

Debate on Unemployment in British House of Commons

Some Remarkable Speeches by John Burns, Keir Hardie, Harold Cox and Winston Churchill—Question Raised by the Labor Party—John Burns Takes Hopeful View—Winston Churchill Thinks Government's Plans Will Accomplish Much.

A striking debate on unemployment took place in the British House of Commons on Feb. 27. It was a battle of giants and was provoked by an amendment moved on behalf of the Labor party by Mr. Barnes, of Glasgow, expressing regret that in view of the serious distress arising from the lack of work the proposals for legislation which the Government had thought fit to recommend are "altogether inadequate for dealing effectively with the root causes of the evils arising out of unemployment." There was, he said, an army of workless workers all over the country. There was a sea of suffering surrounding around our very doors. On the previous night it even overflowed into the lobby of the House. That was a condition of things which ought to arrest the serious attention of the House. It constituted a menace to public safety and public order, but he did not dwell on that because he wished to appeal rather to sympathy and reason than to fear. Going home on the previous night on the top of a tramcar he accidentally met a friend who had witnessed the scenes around the House and in a certain hall not far away where poor people had been collected—wrongly, he thought—from all parts of London. His friend told him of scenes of struggling and starving women and children, of the wailing of the children, the moaning of the women, and the cursing of the men, and he could not help thinking that a great responsibility rested not only upon the Government but upon every member of the House. (Hear, hear.) He wished to say with the greatest emphasis and with the concurrence of his colleagues in the Labor party that the House was on its trial. It was face to face with a problem of increasing urgency, compared with which the Deastableness of the Church in Wales, electoral reform in London, and even the housing of the people sank into absolute insignificance. (Labor cheers.) He felt strongly about it, for his part he would not sit there for his part and see matters of comparative insignificance and trifles take up the time of the House.

The Causes of Unemployment. As to the number of unemployed, he said the Government had not yet grappled with the question to the extent of finding this out. The number known for certain was that 8.7 per cent of the skilled workers, or about three-quarters of a million, were out of work. This meant a loss of about a hundred millions a year—an important decrease in the national wealth, though it was human waste that appealed to him most. Among the causes of unemployment he bracketed the "two evils" of the private ownership of land and the curbing of the efficiency of labor due to the introduction of machinery and the sub-division of work. In the case of the first, for example, the number of persons employed had dropped from 1,500,000 in 1841 to 1,250,000 in 1901. The number of persons employed in the same industry had increased, and we were coming nearer to being a nation of flunkies. The reference in the King's speech to labor bureaus was like throwing a bare bone to a dog. He declined to accept it in any sense a redemption of the Prime Minister's promise last October to deal with the permanent causes of unemployment. The Labor party had always emphasized the need for fundamental remedies. They were certainly in favor of the taxation of land values, because in proportion as they taxed land they would make it easier to buy. (Laughter.) He also spoke of afforestation and the building of railways and urged that local authorities should be freed from the paralyzing hand of the central authority. He suggested for one thing that local authorities in this country, as in Germany and elsewhere, should acquire areas of land not only as a means of revenue but of employment. He did not think the distress committees throughout the country were getting all the help to which they were entitled.

For my part, he said, in concluding, if this House is going to concern itself with Tariff "reform," which he called education, retraining, and other questions which do not touch the everyday and vital needs of the people, I would just as soon be hissing as in, because he believed he should be employing our time far better by going about and getting the country to take a serious view of the present state of things.

Mr. O'Grady, Labor, East Leeds, seconded the amendment. He said they would be told to take a serious view of the country, to become more highly skilled, and to emigrate. It was quite unnecessary advice. No men in the House, he said, would be so stupid as to believe that they should be employed on their own part he would as soon be ruled by an oligarchy of devils as live under the control of a drunken democracy. He was not satisfied with what the Government had done or what they had promised to do, and he would take every advantage that the rules of the House allowed to prevent business being done until this question was dealt with properly.

