

A SIDELIGHT ON BRITISH LABOUR

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I

WHAT is the most impressive achievement of the British working classes? Not their trade unions, for all industrial countries have trade unions; not even their recent political success, great though this has been, for Australia has had Labour governments, and political greatness consists in governing well rather than in getting into power. Their most impressive achievement is the great federation of working men's co-operative stores, which were the majority of working class families in England and Scotland. This has been the great school of industrial self-government in Britain; and the constructive capacity which the co-operative movement has elicited is some guarantee that the Labour party, whose ranks are full of zealous co-operators, will govern the country with sanity as well as with courage. Working men and working women, who have shown themselves capable of building up and managing with jealous care a business with an annual turn-over of two hundred millions sterling and an army of nearly two hundred thousand employees, will not plunge England into anarchy. To the best of their power they will administer the country as they have administered their own affairs, in a spirit of trusteeship for the welfare of the many and the uplifting of those who live by work.

This movement was born in an age of great social agony. The pioneers were starving handloom weavers, and their story can be read in numerous textbooks and monographs. The purpose of this short article is to show how in substituting co-operation for competition the early co-operators substituted a better for a worse. The free breath of competition rendered great services to the expansion of British industry and commerce but competition was carried to excess, and its excesses hurt the working classes first and most. If we remember what the working classes went through in the nineteenth century, and the means whereby they improved their lot, we shall understand the spirit in which their leaders are now addressing themselves to the high task of governing the nation. The details which follow are derived entirely from official evidence given before Parliament.

II

"Smugness" was one of the seven deadly virtues of the early Victorian era. But the self-righteous serenity of the "desert-island" economists must have been somewhat clouded by the evidence given in that startling series of Royal Commissions on social subjects which began with the Hand-loom Weavers' Commission of 1839. Not the least interesting of these enquiries is that of the Parliamentary Committee on the Adulteration of Food-stuffs, which sat 1855-57.

The theory that the individual citizen was the best guardian of his own interests had, by this date, been somewhat undermined. It is doubtful if it ever had been really believed except by fanatical adherents to political or economic dogma, though it had been freely used as a powerful weapon in the cause of commercial self-interest. In such a matter as the people's food it proved to be nothing but the cynical abandonment of the unprotected poor to the tender mercies of the profit-monger. The older political theory of paternal government by divine right or by right of social status had at least insisted on the purity and honesty of merchandise and food exposed for sale in public; the wool staple and all the other market staples offered a warranty to the purchaser. The assize of bread and other foodstuffs afforded at least the consolation of pure food and drink to the owner of even the slenderest purse. In various guises these mediaeval protections survived into the nineteenth century, but the growth of the new industrial life made them archaic and ineffective. In the Municipal Corporations Act of 1835 certain fresh powers were designated, but in the event they were little used. By 1850 adulteration of foodstuffs had become not only a systematic practice, but even a regular and recognized trade.

It is a curious reflection on the dominant political theory of the nineteenth century that while the vigilance of the Excise kept the supplies to the wholesale markets comparatively pure, because adulteration constituted a fraud on the public revenue, the individual purchaser was almost completely unprotected against the ravages of the retailer. It would be charitable to believe that the retailer yielded to the contagion of example under the hard pressure of free (and unscrupulous) competition; but, unfortunately, while competition kept the price down, it also kept the quality distinctly below the standard necessary for the maintenance of public health.

To twentieth century ears it seems incredible that only seventy

years ago the "sophistication" of milk should have been so accepted a custom that in the poorer parts of the metropolis three qualities of milk were sold, at 2d, 3d. and 4d. per quart, the price reflecting (and being *known* to reflect) the amount of chalk and water in the milk! In the whole range of other foodstuffs, however, this impudent manipulative publicity was not so blatant, and the adulterations were more subtle and frequently more noxious.

The working man, as always, was the worst sufferer. Was he a *vegetarian*? Then he was almost sure to absorb Prussian blue with his tea, starch powder with his cocoa, and at least chicory and probably burnt acorns with his coffee. Was he "fond of his pint"? Then there was hardly a public-house in the metropolis at which the beer was not let down with water, and its intoxicating qualities dulled by the addition of a narcotic type of drug. But whether *vegetarian* or otherwise, he was bound to eat bread, the colour of which had been improved by an admixture of alum. His butter was well dosed with water; his cheese was coloured with harmful chemicals; his pepper, mustard and vinegar were grossly adulterated with brickdust, starch and sulphuric acid. As likely as not the meat that he supposed wholesome was cut from a "tibby" or "ragging bob," a beast whose slaughter had anticipated its death from one of the epidemics of the farmyard. Had he bought confectionery, especially the decorative "French" variety, for his children, they would have run considerable risk, for the colouring matters used in confectionery manufacture were almost exclusively *artificial*, and very frequently highly poisonous.

In the course of one day a man might take in the very ordinary *course* of daily life as many as twenty different poisonous adulterations into his system. The accumulated effects of these impurities must *sooner* have laid him sooner or later on his sick-bed. If he sought the aid of a doctor, then the value of the prescription was vitiated by the adulteration of the drugs. If his nostrum was a patent medicine, it was either of a fraudulent or of a positively harmful nature. If he was a pauper, then he was at the mercy of a board of guardians who accepted the lowest tender for their drugs and medicines without regard to quality.

Why did not the people, the consumers of the country in general, exercise the discrimination which they surely possessed? Why, in other words, did not competition work out so that the best article was supplied at a low price? It was very worrying that the poor should suffer from "elaborated" food and "enlarged" drink; it was distinctly contrary to those theories of economics on which England's industrial greatness was built. It was stupid,

but it was so; and though the theorists struggled hard to maintain their thesis, the truth was that unrestricted competition had signally failed once more. The reasons were not far to seek. Adulteration, like most malignant growths, had developed slowly, but its development was so sure that by 1850 the common people of England had undoubtedly lost the true flavour of a great many articles of food; and when active measures were taken against adulteration, it was found that the people complained of the purer article. Pure bread was yellowish, but they preferred the white; pure mustard and pickles were dark, but they preferred a "handsome-looking" article. It was also found that even where convictions were made under the defective old laws, the common people would still trade with these particular shops. The reason for this was that they were bound to the shop by a pernicious system of truck and credit.

But the people had their own way out of this impasse, and wherever they could break away from the credit system they formed co-operative societies for the retailing of pure food, and distributed amongst themselves the profit which they obtained from the purchase of their foodstuffs. This movement was strongest in the North of England, and within a few years of one another societies were formed at Rochdale, Leeds, Halifax, Birmingham, and other large cities, on the model of a People's Flour Mill founded at Hull in the opening years of the century. The co-operative societies were largely responsible for re-educating the public taste; and once they had abandoned their primitive ideas of a communist solution of the social problem through co-operation, they went on from strength to strength till to-day they flourish everywhere, although the industrial North is still their stronghold.