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THE LABOUR PARTY



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*Reports on*

CREATING A C3  
NATION

*and*

HOUSING

*To be presented by the Standing Joint Committee of  
Industrial Women's Organisations to the*

NATIONAL CONFERENCE OF  
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# CREATING A C3 NATION

Report to be presented to the National Conference  
of Labour Women, 1933

## 1.—THE ATTACK ON THE UNEMPLOYED

In August, 1931, the Bank of England found that it could not pay its way and appealed to the Government for help. The Labour Government resigned because it refused to ask the unemployed to meet the Bank's liabilities. A National Government took office which was prepared to do so. It passed a National Economy Act, which increased the workers' contributions towards Unemployment Insurance and cut down the benefits paid; and then appealed successfully to the country on cleverly chosen slogans which saved its policy from being judged on its merits. "Equality of sacrifice" has meant for the unemployed that their benefits have been reduced by 10 per cent. and their right to benefit exhausted when twenty-six weeks' benefit have been paid in a single benefit year. Thereafter, the unemployed man or woman is sent to the Local Public Assistance Committee to have his—or her—means investigated. The Committee must determine how much benefit—transitional benefit—shall be paid. The principle generally applied is that everything going into the home of the unemployed person applying for transitional payment must be regarded as part of the family income. Some Committees include the value of meals supplied to children attending school. There is no uniformity in regard to deductions for rent, or the proportion of income of relatives excluded from assessment, or the scales applied in determining claims.

The National Government also inflicted special hardships on unemployed married women through the regulations which it framed under the Anomalies Act, while a further attack on the unemployed—both men and women—was made in the National Health Insurance and Contributory





Pensions Act, 1932, by which the unemployed man and woman after a certain period will lose medical benefit, sickness benefit, pension rights at 65 and Widow's Pension rights.

The mass of protests from all over the country against the Means Test, which was being administered in many areas with great harshness and injustice, compelled the Government to pass an amending Act last November which laid down rules for general adoption by Public Assistance Committees, prescribing the exclusion of a proportion of wound or disability pensions, of weekly payments under the Workmen's Compensation Act and of savings, in assessing income for the purpose of transitional benefit.

If a Local Authority is considered too generous in its administration of the Means Test, and refuses to change its methods at the behest of the Minister of Health, it may be superseded by Commissioners appointed by the Minister, as for example in Rotherham and Durham.

From the beginning of December, 1932, to March 4, 1933, the Commissioners appointed by the Ministry of Health in Durham had saved £70,000 at the expense of the unemployed. The cost of the Commissioners and their staff was about £14,000, in addition to non-recurrent charges amounting to £2,100.

Between November 12, 1931 (when the Economy Act came into operation), and February 4, 1933, 920,427 claims for transitional benefit under the Means Test were refused by Public Assistance Committees. At March 20, 1933, there were on the registers at the exchanges 1,168,624 men and women in receipt of Insurance Benefit; at the same time there were in addition 1,167,226 unemployed claiming transitional benefit, and in 104,561 cases their claims were refused. The national saving effected through the reduction in the rates of benefit was estimated to be £12,800,000 in 1932-33, and through the Means Test £15,000,000 per year, while the cost of the administration of the Means Test for the past financial year was about £750,000.

## 2.—A NATIONAL RESPONSIBILITY

Not only has the Government, with sanctimonious phrases about "equality of sacrifice," degraded the standards of the unemployed, its method of dealing with the

problem of relief has actually increased the volume of unemployment. The tightening up of the administration of unemployment benefit, and the operation of the Means Test, have thrown large numbers of able-bodied workers on to the Poor Law, with inevitable increases in the rates, the depressed industrial districts of course suffering most. In the county of Durham, for example, the charge on the rates for public assistance increased by £100,000 during the last twelve months, in Merthyr Tydvil by over £12,000; in Manchester the rates for public assistance rose from 2s. 4 $\frac{3}{4}$ d. in 1931-32 to 3s. 9 $\frac{1}{4}$ d. in 1932-33, and in Norwich from 6s. 3 $\frac{3}{4}$ d. to 7s. 3 $\frac{3}{4}$ d.

Such additions to local burdens must aggravate the local unemployment problem, and this obvious fact is at last being recognised. The Government has now agreed that "the responsibility for assistance for all able-bodied unemployed not over 65 shall be accepted by the Government." It appears likely from the speeches that the additional money necessary will be found by a reduction of the block grant to more prosperous areas. The acceptance of responsibility by the Government is a good thing in principle; but—if we can judge by the action of the Government's own commissioners—it may well mean that there will be a general tightening up with regard to administration—and that the unemployed in many areas will be worse off.

