



Fabian Tract No. 185.

The Abolition of the Poor Law

By Mrs. Sidney Webb.

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Poor laws.



THE ABOLITION OF THE POOR LAW.

For everything there is an appropriate time. There is a time to work and a time to play; a time to eat and a time to sleep. In the politics of the Labour Movement there is a time for speech and a time for action; a time for the declaration of our widest principles and purposes and a time for achieving particular reforms that are part of our programme. Now is the appointed time for securing one valuable and far-reaching improvement in our social organisation, which will put an end to much suffering and demoralisation, and open up the way to further emancipation. Now is the time when a determined effort by Trade Union Branches, Trades Councils, Co-operative Societies, the Women's Co-operative Guild, the Women's Labour League, Socialist organisations, and other progressive bodies from one end of England to the other would secure nothing less than the total and complete

ABOLITION OF THE POOR LAW.

This has been recommended by a strong Government Committee, in which the Labour Movement was represented by Mr. J. H. Thomas, M.P. (National Union of Railwaymen), and myself. The Government is prepared to carry it promptly into law against all vested interests if the people declare themselves emphatically enough. The proposal is now submitted for the verdict of "public opinion."* It is the business of every section of the Labour Movement to express itself upon it promptly, loudly, and energetically. We can, if we like to take the trouble, at one blow, get rid not only of the Workhouse, the "Stone Yard," the Casual Ward, and the Board of Guardians, but also of the demoralising Poor Law itself, and of the very idea of "pauperism."

WHAT THE POOR LAW IS.

The English Poor Law, which dates from 1601, was in its time a notable expression of the right of the individual in distress to be helped by the community, and of the duty of the community to rescue from want even the weakest of its members. But the Poor Law and its administration became subject to grave abuses, which were drastically cut down in 1834. Unfortunately the system then adopted was one of limiting the public assistance to the "relief of destitution"; of refusing to help until "destitution" had set in; and of a rigid "deterrence" of all applications for relief by (a) making "pauperism" a disgrace; (b) treating applicants harshly and discourteously; (c) surrounding the relief by deliberately unpleasant conditions, such as "the offer of the Workhouse" and the imposition of penal tasks like picking oakum or "the Stone

* See the significant note by the Minister of Reconstruction prefixed to the Report of the Local Government Committee of the Ministry of Reconstruction on the Transfer of the Functions of the Boards of Guardians (Cd. 8917), which will be sent on application to the Fabian Bookshop, 25, Tophill Street, Westminster, S.W.1, enclosing 3d. in stamps.

Yard." The result has been that the Poor Law is universally hated. The Workhouse, even when humanely managed, is looked on with detestation. The degrading treatment of homeless wayfarers in the Casual Ward is furiously resented by all honest travellers. The unemployed have repeatedly refused to be relegated to the tender mercies of the Boards of Guardians. Men sometimes go to prison rather than seek Poor Law relief. Every year a few starve to death rather than accept the Poor Law Guardians' bitter bread. Yet in many a rural district there is no other shelter for the homeless, no other place for the sick, no other maternity hospital, no other refuge for the orphans, and no other asylum for the feeble-minded, no other home for the helpless aged than the General Mixed Workhouse in which they are all interned.

"CITIZENS, NOT PAUPERS."

Meanwhile there has been growing up, especially under the Town Councils of the most progressive great cities, another system of meeting our needs, not as paupers, eating the bread of charity, but as citizens, supplying ourselves collectively with what would be beyond our reach as individuals. Through the Local Education Authority we provide for our children, not only schools and teachers, but also books for them to read—if they are ailing, also medical treatment—if they are hungry, even food. Through the Local Health Authority we provide hospitals for such of us as are ill, and help in maternity and infancy, not as a matter of charity, but as a matter of the public health, in which all citizens, rich or poor, are equally concerned. Through the Old Age Pensions Committee we issue pensions (as yet far too small in amount, and beginning too late) to such of us over seventy as are in need of them, as a matter not of favour but of legal right. In all these and many other municipal services there is no "stigma of pauperism," and nothing disgraceful. When we need this help we are dealt with, not as paupers, but as citizens. And whilst the Town Council administration is very far from perfect, this is found to be much the most successful way of dealing with the cases. The municipal hospitals, the municipal schools, the municipal arrangements for maternity and infancy have been proved to be far and away more successful in preventing disease and death, and illiteracy, than the rival Poor Law institutions—not because the Poor Law institutions are always badly managed, but because they have to be run, even by the kindest and most efficient Board of Guardians, under the cramping and demoralising Poor Law, and subject to the minutely restrictive regulations of the Poor Law Division of the Local Government Board.

