

PRESENT CONDITIONS OF UNREST

Most people are probably convinced that an indefinite continuance of the present condition of agitation and unrest will inevitably result in a very serious diminution of trade and in consequent loss and suffering to all classes of our population. It is, however, difficult to suggest the remedy for the evil.

There is probably no one cause which tends to promote this unrest more than the continuance of the present high prices, which bear with especial, but by no means exclusive, severity on the working classes, and which in turn lead to continual demands for increased wages to meet them. But the increase of wages itself, instead of being a remedy, simply increases the evil which it is designed to meet, and so things go round in a vicious circle from which, by that means, there is no escape.

Profiteering is, in the popular mind, one of the chief causes of high prices, but while it undoubtedly exists and is much to be condemned, it is probably only a minor contributor to the evil.

The real remedy lies not in mere palliatives like the constant increase in wages or the abolition of profiteering, but in attacking the root of the disease of which these are the consequences.

The root of the disease is that we are spending as a nation more than we earn.

The real remedy, then, for the evil of high prices lies, in the long run, in the increase of production of commodities both for export and home consumption, so that our foreign exchanges may be improved and that the ordinary laws of supply and demand may operate in normal fashion. If the supply of all necessary commodities were again brought up to the demand for them, these laws would at once operate and there would soon be a fall in prices, not perhaps to the pre-war rates, but at least to a much lower level than the present.

It should, therefore, be explained to working men that to a great extent the remedy for the evil lies in their own hands, and that it is only by their own industry that a real improvement can be effected. The interweaving of the threads of cause and effect in modern commerce, and their bearing upon our social polity, are an intricate business, but there are some, at any rate, of the principles which underlie their working that can be made clear to any ordinary intelligence, which is certainly not lacking in the great majority of our working men.

The producing power of the nation depends upon its capital almost as much as upon the industry of its people. Either without the other is shorn of half its value, and if all the capital were

equally distributed, or held by the State as trustee for the people, there would be an end to all enterprise. Neither the individuals, each of whom would have only £444 of capital, nor the State, administering the capital thus distributed, could possibly afford to run the risks which wealthy men have continually to run in the foundation of new enterprises and the exploitation of new ideas and inventions.

But, if an appeal to the working man, however direct and cogent it may be, on the lines of economic exigency, is to have its full force and effect, it must be accompanied by another appeal addressed not only to the working man, but still more to the wealthier classes. There never was a time in which greater need existed for economy, both public and private, than the present, and the working man is likely to turn a deaf ear to such an appeal as ought to be made to him if he sees that the more fortunate classes are not doing their share towards the common good.

The luxury and thoughtless extravagance indulged in at present, especially amongst some of those who through the war have acquired newly-found riches, and whose title to them is none too good, are much to be condemned. The rich and the well-to-do should not forget that they, quite as much as the working man, owe a duty to the country, and are trustees of their good fortune for the common welfare of the State.

The ostentation of wealth is bad in itself, and bad also in its indirect effects, and the influence it has upon those who are less fortunate in that respect.

To the rich, therefore, both men and women, an appeal should be made to exercise some self denial, to cease from flaunting magnificent motor cars and dresses before the eyes of those to whom such things are unattainable, to be content, each in his own degree, with a simpler life and simpler and less expensive pleasures, and to utilise the surplus which they will thus be enabled to save in helping the nation to regain its former prosperity. One can safely say that in reality they will lose little, and gain much, by so doing; for happiness in life does not, after all, consist so much in eating dinners at three or four pounds a head, or in driving motor cars, costing three or four thousand pounds a piece, as in being members of a contented and prosperous community.