## 3.—CUTS IN PUBLIC EXPENDITURE

In yet another way has the Government cut down employment—by its restriction of public expenditure on work schemes. The work of the Unemployment Grants Committee has been suspended and sanction has been refused for useful local expenditure running into many millions of pounds. Very closely connected is the Government's policy of stopping subsidies for house-building by Local Authorities and handing over the provision of houses for working people to private enterprise. In a recent letter to the Bethnal Green Borough Council, the Prime Minister said that the Government had definitely decided "to discontinue the policy of attempting to deal with unemployment by a system of State-assisted relief works," and tried to justify this decision on the grounds that "the policy is completely unequal to the task of dealing with unemployment on a large scale," and that it adds considerably to the burden



of local and national taxation. It is not suggested that all the unemployed could be set to work on State-assisted schemes, but we have the support of many well-known economists when we say that much could be done by a properly worked out scheme of public borrowing, at the low rates of interest possible to-day, and public spending on productive work, such as house-building and land drainage. For in reckoning up the effects of such a scheme there must be taken into account not only the people directly employed, but also those indirectly employed in making and transporting materials, and in meeting the requirements for food, clothing, &c., of workers with wages to spend instead of unemployment benefit or poor relief. The men and the money are there, and by bringing them together, not only would there be a large saving in the cost of relief, but the real wealth of the community would be increased by the work done. The Government, however, appears unable to appreciate these obvious facts, and can only tell us that we must wait for "a revival of ordinary industrial activity" and for the good times to follow the holding of the World Economic Conference.

#### 4.—WAGE ATTACKS

To these charges against the Government must be added that of aiding and abetting attacks on wages. The reaction of the average employer to depression in trade is to seek to reduce his costs of production by cutting wages. This is natural in a competitive system, but the Government should take a wider view, recognising that lower wages mean lower spending-power, and therefore less work. The Government has, however, deliberately encouraged wage reductions, and it has done so in several ways. First, one of its main "economies" during the economy ramp at the end of 1931 was in the wages of State employees, including teachers and police. Second, in a circular dated September 11, 1931, the Minister of Health, then Mr. Neville Chamberlain, drew the attention of Local Authorities to the desirability of reducing the wages of their employees, and suggested that each Local Authority "should discuss the situation with its officers with the object of ensuring that all may have an opportunity of sharing equitably in the sacrifices demanded by national need." One can hardly sup-

pose that the officers concerned would jump at this "opportunity," but many Local Authorities willingly took the hint, while others were forced to do so by methods of "peaceful persuasion" from Whitehall.

Widespread reductions in the wages of public employees naturally encourage private employers to follow the same policy, and in many industries the workers have been forced to submit to cuts. The attitude of the Government has been throughout either one of non-interference or of encouragement to the employers, as, for example, in the case of the miners' demand for national machinery for the determination of wages.

It must be remembered, further, that reductions in unemployment relief and harsher administration are a considerable help to the employers in their attacks on wages, since, as the economists say, they increase the "mobility of labour" and lessen the "rigidity of wages"; in other words they force the unemployed to take any kind of work at any rate of pay which the employer chooses to offer.

While some economists have for years preached the doctrine of lower wages as a remedy for unemployment, the Government's efforts in this direction are undoubtedly largely due to pressure from the big industrialists, who are so well represented in the present House of Commons. Their point of view is best expressed by the National Confederation of Employers' Organisations, which in February, 1931, published a pamphlet called "The Industrial Situation." In this pamphlet the Confederation demands that, in order to make it easier for private employers to reduce wages, the Government should reduce the wages of its own employees, and force Local Authorities to do the same; and that it should reduce the rate of unemployment benefit by one-third, drastically limit the right to benefit, and subject those unemployed not entitled to benefit to a Means Test. It also demands that, in order to reduce taxation, a National Economy Committee should be set up, and that expenditure on the social services should be very considerably reduced. It is worth quoting this document at some length to show how faithfully the "National" Government has carried out the employers' orders.

The only protection of the workers against wage attacks is effective Trade Union organisation. During a period of



industrial depression the main function of the Trade Unions must be to resist attacks on the standard of living, and their efforts in this direction should receive the full support and encouragement of the political and co-operative organisations of working women. The woman in the home by persuading her own young folk in industry to become active Trade Unionists could play a useful part in strengthening the power of the Trade Unions to resist wage attacks.

#### 5.—ATTACK ON SOCIAL SERVICES

As serious in their effects as the attacks on unemployment relief and on wages are the cuts in the social services, in the health services, in education, in housing. We are told time and again that "the country cannot afford" these things, that there must be retrenchment until better times come. But in view of the deplorable conditions under which so many people have to live, can we think of any better way of spending money than in building some of the million houses required? Would not money so spent bring in an immense return, not only in health and happiness, but in providing work for the unemployed? Would it not be true to say that the country "cannot afford" to have C3 and half-educated people? Unfortunately, these are not the views of the people in power to-day. They have always been prepared to sacrifice the social services to economy, except when the opposite policy has been necessary for vote-catching purposes, and amongst the social services education has always been their favourite object of attack. This is understandable, since ignorance is the best protector of vested interests. A dangerously common attitude to the education of workers' children is that expressed by Lord Linlithgow in a debate on economy in the House of Lords last year, when he said that "I would cut out, or very carefully consider the possibility of doing so, all learning except the three R's."

We must press for the reversal of the education economies; and also for the raising of the school-leaving age, which is not only desirable from an educational point of view, but would at the moment be of very real assistance in dealing with the problem of juvenile unemployment, one of the most serious aspects of the general problem of unemployment.

The social services have been built up through years of struggle as some protection to the workers against the evils of capitalism, and they are more than ever necessary to safeguard mental and physical health during a period of widespread and prolonged unemployment. The time of greatest need is, however, the time chosen to cut down and to restrict development, regardless of the effects on health and employment, in the sacred cause of "economy." Instead of doing its utmost to provide useful work for the unemployed, and to reduce the bad effects of unemployment by expanding the health services, the Government pushes its responsibilities on to private citizens under cover of the "Spend for Employment" campaign and the grant of a few thousand pounds in aid of voluntary organisations for occupying the unemployed.