WASTE OF MONEY.

Another result is, in most of the populous cities, a terrible waste of public money in the duplication of institutions and overlapping of services. The Boards of Guardians provide everywhere, in one way or another, for maternity and infancy, for children needing schooling, for the sick and infirm, for the feeble-minded and lunatics, for the aged, and for the able-bodied unemployed—provided that these come under the definition of "destitute." The Town Council has its own arrangements for helping the mothers

and infants irrespective of destitution, runs its own set of schools, has its own doctors and nurses, administers its own hospitals, sanatoria and asylums, issues pensions to the aged, and even (through the Distress Committee) provides for the able-bodied unemployed. This double set of services and institutions for the same classes of people is wasteful and extravagant. It means an unnecessary multiplication of inquiries and officials. One or other—either the Poor Law system or the municipal system—must go. Which shall it be?

WHAT THE COMMITTEE RECOMMENDS.

The "Local Government Committee of the Ministry of Reconstruction" proposes that—

(a) The entire Poor Law, with all the Orders of the Poor Law Division of the Local Government Board, the whole system of "deterrence," and all "taint of pauperism" should come to an end;

(b) The Workhouse, the "Stone Yard," and the "Casual Ward" should be abolished; and

(c) The Boards of Guardians should cease to exist.

It is proposed that all the buildings and other property of the Poor Law Authorities should be handed over (with proper adjustments for differences of area and for debts) to the directly elected Town and County Councils, to be made use of for the services already administered by their Education, Health, Asylums, and other Committees, in whatever way these Councils find most convenient.

All the present officers of the Poor Law Authorities would either be offered situations at least equivalent in value to those they now hold, or else be liberally compensated for loss of office or for any diminution of emoluments of all kinds.

The Poor Rate would no longer be levied.

Thus the whole Poor Law system would be wound up and finally got rid of.

But we must take care that all the people now dealt with under the Poor Law are provided for, without disturbance or the break of a single day, not only as well as they now are, but better; and that their legal right to maintenance is preserved.

Let us first consider the case of the County Boroughs, the eighty-two large towns like Manchester and Birmingham, which are now wholly governed by their directly elected Town Councils.*

THE SICK AND INFIRM.

It would be the duty of the Town Council, acting through its Health Committee, to take under its care, and to provide for under the Public Health Acts, along with those whom it already looks after, all the sick and infirm persons (including maternity and infancy and the aged needing institutional care) whom the Board of Guardians now provides for. The Health Committee would enlarge its present staff of doctors, nurses, and health visitors under its chief medical officer; and would increase its institutional accommodation (probably by using for this purpose some of the buildings

*The complications presented by London and the other Administrative Counties are explained on a later page.

transferred to the Council) so as to be able to merge among its existing patients, without any distinction according to poverty or riches, all the various classes of sick and infirm persons now in the Poor Law institutions. The Health Committee need not interfere with any voluntary hospitals already existing in the town, although it would probably wish to enter into mutually advantageous arrangements with these hospitals for particular cases or classes of cases. Nor is it suggested for the moment that there need be any change in the work of the Local Insurance Committee or in that of the doctors on the panel. Any reform of the Insurance Act must be left to the future.

THE CHILDREN OF SCHOOL AGE.

It would be the duty of the Town Council, acting through its Education Committee, to make, under the Education Acts, all provision required for the children now under the Poor Law who are able to attend school. Already most of these boys and girls attend the Council's schools; but some of them are in residential (Poor Law) schools or "Cottage Homes," and where these exist they would be transferred, subject to proper adjustments for difference of area, to the Council, and become part of its ordinary educational machinery, available without distinction for all orphans and other children needing board and lodging as well as schooling. Other "pauper" children are now in "Scattered Homes," which would equally pass to the Council. Others are "boarded out," and would likewise be henceforth arranged for by the Council. No child would henceforth be a pauper.

THE PERSONS OF UNSOUND MIND.

