell him an overcoat made under Trade Union conditions. So the Trade Union tailor will find himself on the street while Mr. Villiers is enjoying the blessing of sweating. It is very little comfort to the tailor to be told that it is good sound business to "sell our labor in the dearest market and buy our commodities in the cheapest." If we buy all our coats from Belgium no British tailors will be required and employment in Britain for any trade will be reduced to the minimum necessary to supply goods in exchange.

Nor does Mr. Villiers get out of his difficulty by contending that a Socialist State could rely on "work or maintenance" as a policy for unemployment. This is open to two objections. The first is that the Socialist State could not spend more on the maintenance of either employed or unemployed than its workers had the opportunity to produce.—Glasgow Forward.

Welland, Ont. Secures Industry

Welland, Ont.—A valuable addition to Welland's list of industries has been made in the securing of the Canadian plant of The Landis Machine Company of Waynesboro, Pennsylvania. After weeks of negotiation on the part of the Board of Trade and the Industrial Department of the City Council, a sale has been made to the Landis Machine Company of the property and plant formerly occupied by the Dominion Automatic Transportation Company, Limited. This property consists of 31-4 acres of land and includes a modern factory building 40 x 200 feet.

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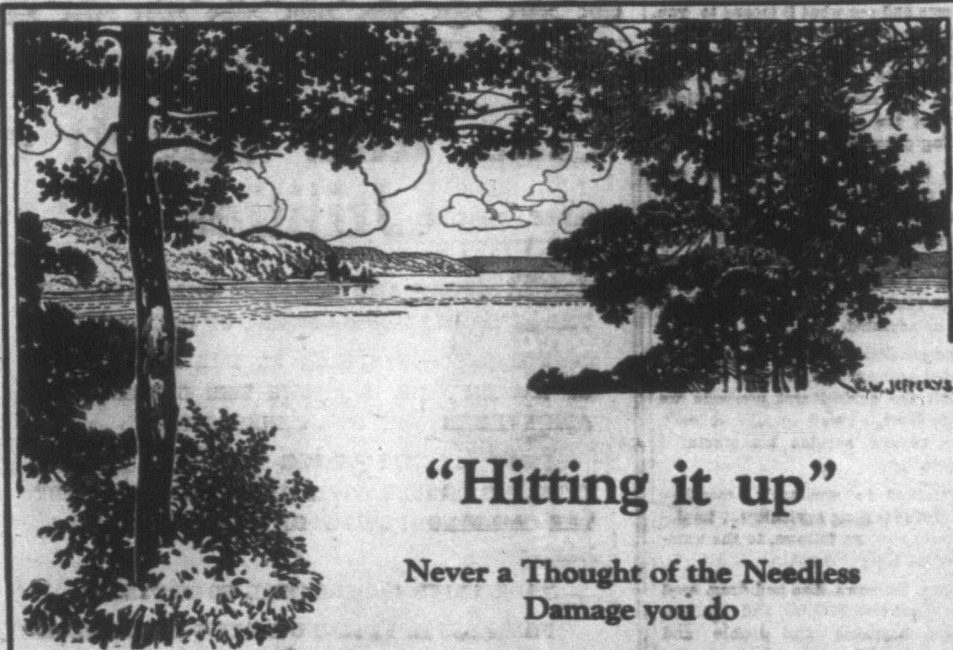
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The Hon. Geo. S. Henry, Minister

S. L. Squire, Deputy Minister

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