#### 6.—UNEMPLOYMENT AND HEALTH

The effect of prolonged unemployment on health is a problem which concerns practically every country in the world to-day and especially industrial countries. It is being studied by the Health Organisation of the League of Nations, and a Memorandum published last September, giving the results of investigation in Germany and U.S.A., shows the deplorable effects of under-feeding and poor clothing in the increase in many diseases, such as tuberculosis, rickets, anæmia, and nervous affections. In Great Britain, too, the problem is being studied by doctors, social workers, and others, and, though we have not reached a situation in which the unemployed live almost entirely on bread, potatoes and margarine, the results of a low standard of food and clothing are already sufficiently serious.

Official statements are usually to the effect that "there is no evidence of any increase of malnutrition," that there is "practically no evidence that any child is going really hungry," that the children "are not suffering unduly," that "it is often a case of bad buying by the mothers." While such statements may satisfy the official conscience, there is plenty of evidence to the contrary, so much that only a small part can be given here.

Medical investigation has shown very clearly that there is a very close relationship between diet and the proper development and functioning of bones, teeth and muscles;



that the right diet is a means of prevention as well as of cure of deficiency diseases, such as rickets and anæmia; that it is essential for expectant and nursing mothers, and for infants and young children, if the health of the adult is to be sound. It has also shown the special importance of certain foods, particularly milk, butter, cheese, fresh vegetables and fruits, fish and eggs. A Report on Diets in Poor Law Children's Homes, prepared by the Ministry of Health Advisory Committee on Nutrition, states that a pint of milk per day should be allowed to each child under 16, and that it is most important that an ample supply of vegetables should be given daily, with two oranges or apples a week.

### 7.—THE COST OF A RIGHT DIET

What is the cost of a proper diet? The Report quoted above estimates that, in 1931, in a Home containing about 200 children, the weekly cost per head would be about 4s. 6½d., if all provisions were bought at contract prices. (At February, 1933, prices this would be 4s. 3d.) A number of medical investigators have put the minimum cost, in February, 1933, of a sufficient diet for a man at sums varying from 5s. to 6s. 8d. per week. These figures allow for food only, are based on the most economical buying, and provide for little variety.

The *Week-end Review* recently asked a committee of experts to investigate, among other matters, the essential factors in diet for males and females at various ages, together with cost of minimum diet, and their report states that the cheapest practical diet (March, 1933), in current English urban prices, for adult males not doing muscular work costs about 5s.; for women 4s. 2d.; for children of 1 to 2 years old 2s. 9d.; for children of 2 to 8 years inclusive from 3s. 4d. to 4s.; and for children of 9 to 13 years inclusive from 4s. to 4s. 10d. After 13 children are counted as adults.

How do these unbiassed medical estimates compare with the amounts which can be spent on food in the average unemployed household, and by the very large numbers of families dependent on low wages? The 1931 Report of the Medical Officer of Health for Hammersmith gives examples of unemployed families which, after allowing for

rent, had sums varying from 1s. 7d. to 3s. 11d. per head per week for everything else; and of families of men at work which, after allowing for rent, had from 2s. 9d. to 5s. 6d. each per week for everything else. The Medical Officer of Health for Deptford, in a report made in January, 1933, gives figures showing that a very large proportion of families in receipt of public assistance have only from 2s. to 5s. each per week after paying rent, and that many households where the husband is at work are little better off.

The Medical Officer for Stockton-on-Tees has prepared a report on the vital conditions in Mount Pleasant area, a new housing estate occupied by families which have been removed from bad and overcrowded property in the Riverside district. The mean standardised death rate in Mount Pleasant for the period 1928-32 is 50 per cent. higher than the rate in the old Riverside area in the period 1923-28—33·55 as against 22·91—in spite of the better housing conditions. The reason is plain. The bigger rents for the new houses—the average rent per family is 8s. 10½d. per week, compared with the old slum rent of 4s. 1½d.—have meant a reduction in the amount available for food, with these dreadful results. The Medical Officer says that “he has not been able to discover any other probable cause.” Budgets of the unemployed families in these houses—and the report states that over 90 per cent. of the families on this Mount Pleasant Estate have endured prolonged periods of unemployment—show a weekly expenditure on food of 2s. 10½d. per “man,” not per person, for in the calculations made each child is counted as a fraction of a “man”; and the average amount per person would therefore be less than 2s. 10½d.

### 8.—SOME BUDGETS

Actual budgets sent from different parts of the country tell the same story:—

- (1) From Thornaby-on-Tees.—Family of father, mother, and three children of 11, 5, and 2. Total income—£1 9s. 3d., transitional benefit. Rent, 8s. 7d.; coal and gas, 3s. 6d.; insurance, &c., 9d.; clothing club, cleaning materials, 2s. 9d.; food, 13s. 8d. (2s. of this amount is for milk). Average amount per person for food, 2s. 8½d.



