

Poplarism--A Fight For the Unemployed

EDITOR'S NOTE.—Here is the first of a series of articles that will run in the DAILY WORKER during the week, by J. T. Murphy, the prominent British Communist and trade unionist. He tells of the brilliant fight of the workers of Poplar, the big working class district in London, that has always carried on a tremendous fight against labor's biggest problems, among them that of unemployment. Murphy writes as follows:

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By J. T. MURPHY.

When the Poplar Board of Guardians, headed by their Communist leader, Edgar Lansbury, and his father, George Lansbury, waited on the new Minister of Health, John Wheatley, and secured from him the rescinding of the Mond Order of 1922, they levelled a challenge which has roused Liberals and Tories alike, in the defense of class interests. Not so much because Wheatley had cancelled an order which none of his predecessors dared put into operation, but because it registered the triumph of a new principle in dealing with the problem of unemployment which, if allowed to develop thruout the country, would shake the foundations upon which capitalist economy had been operating for a century. Poplar declared that if the workers appealed to them for relief because of their inability to find the means of subsistence then they must give relief according to the needs of the applicants without regard to wages paid in the neighborhood. If wages were lower than the relief which was granted then that did not prove that the relief was too high but that the working conditions of the workers were a scandal to civilization.

Tax Rich, Help Workers.

So consistently had they applied their principles in one of the worst areas in the kingdom so far as unemployment and living conditions are concerned, that it passed beyond the power of the Poplar Guardians to find the money and money had to be secured from other authorities. This broke down the independence of the guardians in relation to relief, and forced the inequalities of the districts, both in numbers of unemployed and relief payments, right to the front. The higher authorities prosecuted the Poplar Guardians and forced them into prison for six weeks. But the Guardians won. By their victory they were able to transfer 250,000 Pounds per annum onto the other boroughs of the Metropolis so that the rich boroughs have now to pay where pre-

viously they escaped. It is this extraction of money from the pockets of the rich and the attack upon the low wage standards along lines which annoy the supply and demand politicians and employers, that is upsetting the equanimity of the ruling class. Poplarism is a class war attack along the hunger line.

The counter attack by Asquith, leader of the Manchester School of Liberals, only served to carry the fight a stage further. George Lansbury's reply damned the whole institution of poor law administration. Poor law relief in England has been a safety valve against revolution for a hundred years and more. But it has not stood alone. There is in-door relief when the applicant goes into what is called the workhouse. There is out-door relief. There is state insurance and countless charitable organizations operating on this problem. Asquith demands the revision of the poor law because Poplarism is in danger of making it into a weapon for the extraction of money from the rich and damaging the bargaining power for low wages in the labor market. Lansbury calls for new methods of dealing with relief because the incident of its operation is demoralizing and hateful to the workers.

History of Poor Law.

The history of the poor law in England is one of the most terrible to recount. It stretches far back to the beginning of the seventeenth century, and its trail along the intervening centuries is wet with the blood and tears of the aged, the infirm, the broken, the demoralized and battered by the soul destroying machine of a developing capitalism. It is a story of horrors only paralleled by the stories of the slave trade. By the act of Elizabeth in 1601 the state for the first time "acknowledged its responsibility to the poor and destitute." Previously this had been the function of the church. The parish (a village or group of villages) constituted the unit and the applicants for relief had to apply to the overseer or a magistrate for relief. A century later application was first to the overseer and if refused then to the magistrate. The form of relief was either: (1) out-door relief, or a weekly pension of a shilling or two at home; (2) in-door relief in a workhouse, or house of industry. The eighteenth century saw an impetus given to the workhouse form of relief, for the overseers were empowered to farm out the poor and any applicant for relief was refused without they expressed a willing-

ness to go into the workhouse. Workhouses accordingly grew apace. But they were dreaded and hated by the poor for their dirt, diseases and devastating fevers that swept thru them. Thru all the period of the enclosure acts when the landlords drove the laborers from the land and stole the common land from the people, and the whole period of what is known as the industrial revolution it is one long horror. When the French Revolution drove the ruling class of Britain into nervous alarm and savage repression of the workers the development of the poor law by what is known as the Speenhamland act drove matters to the very limits of endurance. By this act every wage laborer in the country was reduced to the pauper level. "The magistrates resolved that a certain definite sum was 'absolutely necessary for the support of the poor, industrious laborer and that when the utmost industry of a family cannot produce the under-mentioned sums, it must be made up by the overseer exclusive of rent'."

Pauperization of Workers.

This allowance system spread like wildfire. Why bother about paying wages except at the very lowest level? If they were not getting enough let them go to the guardians. The workers were driven to the guardians and farmed out by them. Universal pauperism prevailed. It has been left for the twentieth century to repeat the eighteenth. Thousands of miners in Wales, Lancashire and Scotland are repeating today the experiences of the first battalions of the proletariat of industrial England.

The revolts of those years, the persecutions, the hangings, the banishments, the imprisonments, the beatings, seem to belong to an inferno of the imagination. But they broke down the old laws and in 1883 the law which is still the foundation of the poor law activities was secured. By this act the Boards of Guardian are separate from the borough city and county councils, able to levy their own rates and make their own payments. So long as there is no crisis, no over straining of resources, no great inequalities in payments and resources they jog along the continually the subject of investigation, complaint and condemnation. Local parsons, smug shop keepers, the busybodies anxious for the "dear poor" were always busy with them. While the workers hated them, treated them with contempt, and would not go to them until thoroely down and out. It was not until the wholesale breakdown of state insurance and every other

means of relief drove the workers en masse onto the Guardians, that the Guardians have been again thrown into the limelight and the previous regulations have broken down. When thousands of workers marched from one board to another, surrounded, threatened them, locked them in their board meetings, it was no longer possible to keep up the Pecksniff virtues of prying into every nook and cranny of the domestic life of the workers before coming to their aid. Every commission of inquiry that has been held has condemned the Guardians mostly for different reasons. But now they have got to go because the workers have broken them as a means of suppressing their activities and turned them to account as weapons of attack.

Communist Program.

The Liberal Party is accordingly proposing the abolition of the Boards of Guardians and the merging of the County and Borough Councils. The Webbs and the Poor Law commissions are much in accord and there is every probability of the Labor Party and the Labor Government moving along these lines.

The Communist Party has put forward another alternative. We demand not only the abolition of the Poor Law institutions but State responsibility for payment of relief to unemployed and the administration of the relief to be made by the workers themselves; thru the trades unions. The Party challenges the principle of that democracy which compels the workers to go cap in hand to the local grocer or parson or creature of the petty bourgeoisie. The workers are capable of administering state insurance thru the unions, why not unemployment relief too? This the party argues also would help to keep the unemployed and employed workers together and force upon the union leaders the task of facing up to the problem of unemployment in its sharpest form. The Party has had some success in its campaign. The first demand in the unemployed Charter issued by the General Council of the Trades Union Congress and the Unemployed Workers Committee contains 'the Communist Party proposal. Once on a time the employers granted relief as a means to reduce wages and to crush the workers with their administrative machinery. Today the workers are forcing them to grant relief and taking the administration from their hands. That's the meaning of Poplarism!