

A Labour Policy for Public Authorities.



Working-men are now, through the Town or County Councillors, or Members of Parliament, elected by their votes, the employers of many thousands of their fellow working-men. If the Post Office servants are made to toil at inconvenient hours for low wages, without liberty of combination, this is largely due to the fact that working class electors all over the country do not take the trouble to protest against this scandal. Dishonest employers and "rat" firms still receive many public contracts because working-men are often the worst employers of working-men. But at last it is possible really to make a move for reform in these matters.

The chief points of a good municipal policy on labour questions (in the narrower sense) are given in the following pages. No trade unionist or wage-earning elector should vote for any candidate who is not sound on these points. Every trades council, every trade union executive or branch, would do well to insist on explicit answers on the subject from every candidate.*

Proper Treatment of Labour.

(a.) A normal eight hour day for all public employees.

This would give a powerful impetus to the general movement for shorter hours. Town and County Councils must set a good example to other employers.

(b.) Payment of not less than trade union wages for each occupation.

We must at any rate not "sweat" our own employees.

(c.) Full liberty of combination.

The servants of the public may often need protection against the public, as in the Post Office.

(d.) One day's rest in seven and sufficient holidays.

The public service must often be kept going on Sundays as well as on week days, but we must teach railway and tramway directors and other employers that this does not necessarily involve a seven days' week.

(e.) Prohibition of overtime except in unexpected emergencies.

Shortening hours is not of much use unless overtime is put down. At present the Post Office, Customs, and Inland Revenue work much overtime.

* Convenient "Questions," to be put to candidates for Parliament, Town or County Councils, Boards of Guardians, London Vestries, and the London County Council are contained in Fabian Tracts, Nos. 24, 27, 28, 20, 21, and 26.

Direct Employment of Labour.

Contracting and sub-contracting inevitably lead to sweating. To maintain all along the line the rate of the standard wage, we must stop even the slightest breach, and this can only be done by the publicity of direct payment of wages to workmen by the Council itself. Every public body ought to do its own manufacturing as far as possible. One town might even make things for another, so as to ensure economy and regularity of work in the branch that each undertook. The War Office already has its own factory of soldiers' uniforms; the Admiralty its own mills for the sailors' biscuits; Manchester Town Council its own gas works, Bristol Town Council its own docks, Huddersfield Town Council its own tramways, Nottingham Town Council its own artizans' dwellings. Even the St. Pancras Vestry is laying down its own electric lighting works. Why should not the London County Council set up a factory and make all the police and park-keepers' uniforms, and the other clothing that it purchases?

Fair Wages Clause in all Contracts that cannot be Avoided.

In 1888 the London Society of Compositors managed to get one of their members elected to the London School Board. With the help of the Socialist members of the Board he secured the adoption of a resolution in accordance with which all firms sending tenders for work are obliged to declare that they, "pay not less than the standard rate of wages in each branch of their trade," and the following clause is now inserted in every contract for printing, viz. :—

"The contractors shall not assign over or underlet this contract or any portion thereof. If the contractors assign or underlet, or attempt to assign or underlet any portion of the contract, or [if they become bankrupt] the Board shall have power to determine this contract immediately."

The London County Council followed suit, and passed resolutions, which enact that :—

"Any person or firm tendering for a contract with the Council shall be required to make a declaration that they pay such rate of wages and observe such hours of labour as are generally accepted as fair in their trade; and, in the event of any charges to the contrary being established against them, their contract shall not be accepted." In his tender, the Contractor is bound to insert an undertaking to pay the rates of wages, and to observe the hours of labour above specified; and in building contracts the Contractor is bound under a penalty of £500 "which shall be deemed liquidated or ascertained damages," "not to assign or make over the contract to any other person nor to underlet it, nor to make a sub-contract with any workman or workmen for the execution of any part of the cast iron, wrought iron, or any other metal work, timber, brick work, concrete, ground work, masonry, or any other work appertaining to this contract, but to employ his own workmen for the labour thereof, who are to be paid by him in wages by the day."

Local government - U. K.

This policy has been found to be of great public advantage, and, on May 27th, 1892, the London County Council passed a more stringent resolution, expressly recognising the Trade Union rate. This resolution was as follows:—"That all contractors be compelled to sign a declaration that they pay the Trades Union rates of wages and observe the hours of labour and conditions recognised by the Trades Unions in the place or places where the contract is executed, and that the hours and wages be inserted in and form part of the contract by way of schedule, and that penalties be enforced for any breach of agreement." A Special Committee was appointed to report upon the best means of carrying this resolution into effect.

Other public bodies, notably the Town Councils of Birmingham, Bristol, Hull, Manchester, Salford, Nottingham, Leicester and Sheffield have adopted resolutions on the subject. Many of the Metropolitan Vestries and District Boards have accepted the principle, and up and down the country numerous School Boards, Local Boards, Boards of Guardians and other public bodies have done the same thing. Moreover, even the House of Commons has adopted the same policy, and, on the motion of Mr. Sydney Buxton, it passed, on the 13th of February, 1891, the following resolution:—"That, in the opinion of this House, it is the duty of the Government in all Government contracts to make provision against the evils recently disclosed before the Sweating Committee, to insert such conditions as may prevent the abuse arising from sub-letting, and to make every effort to secure the payment of such wages as are generally accepted as current in each trade for competent workmen."

This has been the greatest blow that has been struck at "unfair" employers that English trade union annals record. But unless working-men see that candidates are thoroughly in earnest in maintaining this result, it will soon all be lost. The resolutions may not be rescinded, but constant vigilance is necessary to prevent them becoming a dead letter.

A Trades Hall.

But public bodies might go further to promote the organisation of the workers, and to facilitate the protection afforded by Trade Unions. At present these have no meeting place, no local rallying point, no effective centre of communication. The Paris Municipal Council has built, and now maintains out of public funds, a large labour exchange under a committee of trade unionists. Here Trade Unionists can have accommodation for executive, branch, or general meetings free of expense; here they may maintain their offices and secretaries rent free; here they can establish their own library; here, at last, they are free from the obligation of resorting to the public-house as the only available meeting place.

Melbourne, in Victoria, has also its Trades Hall. Edinburgh may soon have one provided by private generosity. But could there be a better use of public buildings, provided at the cost of the community, than to afford accommodation for such an essentially public institution as the Trades Council? This has been recognised in Nottingham, where the Mayor grants the

Trades Council, free of charge, the use of a room in the municipal buildings for its monthly and special meetings. Why should the Trades Council in other towns not obtain the same privilege?

All that is needed in these cases is that the local Trades Council should formally apply for this to be done, and that the local trade unionists should insist, at every election, that candidates should be in favour of this proposal. The London and other County Councils do not yet legally possess the power to carry out their constituents' wishes in this respect. But they would soon obtain that power from Parliament if the workers demanded it.

How to get this Labour Policy adopted.

Press it upon all candidates for office, and get your Trade Union and Trade Council to take organised action at every election.

What can you do to help? You can propose at the very next meeting of your branch that a small committee be formed to consider all the candidates for your own constituency; to make a list of your members who are electors; to send them a special circular about the importance of the election to Trade Unionists; to concert with other unions in holding a special meeting of all the Trade Unionists in the constituency; to hunt up all those who have removed but are still entitled to vote.

Above all, form a band of men who will promise to go round on the day of voting and fetch up every member of your Union to the poll.

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