- (2) From Glamorgan.—Family of father, mother, and five children of 14, 13, 12, 10, and 7. Total income, £1 11s. 3d., unemployment benefit. Rent, 10s. 2d.; coal and light, 3s.; insurance, &c., 2s. 6d.; clothes, cleaning materials, 3s.; food, 11s. 7d. (this includes bread, 6s.; margarine, 1s.; milk, 10½d.; no meat, fish, eggs, or butter). **Average amount per person for food, 1s. 8d.**
- (3) From Newport.—Family of father, mother and two children of 8 and 3. Total income, £1 7s. 3d. transitional benefit. Rent, 7s. 9d.; coal and gas, 4s. 6d.; boots, clothes and cleaning materials, 3s.; food, 12s. 6d. (no butter or eggs; 1s. for milk). **Average weekly amount per person for food, 3s. 1½d.**
- (4) From Rotherham.—Family of father, mother, one son at work, and six children of 13, 11, 9, 7, 5, and 2. Total income, £2 3s. 6d.—£1 7s. 6d. transitional benefit and 16s. wages. Rent, 10s.; coal and gas, 4s.; unemployment, health, and other insurance, trade union, fares to work, 6s. 9d.; boots, clothes, and cleaning materials, 7s.; food, 15s. 9d. **Average weekly amount per person for food, 1s. 9d.**
- (5) From Berkshire.—Family of father and mother and six children of 16, 13, 12, 10, 6, and 3. Lad of 16 working. Total income, £3—£2 5s. father's wages, 15s. boy's wages. Rent, 15s.; coal and gas, 5s. 6d.; trade union, insurance, and fares to work, 8s. 7d.; boots, clothes, and cleaning materials, 4s. 9d.; food, 27s. 2d. (including 3s. 6d. for milk; no butter). **Average weekly amount per person for food, 3s. 4½d.**
- (6) From Middlesbrough.—Family of father, mother, and five children of 14, 13, 10, 7, and 4. Total income, £1 13s. 3d. transitional benefit. Rent, 7s.; coal and gas, 4s. 10d.; insurance, 2s. 3d.; clothing and cleaning materials, 4s. 6d.; food, 14s. 8d. (milk 9d. per week). **Average weekly amount per person for food, 2s. 1d.**

### 9.—MALNUTRITION

When low rates of relief and low wages are combined with the high rents prevailing in most parts of the country, involving in many cases expenditure on house-room alone of one-third or more of the total income, it is obvious that

there must be physical degeneration and inability to resist disease. Cheap foods may satisfy hunger, but they do not maintain health. Of the ill-effects on the children we have plenty of evidence, in spite of official statements to the contrary. The School Medical Officer for Rotherham, in his Report for 1931, commenting on the effects of a milk scheme started in 1929, says "Dull, pinched, and pallid faces had been replaced by alert-looking ones with bright eyes and good colour. In addition to the physical improvement the teachers testified to improved attendance, greater vitality and alertness." In parts of Glamorgan, in February this year, 7, 8, or 10 per cent. of children were suffering from malnutrition. The School Medical Officer of Newcastle-on-Tyne, in his Report for 1931, notes a falling off in the standard of nutrition of the children, due to the industrial depression; and the School Medical Officer for Walthamstow remarks on the large increase in the number of children with poor clothing and boots.

In the *Lancet* on March 25, 1933, Dr. Somerville Hastings gives the results of an investigation of the circumstances of twenty-one families of unemployed in one of the western districts of London. **Fifty-three children of these families were examined by two doctors, and thirty-three were found to be under-nourished.**

"We were informed," wrote Dr. Somerville Hastings, "that of the children showing signs of under-nourishment none was having dinners at school, but four were having milk, which was given free. . . ."

"Several of the parents of the children showing signs of under-nourishment informed us that they had applied for school dinners, but these had been refused.

"We were fortunately able to obtain and verify the income of each household and also the rent paid, and could therefore calculate the exact amount per head available to provide food, warmth, clothing, cleansing materials, and other necessities of life. **This varied from 1s. 4d. to 4s. 6d., and averaged 2s. 5½d. per head.**"

The children are suffering, but so are the parents; and the children would suffer more were it not for the sacrifices of the parents. It is bad enough that men and women should go hungry in the midst of plenty, but much worse when it is realised that on the health of the mothers to-day



depends the health of the next generations. The Medical Officer of Penybont (Glamorgan) Rural District Council, in his Report for 1931, says that there is "considerable malnutrition" amongst the mothers and that "the dietary in a large proportion of cases leaves much to be desired." In Newport, we are told, many mothers are suffering in health, and their boots and clothing are rapidly getting much worse. A Deptford doctor says: "It may be assumed that the member of the family who suffers most when there is a shortage of nourishment is usually the **mother.**" Many similar statements could be quoted, but the general conclusion is clear. One other point must be remembered, however: the death and injury rate amongst mothers at childbirth is known to be increased by under-nourishment of growing girls, so that under-feeding to-day means suffering not only to the mothers and babies of to-day, but also to the mothers and babies of to-morrow.

#### 10.—SCHOOL MEALS

As unemployment continues and increases the problem becomes more urgent. No new legislation is needed to deal with it, only the will to act. Under the Education Act of 1921, the Local Education Authorities may, subject to recovery of the cost of food where possible, provide meals for children in attendance at any public elementary school in their area, both on days when the school meets and on other days.

This Act was intended to meet not only unemployment, but low wages. The Local Authorities can feed any child who from want of proper food is unable to profit fully from the education provided. But reactionary Local Authorities confine school feeding to children who show definite signs of "malnutrition," which is a very different thing. During the year 1931-32, only half the Local Education Authorities in England and Wales provided meals, while only 5.7 per cent. of all the children on the registers received meals, or supplementary nourishment, such as milk or cod-liver oil; 3.7 per cent. free and the rest for payment. Most of the Authorities which are feeding children provide dinners only and no other meals; and there are well-founded complaints in a number of areas about the unsuitable character of the buildings in which the meals are served.

