

A Plea for Poor Law Reform.

(REVISED OCTOBER, 1894).

THE POOR LAW was established to relieve and diminish poverty. It was the most humane of our institutions in its origin: in its administration it is so harsh and humiliating that most self-respecting workers prefer starvation, and some prefer death, to accepting the relief it offers. The harshness might be justified if our industrial system were such as to secure to every reasonably thrifty person the means of providing for old age and misfortune without the aid of the Poor Law. But as a matter of fact, low wages and precarious employment make it difficult for the laboring class to live even in the humblest decency, and utterly impossible for them to save.

Each day in the year over 970,000 persons in the United Kingdom are driven to accept relief as paupers. In the course of every year more than two millions of separate individuals are thus relieved.

At least one in five persons over 65 is a pauper.

In London alone there was in 1893 an average of 59,901 indoor and 47,472 outdoor paupers, over 210,000 separate individuals falling for longer or shorter periods into this condition in the course of the year.

One in every eight of deaths in London takes place in a workhouse or other Poor Law institution.

Poor Law administration, since 1834, has aimed at abolishing pauperism by deliberately increasing the miseries of poverty. By making public relief dishonorable, and disfranchising the receiver, it has reduced the number of applicants; but it has done nothing to root out destitution, and it has not relieved the Poor Rate. It has often, in saving the ratepayers the expense of relieving a pauper, put upon them the expense of prosecuting and punishing a prisoner.

No distinction in treatment is made between the professional idler and the worker who, through accident, sickness, misfortune, or depression of trade, is thrown on the rates. No honor, but deliberate dishonor, is assigned to the old age of the poor. No sufficient care is taken to ensure that the destitute children of whom the State takes charge shall be reared as efficient and self-respecting citizens.

REFORMS NEEDED.

I.—Improved Education for Children.

Over 50,000 children in England alone are in the charge of the Poor Law authorities. Their treatment is condemned by the fact that many of them grow up to lead pauper lives. They should not be taught in Poor Law "barrack" schools, but in the public elementary schools. They should not under any circumstances live in workhouses, but should be boarded-out in the country. The present practice of placing them out as mere laborers, or as errand boys

* See also Fabian Tracts Nos. 17, 20, and 54, entitled "Reform of the Poor Law," "Questions for Poor Law Guardians," and "Humanizing the Poor Law." (*Adv. p. 4*).

and domestic drudges, should be abandoned. They should be well started in life by putting them to some skilled trade. They must not be made to feel that their dependence is in any way criminal or disgraceful, and they must therefore not be marked out, either by dress or in any other way, from the children of more fortunate parents. The Children of the State must be made a credit, not a disgrace, to its citizens.

II.—State Pensions for the Aged.

About 160,000 retired civil servants, military and naval officers and men, policemen, postmen and others, receive pensions. In all these cases the pension is given from the State as a matter of right; and the pensioner enjoys, in addition, whatever he may have saved out of his pay. But an ordinary wage-earner who has saved a little out of his wages, is not allowed to do this. If he has saved less than enough to live on, he must actually spend all his little capital before the Guardians will come to his assistance; for until he is absolutely destitute the law refuses him relief. This is a hardship all round: it increases the burden of the rates, and makes the laborer feel that it is useless for him to practise the "thrift" that is preached to him so freely. Every worker directly or indirectly contributes, whilst he works, towards the rates and taxes. Every citizen should have the right, when he can work no more, to a pension from the State—after the age, say, of 65.

A Royal Commission is now sitting to enquire into the condition of the aged poor. Now is the time to press forward demands for reforms in the law.

III.—The Humanizing of the Workhouse.

At present the workhouse is too often made a prison. The aged and infirm within its walls are not allowed to go out except for a day or two in each month: they are deprived of their little comforts, clothed in a pauper uniform, and made to feel themselves, not honorable pensioners, but dishonorable burdens upon the community. Pending the establishment of State pensions, the well-conducted aged poor should be allowed to go out on every fine day; their dietary should be improved; they should be clothed in a way not marking them out as paupers; they should be supplied with tobacco and tea, given no compulsory tasks, and permitted to occupy themselves in any way not inconvenient to their comrades; and aged married couples should have every facility for living together as the law at present allows. The Veterans of Labor should be made in every way to realize that they are enjoying the provision willingly made for them by the community which they have served.

IV.—Public Aid for the Sick.

Every sufferer from serious illness should be entitled to free treatment in hospital. In London nearly two-thirds of our hospital accommodation is maintained out of the rates, although the citizens have practically no control over it and do not even know that they contribute to it otherwise than by private voluntary subscription. The existing distinction between the so-called voluntary and the rate-

supported hospitals ought to be abolished, and the whole public provision for the sick and insane placed under an elected public authority.

The provision for the sick should be separated entirely from the Poor Law administration.

V.—Reform of the Casual Ward.

The casual wards have encouraged a class of habitual vagrants, who make no attempt to better their condition. Habitual casuals and demoralized loafers should be sent to a reforming labor colony, where they could earn their subsistence by the performance of some useful work. Willing workers of good character, when the uncertainty of employment under our present industrial system forces them to resort to the casual ward, should be helped to find employment.

VI.—Administrative Reforms.

The regulations of the Local Government Board, under which relief is now given, were drawn up in 1847. They need thorough revision in accordance with the more humane ideas which have grown up since that time. A revised set of regulations could sweep away the inhumanities of a pauper dress, oakum picking, and stone breaking; the dietary, which is now far inferior to that provided for convicts, could be improved; the outdoor relief system could be humanized; the treatment of the children could be put upon a satisfactory basis; and a thorough and effective system of inspection and supervision could be organized. A few strokes of the pen could effect quite a revolution, for all these things could be done without any new Act of Parliament.

VII.—Democratic Control.

The Boards of Guardians should be compelled to meet in the evening when workers can attend. A **Poor Law Council**, elected triennially for the whole of London, should be created to have control over all asylums, workhouses, and, so long as they are retained, the Poor Law schools. In its hands should be the fixing of a Poor Rate for the whole metropolis in order to do away with the present gross inequality between rich and poor neighborhoods. Disfranchisement on acceptance of Poor Law relief must be abolished. These reforms will require legislative sanction, and therefore they must not be overlooked in the excitement of the next General Election.

Before the election for Guardians comes on, get from the Fabian Society the "Questions for Poor Law Guardians," and form your judgment of the fitness of the candidates by the answers they return. Wherever possible, run Democratic candidates, see that the men and women who are elected know what powers the law gives them, and make them pledge themselves to administer the law with humanity.

The figures in the above are obtained from the Reports of the Local Government Boards for England and Wales, and for Ireland; the Report of the Board of Supervision of Poor for Scotland; and "Pauperism and Old Age Pensions," by C. Booth, p. 130.

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