It would be the duty of the Council, acting through its Asylums Committee (together with its Mental Deficiency Committee, if this exists separately), to make all the necessary provision for persons of unsound mind, including idiots and the feeble-minded, whether or not they are formally "certified" under the Lunacy or Mental Deficiency Acts (though without any power of compulsorily detaining those not so "certified"). The Asylums Committee would, therefore have to increase its institutional accommodation—not necessarily on the present expensive scale of regular lunatic asylums—so as to provide proper homes and treatment for the feeble-minded and mentally deficient folk now herded together in the General Mixed Workhouses. Some of the Poor Law buildings to be transferred to the Councils could doubtless be adapted to this purpose. All persons of unsound mind would be freed from the "stigma of pauperism," and would be properly treated without distinction of class in respect of their unfortunate mental infirmity, and not in respect of their poverty.

THE UNEMPLOYED.

Under the Poor Law there is nothing for the able-bodied man who seeks in vain for employment, except what is really imprisonment in the Workhouse—it may be under worse than prison conditions, in an "Able-bodied Test Workhouse." If the labourer tramps away in search of work he finds shelter only under degrading conditions in the Casual Ward. Only in extreme distress will the Poor Law Authorities provide employment outside the Work-

house, and then only at stone-breaking or other valueless labour, not at wages, but on a starvation pittance. So futile and disgraceful is the Poor Law system with regard to the able-bodied that even the Conservative Government of 1905 had to abandon it, and by the Unemployed Workmen Act to set up Distress Committees (and in London the Central Unemployed Body), working in conjunction with the Borough Councils. But these Distress Committees, which organise "relief works" and "farm colonies," are cramped in their powers. They are empowered neither to prevent the occurrence of unemployment by regularising the total demand for labour, nor yet find situations at wages for the unemployed, nor yet to provide "maintenance under training" for the unemployed, nor yet, frankly, to admit the demand of the Labour Party's "Right to Work" Bill.

What is now proposed by the Government Committee is that the whole business of dealing with the unemployment problem in each town should be placed, with new statutory powers, in the hands of the Town Council, which will be required to appoint a "Prevention of Unemployment and Training Committee," on which "*Organised Labour*" is to have a special right to be represented. This committee will be expressly empowered to prevent the occurrence of Unemployment by keeping the total demand for labour in the town as far as practicable at a uniform level; to find situations for men and women; to provide maintenance and training for any who are unemployed; to provide village settlements if required; to assist towards migration or emigration of families wishing to move elsewhere; and generally to do whatever can be done to deal satisfactorily with the difficulty. As the Workhouse, the Casual Ward, and the "Stone Yard" will have come to an end with the Poor Law itself, there can be no reversion to these barbarisms.

This is a most important reform. One of its most important features is the right to be conceded to "*Organised Labour*" to be specially represented on the committee. The Trades Council and the Trade Union Branches must see to it that this representation is effectively given, as, by explicit order of the Government, it has been given on the Local War Pensions Committees, by the Trades Council (where it is fully representative) or the principal Trade Union Branches in the locality *being allowed to nominate their own representatives*.* Where this is not done, and the Town Council chooses what it considers to be "representatives of Labour" (as happened by a blunder of the Ministry of Food in the Food Control Committees), the result is nearly always failure. The Trade Unions must insist, therefore, on Labour having the right to nominate its own representatives on the "Prevention of Unemployment and Training Committee," as the Government intends and desires that it should do.

HOME ASSISTANCE.

There remains the large class of persons in need, for whom the best form of help is a weekly payment to "maintain the home." The widows with young children, the old people who can get

* See Report of the Parliamentary Committee of the Trades Union Congress, Bristol, 1916.

decently looked after, the men and women crippled by chronic disease, the workers left temporarily without resources through some misfortune—how harshly and cruelly they have often been treated by the Poor Law Guardians, sometimes by the direct instigation of the Poor Law Division of the Local Government Board, in pursuance of the policy of always “offering the Workhouse” and trying to prohibit all Outdoor Relief.