At present some Local Authorities pursue an enlightened policy and give school meals in addition to poor law or unemployment relief. At Sheffield, breakfasts, dinners and teas are provided on six days a week. Breakfasts and teas consist of cocoa with milk, sweetened, and bread and dripping or jam. Meals are provided during school holidays as determined by the School Medical Sectional Sub-Committee. Meals are omitted on certain bank holidays. When the family income, after deducting rent and rates, does not exceed 6s. per head, breakfasts and dinners are provided; where such income does not exceed 4s. 6d. per head, teas are provided in addition to breakfasts and dinners. The cost of breakfast, dinner and tea—for food only—is 5.82d. to the Authority, or just under 2s. 11d. per week per child—a real and substantial relief to an unemployed family. School feeding is grant-earning: roughly half the cost only falls on the local Authority.

While some Local Education Authorities are increasing the amount of school feeding, others are economising; few are using their powers as they should; and all are hampered by the Government's meanness. Persistent agitation must be carried on, both nationally and locally, for the full use by the Local Education Authorities of their powers under the Education Act. Feeding must not be limited to those children who are officially defined as suffering from malnutrition, since medical officers' standards of malnutrition vary, and since, as the School Medical Officer of Rotherham says: "When a young child shows signs of malnutrition irreparable damage has in many cases already been suffered." A wiser course would be to feed all children whose parents have less than a certain sum per head per week, after allowing for rent, whether they show signs of malnutrition or not.

In certain areas the Public Assistance Committees, in assessing the means of applicants for transitional benefit, take into account the value of meals given at school to children. The Minister of Labour, Sir Henry Betterton, said in the House of Commons on October 27, 1932, that this is "commonly, though not universally" the practice. Where it is the practice, mothers have to choose, in effect, between meals and money, and many feel that they can make better use themselves of two or three extra shillings a week. With



agitation for the extension of school-feeding must go, therefore, the demand that school meals shall not be reckoned in assessing transitional benefit.

Better care of the children would help the parents, but much more must be done for the mothers as well. Here again the Local Authorities have the power; they can supply expectant and nursing mothers with milk and nourishment. Most, however, do not use their powers as they should, and some have actually cut down their Maternity and Child Welfare services for the sake of "economy." Here again, therefore, persistent agitation must be carried on, both nationally and locally, for the full use of existing powers.

#### 11.—RAISE INTERNATIONAL STANDARDS

We must demand better treatment for the children, the mothers, the unemployed, as a matter of elementary justice and as the truest form of national economy. In securing this, far from increasing unemployment, as the Government tells us, we shall, by raising the buying power of the masses, actually reduce it. All over the world, in agriculture and in industry, the output of the worker is rising with the greater use of machinery and other methods of "rationalisation." This is not a new problem, but it has become much more acute since the war, and there is the highest authority for saying that a large part of the unemployment of to-day is due to the displacement of workers by machines. There are only two remedies for this: greater spending power in the pockets of the people, through extended social services and higher wages; and shorter hours for the workers, so that work and leisure may be shared.

These involve, first, better organisation in industry and agriculture, and a sounder financial policy, by which much could be done to raise standards here without increasing the selling prices of our goods; and second, persistent effort, through international Trade Union action (in so far as dictatorship abroad still makes that possible), and through the International Labour Organisation of the League of Nations, to improve the conditions of sweated workers in other countries, so as to lessen the danger of under-cutting and to increase their power to buy our goods. The proposed international agreement in favour of a forty-hour working week, to be discussed at the I.L.O. Conference this year,

would be a considerable step forward in dealing with the unemployment problem; and it is a very serious indictment of the present Government that it should have opposed this agreement from the very beginning, in addition to doing everything else possible to weaken the I.L.O.

#### 12.—THE SOCIALIST SOLUTION

The Labour Movement stands for work or maintenance. It must continue to press its demands for the restoration of the cuts in benefit and wages, for the abolition of the Means Test, for a reversal of the Government's disastrous policy of economy in public expenditure and in the social services, for the raising of the school-leaving age, for the feeding of school children, for the fuller use by Local Authorities of their powers under existing Maternity and Child Welfare legislation. On the industrial side it must continue its resistance to attacks on wages and working conditions. It must also urge the need for international action through the International Labour Office to reduce workers' hours throughout the world, as the only rational way of meeting the problems created by the rapidly-increasing mechanisation of industry.

Such reforms will secure considerable improvements in the lot of the workers and especially of many of the unemployed, and they are urged as necessary and possible immediate steps. But they will not solve the problems of insecurity and poverty. So long as the machine and the material on which it works are privately owned, and exploited primarily for private profit, we shall continue to have men and women going idle and hungry and ill-clad amidst the plenty they have created. They are capitalism's necessary "reserve of labour." For the capitalist system cannot afford to employ all those who are available for work; nor can it afford to provide the full measure of social services which are essential to a decent society. If it could do all these things it would not be a bad system. While, therefore, we ask that certain things which are possible even under existing conditions be done immediately in the interests of the unemployed, the children and the mothers, we must relate these demands to our fundamental demand for the reorganisation of the community's resources on Socialist lines.