Mr. Cox's Criticisms. Mr. Harold Cox, L. Preston, said he appreciated the gravity of unemployment just as much as members opposite. But he believed that the remedies the Labor members proposed, like the Unionists above the gangway, would increase the evils of unemployment. Mr. Barnes said all the troubles of mankind came from the fact that we produced for profit instead of for use—a favorite Socialist phrase. If that were a temporary member reflecting for a moment he would see that the world profit meant remuneration, and remuneration meant pay. So that all the troubles of the world came from the fact that we were paid for the work we did. (Laughter.) Mr. Barnes said that landlords were as greedy as the devil. As an illustration he mentioned that the Glasgow corporation sold some land a few years ago for 28 1/2 a square foot, and afterwards bought it back at 28 1/2 a square foot. He did not know whether the honorable member meant that as an example of the superior intelligence of municipalities as compared with private individuals. (Laughter.)

Mr. Barnes—I meant it as an in-

stance of social robbery. (Labor cheers.)

Mr. Cox—If I sold land to the honorable member at a low price and afterwards he found it worth his while to sell it back to me at a high price and I found it worth my while to buy it back at that price, where would the robbery be?

Mr. Barnes—I think it is pretty plain. The owner of the site did absolutely nothing to improve its value; he might just as well have been in or out of the land all the time the value was growing.

Mr. Cox—What he did was to risk his capital on a speculation. (Hear, hear.) I suppose the honorable member thought they were getting a good price when they sold at 2s 8d. Then Mr. O'Grady told them that 13 per cent of the value of the land was in the hands of the three previous speculators. They all sympathized. But what was the remedy suggested? The only remedy the three previous speculators had put forward was afforestation. These skilled cabinet-makers were to be set to digging holes in the ground.

Mr. O'Grady—I did not know that sailors were in the habit of digging holes.

Mr. Wilson—No, but we carry timber.

Mr. Cox was glad his honorable friend had reminded him of that, for he had intended to point out that if we were so mad as to invest the tax-payer's money in afforestation it would be much better to buy timber-growing land in Sweden, where we should make a far greater profit than could be made in afforestation in this country. It could not increase the sum total of employment unless we increased the money or the wealth available for paying the labor employed. The tax-payers spent their money in purchasing things, virtually in employing people. If we took money away from the tax-payers, we were taking it away from the people who were doing the work. It was simply meant that we threw one set of people out of work and brought another set into work. In any case afforestation could not possibly have any effect for 40 years. Another curious argument that had been advanced was that unemployment was increased by the introduction of machinery. That was true, all we had to do was to break up all machinery and go back to the days when the people ran about the streets as savages. (Laughter.) Then there would be employment for everybody.

A Member—What about the tailors?

Mr. Cox said Mr. O'Grady seemed to think that we could increase employment by diminishing the hours of labor. This was a fallacy. Unless the hours of labor were so long as to be uneconomic, the result of a reduction in the hours of labor would be to lessen the production of wealth. If we could increase employment by reducing the hours from eight to six, we would be reducing the production of wealth by eight to six, and so on until at last we should come to a point where the production of wealth would be less than the cost of production. He suggested that we should work for everybody and nobody to do any work at all. (Laughter.) Honorable members who had spoken of the need for a permanent cause of unemployment, he said, were in fact seeking capable workmen, and on the other hand were capable workmen seeking employers, but at present the two classes were separated by a great gulf of labor and time. By organizing a system of labor exchanges we might get rid of that. He suggested that we should have a system of labor exchanges, and that the double advantage of relieving the general community of a burden which it ought not to bear, and of inducing the State to distribute work in such a manner that there would be a minimum of unemployment. In conclusion he called upon those who claimed to be the champions of the people to solve the problem of unemployment to tell the House what they refused to tell the country, and to say to the country that they were going to be done. (Ministerial cheers and laughter.) What free trade professed to do was to leave people free to solve their own problems. What the Socialists below the gangway said, and equally the Socialists above the gangway (laughter), was that the state ought to undertake the solution of the problem. The tariff "reformers" were apparently that the solution could be reached by abolishing foreign trade. (Laughter.) The honorable member who said that there would be employment for everybody when each country refused to do any trade with any other country. (Laughter.)

