



# A Labor Policy for Public Authorities

(REVISED MARCH 1895.)

WORKING-MEN are now, through the Town, District 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 full 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 labor 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 Labor.

(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 weekdays, 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, District or County Councils, Boards of Guardians, London Vestries, Parish Councils, etc., are contained in Fabian Tracts, Nos. 20, 21, 24 to 28, 56, 57 and 59.

### Direct Employment of Labor.

Contracting and sub-contracting generally lead to sweating. To maintain all along the line the dyke of the standard rate, we must stop even the slightest breach, and this can best 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 has its own mills for the sailors' biscuits; Manchester Town Council its own gas-works, Bristol Town Council its own docks, Glasgow Town Council its own tramways, Nottingham Town Council its own artizans' dwellings. Even the St. Pancras Vestry has its own electric lighting works, and the Commissioners of Sewers of the City of London manufacture, by their own staff, all the waggons, harness, and horseshoes that they use. The London County Council has its own Works Department. Why should it not set up a factory and make all the 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."

The London County Council quickly passed resolutions to a similar 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, District Councils, 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 policy was found to be of great public advantage, but the contractors were always trying to evade it, and, on May 27th, 1892, the London County Council passed a more stringent resolution, expressly recognising Trade Union rates. The existing Standing

Orders of the Council (which form the best model for other towns) are as follows :

#### STANDING ORDERS OF THE COUNCIL.

183.—(1) There shall be kept at the county hall a list of the rates of wages and the hours of labor to be paid and observed by the Council in works which are in the nature of construction or manufacture, and which the Council may resolve to carry out without the intervention of a contractor.

The list shall be settled by the Council on the recommendation of the Works Committee, and shall be based on the rates of wages and hours of labor recognized and in practice obtained by the various Trade Unions in London, and by contractors in respect of the supply, manufacture and production of any raw material or manufactured articles, except contractors for the supply of stores to be used in maintenance, and shall form part of the Standing Orders of the Council.

The list shall at all times be open to public inspection.

(2) In inviting tenders for work to be executed within twenty miles of Charing Cross, the advertisements and instructions for tender shall state that in the case of all workmen to be employed by the contractor he will be required to pay wages at rates not less, and to observe hours of labor not greater, than the rates and hours set out in the Council's list, and that such rates of wages and hours of labor will be inserted in a schedule and will form part of the contract, and penalties shall be enforced for any breach thereof.

As regards each contract the list shall be that in force at the date of the tender.

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 labor 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 recognized 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. At Manchester, Leicester, Hanley, and other towns, the Trades Council is allowed to meet in the Town Hall or at the municipal offices. 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 favor 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 Labor Policy adopted.

Press it upon all candidates for office, and get your Trade Union and Trades Council to take organized 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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