# HOUSING

Report to be presented to the National Conference  
of Labour Women, 1933

## 1.—PRE-WAR CONDITIONS

There never was a time when the poor were properly housed. To-day the problem of their housing is acute, but it has been acute for many years. In spite of the Housing legislation of successive post-war governments, and the activities of the Local Authorities, the housing needs of large sections of our people have scarcely yet been touched. The problem began to be urgent over a century ago; and with the enormous industrial expansion and the rapid increase in population throughout the nineteenth century its urgency grew. In the industrial areas men and women sweated and toiled for long hours in workshop, factory and coal mine for the industrial supremacy of Britain, returning at the end of the day to ugly, ill-planned, dark and insanitary houses. To-day the workshop is often silent, the factory shut, and the coal mine derelict. But the wretched houses remain, spreading disease, injuring health and causing unnecessary deaths in these days of industrial depression, just as they used to do in the days of our prosperity.

Before the war, the Land Inquiry Committee for England and Wales reported that there was a shortage of houses and a very serious shortage of good houses. The Royal Commission on the Housing of the Working Classes in Scotland, which had been appointed in 1912, in its report in 1917 described even worse conditions. The Census figures of 1911 had shown that over 53 per cent. of all the houses in Scotland were one and two-room houses; that 47 per cent. of the Scottish population were living in them; and that 45 per cent. were living more than two persons to a room.

In England and Wales 11·5 of the houses were of the one or two-room type, the percentage of the population living in them being 7·1. The position was substantially the same at the 1921 Census.

## 2.—FAILURE OF PRIVATE ENTERPRISE

Before the war, though there had been an increasing use by Local Authorities of the powers to adopt by-laws in regard to types of building and sanitation, the powers to provide houses had scarcely been used. These powers were limited and carried no subsidy in aid of rents. The provision of houses was almost entirely in the hands of private enterprise, whose failure can be read in the facts recorded in the Reports just mentioned. The National Housing Manual published in 1923 by the National Housing and Town Planning Council says: "It must be regretfully stated that private enterprise has failed lamentably and hopelessly to solve the problem of the poor, for the greater part of the pre-1875 slums still persist to sadden and perplex the house reformer to-day"; and again: "Private enterprise broke down in this regard long before the war. This applies to the housing of the poor of our great cities. It applies equally to the housing of the agricultural workers in most rural villages." The Report of the Royal Commission in Scotland was equally emphatic: "Private enterprise had prior to the war almost completely ceased to provide working-class houses. . . . Private enterprise was practically the only agency that undertook the building of houses, and most of the troubles which we have been investigating are due to the failure of private enterprise to provide and maintain the necessary houses sufficient in quantity or in quality."

It is worth while underlining these statements afresh, in view of the determination of the present Government to hand housing over to the agency whose failure in the past is responsible for to-day's problem.

## 3.—1919, 1923, AND 1924 HOUSING ACTS

After the end of the war we had the first effort to make housing a national responsibility in the 1919 Housing Acts for England and Wales and for Scotland. They required Local Authorities to survey the needs of their areas and then to take steps to see that houses were built. The



survey by Local Authorities in England and Wales revealed an immediate need of 796,248 new houses, in Scotland of 115,565. These were official estimates, and appear to under-rate the real need. The National Housing and Town Planning Council in 1923 estimated that over a million new houses were required in England and Wales in order to close houses unfit for habitation; and as the basis of their calculation was the very modest estimate that from 25 to 30 per cent. of the houses which had been in existence before 1875 would be unfit for occupation in 1923, it may be assumed that their figure is nearer the real need of 1919 than the figures in the official surveys. The Scottish Commission's Report in 1917 estimated that 236,000 houses were needed to clear the slums and raise the standard in regard to overcrowding. This is double the estimate of the official surveys two years later.

The 1919 Acts limited the burden falling on a Local Authority which built working-class houses to the produce of a penny rate. Any loss in excess of that amount was to be met by state subsidies. Local Authorities prepared schemes, and the houses (Addison houses) began to materialise. But in 1921, the Government in an economy panic, decided to limit the total number of houses to be provided to 176,000 for England and Wales, and a proportionate number for Scotland. This was less than 25 per cent. of the number which the Local Authorities two years before had declared to be necessary, without making allowance for the new needs arising annually from the growth of the population and wear and tear of existing houses.

In 1923, a new Housing Act—the Chamberlain Act—was passed by the Tory Government. In the words of the recent Report of the Ray Committee on Local Expenditure, "one of the main objects of the Act of 1923 was to encourage private enterprise." It provided an annual subsidy of £6 for twenty years. It helped mainly those who could buy their houses, and hardly touched—nor was it meant to touch—the problem of those who wanted houses to rent.

In 1924, the Labour Government tackled the question of houses to let, and its Housing Act—the Wheatley Act—has been the most successful agency for the provision of working-class houses. The subsidies it provided, £12 10s. per year for forty years in agricultural parishes, and £9 in

other areas, made it possible to let the houses at reasonable rents.

In 1927, seeking fresh fields for economy, the Tory Government reduced the subsidies under the 1923 Act from £6 to £4, and decided to let the Act lapse in October, 1929, in England and Wales. The Wheatley Act subsidies were also reduced from £12 10s. and £9 to £11 and £7 10s. in England and Wales, a further cut to be imposed in October, 1929. There was to be no reduction of subsidies in Scotland until October, 1929.