Mr. Burns' Reply. Mr. Burns, president of the Local Government Board, could not accept the gloomy picture which Mr. Barnes had drawn of the state of things in the engineering trade and of things in general as accurate. He did not believe that the matter of unemployment. One thing that made it appear as though we were that in the old days a workman, accepting unemployment as an inevitable law, said nothing about it, whereas nowadays some people had not been out of work more than a week when they collected as if they had got their fingers in the door of a railway carriage. (Laughter.) Unemployment and pauperism were not of the dimensions which some people led us to believe. Of the 928,000 men, women and children, who were dependent on poor law relief only 11,000 were able-bodied men. Mr. O'Grady had said that he believed that by the action they intended to take they would be able in two or three years to reduce that number to 1,000 or 2,000, and to reduce the 14,000 or 17,000 casuals by various modes of treatment—not one but twenty or thirty modes—to an almost negligible quantity. Mr. O'Grady had said they would be told that workmen should be more sober. He had not intended to say a word about that, but as it had been mentioned he would tell the House one fact about a town in the North of England whose distress he had been going his best to mitigate. He got a letter from a bank manager who used to manage a bank in that town. His correspondent stated that when he

was in that town he used to pay from £50,000 to £60,000 over the counter every Friday for workmen's wages. Every Friday for workmen's wages, engineers, boiler-makers, shipbuilders, and men engaged in kindred industries, and every Friday he used to receive on the counter from £12,000 to £16,000 from the publicans of the town. He would make no comment except this, if only a tithe of the sum had been spent in insuring against unemployment through the trade unions, much of the misery and sorrow that had fallen upon the town would have been avoided. (Cheers.) It would be asked what remedies had the Government to propose, what forms of work did they intend to do?

Mr. A. Henderson (leader of the Labor party)—Hear, hear. That is what we want to know.

Mr. Burns—If I could know it in due course—decently and in order. (Laughter.) Nothing had been lost during the last three years, but some valuable experience had been gained. The scheme for the reclamation of coast land did not present quite so rosy a picture now. In the experience that had been made it cost £18,000 to reclaim 1,000 worth of land, and when the land had been reclaimed they did not know what to do with it. (Laughter.) Women's workrooms had not the attractiveness they had two or three years ago. Something like £16,000 had been spent in the reclamation of coast land, and less than 800 women, and less than £5,000 had been received from the sale of the products. He had been cautious about extending the scheme, because it would be the fear that they might compete with goods made under ordinary conditions. He did not want to repeat the economic fallacy of the honorable member of the Labor party themselves had denounced the Salvation Army and the Church Army, the fallacy of using charitable aid to drive him out of the market. (Cheers.) Then, again, we were all wiser now about labor colonies. They were no longer a celebrated remedy, but neither the majority nor the minority of the royal commission on the poor laws would look at such colonies as a remedy. Their complaint was that while disestablishment had a plain in the eyes of the public, it was a failure. The claims of the unemployed were more important than those of the Welsh dissenters. Mr. Burns had suggested absolutely nothing in a 50-minute speech, yet the day before 6,000 poor women were being sent to the workhouses in London with their hungry children. He described the King's speech as mere window-dressing, which would result in nothing for the unemployed. He urged that a proper register of the unemployed should be kept.

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certain defects at the cost of anything from £3,000,000 to £4,000,000. There were many other proposals which the Government hoped to develop if they were in power, as they hoped to be, for another three years. (General laughter.) By devoting the House and the entire session they were pledged to consider the report of the poor law commission, and go into every aspect of the problem—poor law, vagrancy, employment, child labor, and half-time labor. He hoped by that time the textile trade unions would have been converted to the wisdom in the interests of the adult unemployed, of abolishing child labor, and above all half-time labor. Afforestation would have its immediate, sympathetic, and practical consideration, and he trusted they would be able to take action before the present session was over. (Ministerial cheers.)