This is now to come to an end. The Poor Law Orders, including the Outrelief Regulation Order, will drop. There will be no question of Poor Relief. There will be no Workhouse with which to threaten the applicants: The Town Council is to appoint its own committee, the “Home Assistance Committee,” which is, under new statutory powers, to be responsible for granting “Mothers’ Pensions” to widows, under the name of “home assistance,” for all cases which can best be helped in this way. This committee is to seek admission to suitable hospitals for those who are sick and who need to go to hospital; to procure admission to appropriate boarding schools for orphan and other children requiring this; to see that the old people, and the chronically afflicted, and the feeble-minded are properly cared for; to become the guardian of orphan and deserted children; and to look after the interests of all the families who come to it for help. This “Home Assistance Committee” is to be concerned only with “maintaining the home,” and—this is very important—is specifically not to have any institution of its own which it might be tempted to use as an alternative!

THE COUNTY COUNCIL.

In this way all the people now looked after by the Boards of Guardians under the Poor Law as paupers would henceforth be looked after as citizens by the Town Council itself through its several committees.

The same system would come into force in the administrative counties, with some necessary adjustments. In London, for instance, it is proposed that all the Poor Law buildings should pass to the London County Council, and that all necessary institutions for the sick and infirm, the persons of unsound mind, and the orphan and deserted children should be maintained by that Council—the Metropolitan Asylums Board and the Central Unemployed Body ceasing to exist, as well as the Boards of Guardians—whilst the Metropolitan Borough Councils would take over, under their own Health Committees and their own medical officers of health, the present outdoor medical staffs of the Boards of Guardians, and set up their own “Home Assistance Committees” to grant “home assistance” and “maintain the home.” The London County Council would undertake by its “Prevention of Unemployment and Training Committee” the whole responsibility for preventing the occurrence of Unemployment by keeping the total demand for labour in London as far as practicable regular from year to year and throughout each year; and for providing in the most suitable way for the unemployed. And, in order to equalise the burden as between rich districts and poor, it is proposed that two-thirds of all the expenditure of the Metropolitan Borough Councils under these heads should, under proper rules, be repaid by the London County Council. In this way the poor districts would no longer be crushed

by such heavy local rates, to the advantage of the richer districts.

In the Administrative Counties other than London much the same sort of arrangements are proposed. But all the places having 50,000 population which are not County Boroughs will, for this purpose, have the same complete independence as if they were County Boroughs. This meets the need of such places as Tottenham and Willesden and Rhondda. The children of school age will be provided for by the Local Education Authority, whatever it is. The persons of unsound mind will be dealt with by the Asylums Committee of the County Council. The County Council will set up "Prevention of Unemployment and Training" and "Home Assistance" Committees, and these, aided by District Committees in the different localities, on which the local councillors will sit, will look after all the cases. With regard to the provision to be made for the sick and infirm (including maternity and the aged requiring institutional care), it is suggested that the responsibility should be with the County Council, and that it should at once submit a scheme, showing how it proposes to make the necessary provision for all the various needs for all parts of the County. If any Borough or Urban District which is important enough to be a Local Education Authority very much desires to be independent as regards this new and enlarged Health service, and can show itself prepared to make proper provision without delay at the expense of its own rates, it is suggested that it might (under proper conditions of co-operation with the County scheme) be allowed to run its own hospitals and homes for the infirm aged, its own scheme of maternity and infancy care, and its own medical and nursing service. But no district is to be allowed to "contract out" in order to be free to neglect its duty.*

Such, in summarised form, is the plan for the breaking up of the Poor Law and the abolition of pauperism, which the Government is understood to be prepared to put before Parliament *if public opinion demands it*. Of its advantage to the poor, and also to the nation as a whole, it is unnecessary to speak. Three questions are asked about it.

CAN THE COUNCILS DO ALL THE WORK?

The answer is: Yes, easily, if the councillors set about it properly, and so organise their business that the elected representatives do the work of representatives, and do not attempt—a fault of many a councillor—to take upon themselves work which ought to be done by the salaried municipal officials, whom the elected representatives ought only to appoint, supervise, and direct. The existing Education, Health, and Asylums Committees will not find their work seriously increased merely because the numbers under their care have grown. But two new committees must be manned (the "Prevention of Unemployment and Training Committee" and

* The various incidental functions of the Poor Law Authorities are, of course, to be provided for. The administration of the Vaccination Acts and of those relating to the Registration of Births, Marriages and Deaths will pass to the Local Health Authority. The appointment of the Assessment Committee, where this is now made by the Board of Guardians, will go to the County Council, pending a complete reform of assessment and rating.