The result was an immediate drop in the output of houses. In the year following the reductions in the subsidy the number of houses built fell to less than half of the previous year's total, and there was a sharp drop in the number of houses under construction each month from an average of over 50,000 before the cut to less than 30,000. Under pressure of the Ministry there was decline in the standard of houses provided and a reduction in the size of rooms.

#### 4.—THE LABOUR GOVERNMENT'S HOUSING POLICY

The Labour Government when it took office in 1929 immediately passed an Act to prevent the further cuts in the Wheatley subsidies which were due in October of that year. This had the effect of checking the steady decline in house-building.

The Labour Government then turned to the challenge of the slums which still remained substantially as they had been at the close of the war, scarcely touched by any of the Acts on the Statute Book. The Housing Acts for England and Scotland, passed in 1930, mark a new era in housing policy. Local Authorities were required to submit their proposals for dealing with housing conditions in their districts and for the provision of further housing accommodation. The Acts provide annual subsidies for forty years towards the cost of new houses for those who are displaced as a result of slum areas or insanitary houses being demolished or closed. The subsidy depends, not on the number of houses built, but on the number of persons who are rehoused. As the slum area is often an overcrowded area this method ensures more generous financial assistance to Local Authorities which tackle their slums. The subsidies are £2 5s. for



forty years per person rehoused and £2 10s. in agricultural parishes, while there is a special subsidy of £3 10s. when re-housing takes place on expensive sites in high blocks of tenements. In Scotland the subsidies are £2 10s. per person rehoused, and £2 15s. in rural areas. The assistance thus given to Local Authorities is specifically designed to enable them to let the houses built under the 1930 Acts at a lower rent than that normally charged for other houses built by them ; and also at their discretion to charge differing rents according to the circumstances and needs of the families which have to be rehoused.

Slum clearance schemes under legislation previous to the 1930 Acts have provided only 13,343 houses in England and Wales and 14,392 in Scotland. The 1930 Act gave Local Authorities an opportunity of successfully attacking the slums, and if worked in conjunction with the 1924 Act—as it was intended to be—opened out a prospect of a steady improvement in housing standards over the next few years. Programmes received by the end of 1930 from Local Authorities in England and Wales which covered about five-eighths of the population contained plans for the provision of 340,000 houses by these authorities in the next five years, an average of 68,000 per year, about two-thirds being allocated to the 1924 Act and one-third to the 1930 Act.

In Scotland by the end of December, 1931, 204 Local Authorities out of 227 had submitted programmes, which provided for the building of 54,986 houses in their areas in the next three years.

In view of the special difficulties of Local Authorities in rural areas, and of the urgency of their housing problem, the Labour Government also passed the Housing (Rural Authorities) Act of 1931, to enable further financial assistance, in addition to that provided under the 1924 Act, to be given to County Councils for the provision of working-class houses in rural areas. A State Grant of £2,000,000 was to be made available for this purpose, of which Scotland's share was £241,758. The Act aimed at the provision of 40,000 cottages in England and Wales and of 6,000 in Scotland.

#### 5.—THE ECONOMY CAMPAIGN

The advent of the National Government has proved to be disastrous from the point of view of a progressive

Housing policy. A circular sent to Local Authorities by the Minister of Health in January, 1932, suggested that the provision of houses of the parlour type should in future be regarded as quite exceptional. Influenced by the Government's economy drive, many Local Authorities have refrained from submitting further housing programmes, and programmes prepared under the 1930 Act have been held up or reduced. Local Authorities representing five-eighths of the population of England and Wales had, as already stated, prepared programmes by the end of 1930 for the provision of 340,000 necessary houses in the next five years, while Scottish Local Authorities had programmes for the provision of 54,986 houses in 1931, 1932 and 1933. These programmes seem to have gone amissing. For example, in Scotland, only 10,064 houses were built in 1931 (including 2,339 by assisted private enterprise) and the Annual Report of the Department of Health for Scotland, 1931, remarks : " It is apparent that if the programmes are to be fulfilled a very special effort will have to be made in 1932 and 1933." There is no sign of that special effort being made by the Local Authorities and no hope that the Government is going to encourage it. On the contrary, the Government with its strong bias in favour of private enterprise is definitely discouraging Local Authorities. An application from a West Riding Authority for permission to build houses for aged persons under the 1930 Act was refused unless it could be proved that private enterprise could not supply the need. And nothing more will be done under the Housing (Rural Authorities) Act, though less than 1,500 houses so far have been provided instead of the 40,000 originally intended.

The monthly returns prepared by the Ministry of Health show that the average number of houses completed each month for the year ending February 28, 1933, was 4,595, as compared with a monthly average of 5,745 for the previous year, while the number of houses under construction has fallen from 41,242 in December, 1931, to 27,528 in February, 1933.

A Committee on Local Expenditure (the Ray Committee) was appointed in July, 1932, and recommended drastic economies in housing, including the abolition of subsidies under the Wheatley Act and freedom to raise rents ; a



limit of 2,000 to the houses which may be provided under the Housing (Rural Authorities) Act; reduction of subsidies under the 1930 Act; and the sale of their housing property by Local Authorities.

The Committee further proposed that "subsidies should not be wasted by being given to those who do not need them"; and that tenants "who can afford it" should be asked to pay higher rents, or buy their houses, or vacate them; and that "accommodation should not be wasted" on a couple without children or with one child or whose family had left them. These proposals imply a new Means Test for tenants of Municipal houses. It is regrettable that some Local Authorities have not been slow to take the advice offered by the Ray Committee. Leyton Council, for example, have requested certain of their tenants to vacate their houses, among them tenants of many years' standing, on the ground that they do not require so much accommodation.