Mr. Crooks Disatisfied.

Mr. Crooks said he had listened anxiously to the speech of the president of the local government board in order to find out what was to be done in Ireland. Yet when he (Mr. Crooks) suggested the creation of a body in England similar to the one in Ireland, Mr. Burns said he would not touch it with a 40-foot pole. (Laughter.)

Mr. Burns—That is the Irishman's story.

Mr. Crooks—I know all about that. I know all about you, too. (Cries of "Oh" and "Order.") Proceeding, Mr. Crooks said he had listened to the speech of the president of the local government board in order to find out what was to be done in Ireland. Yet when he (Mr. Crooks) suggested the creation of a body in England similar to the one in Ireland, Mr. Burns said he would not touch it with a 40-foot pole. (Laughter.)

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would pretend for a moment to understand the misery and waste of human happiness and of human strength and energy which was going on at the present moment in this country, and he did not repudiate the responsibility of the Government to do all in its power to protect the law-abiding and willing citizen from the consequences of industrial fluctuations entirely beyond his control. But it was not easy to say what was the true remedy. We saw the phenomenon of unemployment in every country, in the newest as well as the oldest, and under every system of government, and he did not for a moment expect that it would be removed by a revival of trade. There was no evidence that the population was increasing in excess of the means of subsistence. Production was active, industry was growing, and with surprising vigor, and our wealth increased from year to year. Yet at the base of every trade there grew with the trade a fringe of casual, underpaid, or under-employed labor which was liable at any moment of depression to be converted into absolute unemployment.

Dimensions of the Problem Unknown.

Not the least of the difficulties was that the dimensions of the problem were unknown. He would not follow Mr. Barnes by attempting to discuss whether the abolition of rent and interest was the true remedy for the existing situation. Nor would he attempt to discuss whether a government department could regulate with any such the labor of the whole of Great Britain. He would not usually accuse, even by his friends, of being of a modest and retiring disposition, said Mr. Churchill, amid the fact of the movement towards the nationalization of the means of production and distribution comes to be an accomplished fact, and if a department is created to deal with the regulation of these grave matters, I earnestly hope that I may not be called upon as president of an extended board of trade to discharge such difficult duties. (Laughter.) If the speech from the throne had declared that the Government would not be able to deal with unemployment until they had dealt with the nationalization of the means of production and distribution, there would have been one argument more in favor of the movement, stronger than any that had been used in the course of the debate. (Laughter.) Mr. Cox always made speeches which interested and instructed the House. (Labor cries of "Speech.") But he was interested and instructing the House his honorable friend spoke for the people, and which to some extent would regulate the spin of the machinery. He was not at all sure that it was not possible to co-ordinate the public work in such a way as to throw public contracts into the balance when the labor market was congested. That was a point on which they were agreed at present. Then there was the question of whether there should not be certain industries, actual or potential, which could be brought into existence at periods of depression, and

Mr. Keir Hardie's Warning.

Mr. Keir Hardie (Labor, Merthyr-Tydvil), said he hoped the proceeding speaker was not under the impression that either the leader of the Labor party or its vice-chairman was in any way looking at the disestablishment of the English church in Wales. (Cheers.) Their complaint was that while disestablishment had a plain in the eyes of the public, it was a failure. The claims of the unemployed were more important than those of the Welsh dissenters. Mr. Burns had suggested absolutely nothing in a 50-minute speech, yet the day before 6,000 poor women were being sent to the workhouses in London with their hungry children. He described the King's speech as mere window-dressing, which would result in nothing for the unemployed. He urged that a proper register of the unemployed should be kept.

Afforestation.