the "Home Assistance Committee"); and there will be, under the other committees, additional institutions to be looked after by new sub-committees. The need for more men (and especially for more women, and for both men and women of experience in the special work to be done) must be faced. The number of councillors cannot usually be increased with advantage or without making the Council itself too large for efficiency. There seems no alternative but to give the Council power to add to each committee a minority from outside the Council. This resort to unelected persons is sometimes thought to be against Democratic theory. But, after all, the Council itself has still the decision. The committee or the sub-committee can act only under the Council's orders. What is more important, this plan of Co-optation, within due limits, is found to work well. It has long been of great use in most large towns in the case of Libraries and Museums Committees. It was at first strongly objected to in the case of the Education Committee, but after fifteen years' trial very few Education Committees would now wish to abandon it. It would be of considerable value to have some representatives of the Local Insurance Committee on the Health Committee. The same thing would be of great assistance to the Asylums Committee, which has everywhere a most burdensome task, for which many of the councillors can with difficulty find time. And, in the case of the Prevention of Unemployment and Training Committee, *it becomes of very special value if it enables the Trades Council and the principal Trade Union Branches in the district to nominate their own representatives to this Committee.* If only for this reason alone, Organised Labour should think twice before it condemns the suggestion.

WILL IT RAISE THE RATES?

The reform ought to lower the rates, not raise them. The General Rate for the Town or County Council's expenditure will necessarily go up; but, on the other hand, *the Poor Rate will cease altogether.* There will have to be more spent in proper provision for the sick and on maternity and infant care; but, on the other hand, the present extravagant duplication of institutions and multiplication of officials will come to an end. Moreover, the Government has already agreed to propose to Parliament an extensive new Grant in Aid of all Health services, as well as increased Education Grants; and these ought to be sufficient at least to prevent any increase in the rates.

CAN SUCH A REFORM BE GOT THROUGH WHILST THE WAR LASTS?

It *must* be got through promptly, even whilst we are at war, because it is supremely important to put our social machinery in order before Peace is declared. The very day after Peace is assured the great industrial dislocation and "general post" of workers will begin. The munition workers will be suddenly and promptly dismissed. The millions of soldiers will be rapidly discharged to a labour market which will, at least, be disorganised, and may (owing to shortage of raw material) be calamitously over-

stocked. More than eight millions of men and women will lose their employment within a year or so. There will presently be hundreds of thousands of men and women seeking situations. And disease will increase. The close of a war has always been a time of increased sickness. Many thousands of "carriers" of disease from foreign countries will be scattered among the whole population. However optimistic we may be as to "Trade after the War," the nation cannot fail to have to face Unemployment, Disease, and Want in thousands of homes. We need to set our house in order before the time comes. "Do it now" rather than "Wait and See."

The Ministry of Health Bill is waiting. The Maternity and Infancy ("Baby-saving") Bill is overdue. Would it not be the right course—one overcoming many objections—to insert the necessary clauses abolishing the Poor Law in the same Bill as the other two reforms, and thus put through the whole reorganisation at once.

You are requested—

1. To get resolutions passed by every organisation with which you are connected asking the Government promptly to carry the Abolition of the Poor Law.
2. To get such resolutions sent to the Prime Minister and also to the member of Parliament for the constituency.
3. To get deputations sent to your member of Parliament asking for his help in the matter.
4. To make it a test question at any Parliamentary Election.
5. To get it brought forward for discussion in your Town or County Council.
6. To write a letter to the local newspaper urging the necessity for the Abolition of the Poor Law.

APPENDIX.

For further information see the following, any of which would be sent on receipt of remittance by the Fabian Bookshop, 25, Tothill Street, London, S.W.1:—

Report of Local Government Committee of the Ministry of Reconstruction on the Transfer of the Functions of the Boards of Guardians (cd. 8917). Price 3½d., post free.

Poor Law Commission, 1905-9. Majority Report, 2 vols.; Minority Report, 1 vol. (The Minority Report, which was that of the Labour representatives on the Commission, contains a complete account of the Poor Law and the provision for the Unemployed, and remains still the best description of the whole system.)

English Poor Law Policy. By Sidney and Beatrice Webb. 6s. net (postage 5d.). A detailed analysis of the changes between 1834 and 1907.

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