Turning to the subject of afforestation, Mr. Burns said the Government and the country were not so grateful to Mr. Ivor Guest and the commission over which he presided for a report which showed almost satisfactory results in the case of the unemployed, afforestation in itself was good, and that incidentally it would provide employment for a large number of unemployed men. He suggested that we should work for everybody and nobody to do any work at all. (Laughter.) Honorable members who had spoken of the need for a permanent cause of unemployment, he said, were in fact seeking capable workmen, and on the other hand were capable workmen seeking employers, but at present the two classes were separated by a great gulf of labor and time. By organizing a system of labor exchanges we might get rid of that. He suggested that we should have a system of labor exchanges, and that the double advantage of relieving the general community of a burden which it ought not to bear, and of inducing the State to distribute work in such a manner that there would be a minimum of unemployment. In conclusion he called upon those who claimed to be the champions of the people to solve the problem of unemployment to tell the House what they refused to tell the country, and to say to the country that they were going to be done. (Ministerial cheers and laughter.) What free trade professed to do was to leave people free to solve their own problems. What the Socialists below the gangway said, and equally the Socialists above the gangway (laughter), was that the state ought to undertake the solution of the problem. The tariff "reformers" were apparently that the solution could be reached by abolishing foreign trade. (Laughter.) The honorable member who said that there would be employment for everybody when each country refused to do any trade with any other country. (Laughter.)

Mr. Burns' Reply.

Mr. Burns, president of the Local Government Board, could not accept the gloomy picture which Mr. Barnes had drawn of the state of things in the engineering trade and of things in general as accurate. He did not believe that the matter of unemployment. One thing that made it appear as though we were that in the old days a workman, accepting unemployment as an inevitable law, said nothing about it, whereas nowadays some people had not been out of work more than a week when they collected as if they had got their fingers in the door of a railway carriage. (Laughter.) Unemployment and pauperism were not of the dimensions which some people led us to believe. Of the 928,000 men, women and children, who were dependent on poor law relief only 11,000 were able-bodied men. Mr. O'Grady had said that he believed that by the action they intended to take they would be able in two or three years to reduce that number to 1,000 or 2,000, and to reduce the 14,000 or 17,000 casuals by various modes of treatment—not one but twenty or thirty modes—to an almost negligible quantity. Mr. O'Grady had said they would be told that workmen should be more sober. He had not intended to say a word about that, but as it had been mentioned he would tell the House one fact about a town in the North of England whose distress he had been going his best to mitigate. He got a letter from a bank manager who used to manage a bank in that town. His correspondent stated that when he

was in that town he used to pay from £50,000 to £60,000 over the counter every Friday for workmen's wages. Every Friday for workmen's wages, engineers, boiler-makers, shipbuilders, and men engaged in kindred industries, and every Friday he used to receive on the counter from £12,000 to £16,000 from the publicans of the town. He would make no comment except this, if only a tithe of the sum had been spent in insuring against unemployment through the trade unions, much of the misery and sorrow that had fallen upon the town would have been avoided. (Cheers.) It would be asked what remedies had the Government to propose, what forms of work did they intend to do?

Mr. A. Henderson (leader of the Labor party)—Hear, hear. That is what we want to know.

Mr. Burns—If I could know it in due course—decently and in order. (Laughter.) Nothing had been lost during the last three years, but some valuable experience had been gained. The scheme for the reclamation of coast land did not present quite so rosy a picture now. In the experience that had been made it cost £18,000 to reclaim 1,000 worth of land, and when the land had been reclaimed they did not know what to do with it. (Laughter.) Women's workrooms had not the attractiveness they had two or three years ago. Something like £16,000 had been spent in the reclamation of coast land, and less than 800 women, and less than £5,000 had been received from the sale of the products. He had been cautious about extending the scheme, because it would be the fear that they might compete with goods made under ordinary conditions. He did not want to repeat the economic fallacy of the honorable member