#### 6.—LANDLORDS "ON THE DOLE"

It is interesting to note in passing that the Ray Committee urged a fuller use of the facilities provided under the Housing (Rural Workers) Act, which was passed by the Tory Government in 1926, but has not been mentioned earlier as it does not provide for the building of new houses, but for the patching of old houses in rural areas. It says to the rural landlord: "If you have an old cottage which has become uninhabitable through your neglect, we shall relieve you of the cost of your neglect and pay you for doing now what you ought to have done years ago." If the cost of reconditioning a cottage is £150, the landowner finds £50, the Local Authority provides £50, and the national exchequer £50. When ratepayers and taxpayers have spent between them £100 on the house, it still belongs to the landowner; and the Act thoughtfully enables him to raise the rent when the repairs are completed so as to recoup himself for the £50 he spent himself. The Act is a good example of "Tory Socialism," and it is not surprising that the Ray Committee urges landlords to take fuller advantages of the opportunities thus offered them of going on the dole.

#### 7.—THE HOUSING (FINANCIAL PROVISIONS) BILL

The reply of the Government to the demands for further economies is the Housing (Financial Provisions) Bill which

has now passed through all its stages in the House of Commons. It brings to an end all subsidies to Local Authorities except those in respect of slum clearance under the 1930 Act. It restores to private enterprise the task of providing houses for the working classes; and it provides for a state guarantee of part of the advances made by Building Societies to individuals for the purpose of building working-class houses. This guarantee has been given as a result of a scheme put forward to the Government by the representatives of Building Societies which have offered a more attractive field for private investment since the slump in industry occurred.

The Bill is inspired as much by antipathy to public enterprise as by the desire for further "economy." There is no evidence that private enterprise is any more capable than before the war of coping with the housing problem. On the contrary the advocates of private enterprise made it clear in the House that they see no hope for its success *unless housing standards are lowered*. The better standard built up since the war by state and municipal enterprise is in danger. More houses to the acre, smaller houses and poorer equipment are contemplated. Though the Minister made a concession in accepting a Labour amendment that each house should have a fixed bath, the amendment that the bath should be in a separate bathroom, which has been the law since 1924, was overwhelmingly defeated.

#### 8.—THE EXISTING NEED

An examination of the figures of the number of houses built since 1919 makes it clear that there is still a very serious housing problem to be dealt with.

NUMBER OF HOUSES BUILT SINCE THE WAR AT FEBRUARY 28, 1933

	Local Authorities		Private Enterprise		Total
	Ordinary	Slum Clearance	Without State Assistance	With State Assistance	
England and Wales	690,920	21,143	8,140	418,428	1,990,986
Scotland	90,980	20,356	—	31,897	164,137

\* At December 31, 1932.

In addition 2,552 steel houses were completed in Scotland by the Second Scottish National Housing Company.



The houses which private enterprise has provided, with or without state assistance, have helped very little to meet the need for working-class houses. They have met the demand largely of those who can afford to buy their houses. The houses provided by Local Authorities are the best measure of the extent to which the post-war need has been met. If we are content to accept the official estimates of the number of houses needed in 1919—796,248 houses in England and Wales and 115,565 in Scotland—then it has to be said that in thirteen years the Local Authorities have not been able to meet even this need. Their failure in regard to the worst aspect of the housing problem, that of the slum, is more marked. A considerable proportion of the estimated need of 1919 was in respect of houses that were unfit for occupation (the Royal Commission in Scotland, for example, said that there were 57,669 unfit houses which were not capable of being repaired) and yet the total number of houses provided under slum clearance scheme is 21,143 in England and Wales and 20,356 in Scotland.

But to ascertain the real need we must add to the number of houses estimated as necessary in 1919 the number required annually to provide for growing population and to meet wear and tear of existing houses. This has frequently been estimated at 100,000 a year for Great Britain, so that 1,300,000 ought to have been provided since 1919 to meet the needs arising annually. So far as the working-classes are concerned this need has not been met at all.

### 9.—HOUSING AND HEALTH

The Report on the 1931 Census figures is not yet available, but County Reports which have already been published show the seriousness of the existing position. Half-a-million of the people of London, one person in every eight, are living more than two to a room; 58·8 per cent. of London families occupy homes of one, two and three rooms.

The effect of bad housing conditions on the health of the people hardly needs to be told here. Reports of medical officers show that we continue to kill babies and spread disease at a much quicker rate in the slum than in the suburb. In evidence given to the Royal Commission on Housing in Scotland, the Medical Officer for Glasgow pointed out that the death rate of male children from one to five was 40·56

in the one-room house; 30·2 in the two-room house; 17·9 in the three-room house; and 10·2 in the house of four rooms or over.

The general death rate, the tuberculosis death rate, and the death rate of infants followed a similar curve. Though the infant mortality rate has shown a downward trend in the past twelve years, the gap between the rate in the slum and in the good housing area has not diminished.

### 10.—NATIONAL POLICY NECESSARY

The shortage of houses is still serious; the slum problem is as acute as it was at the end of the war; the damage done to health by bad housing conditions continues. The only method of dealing with the problem is by planned national effort. To hand it over to private enterprise is to make it worse.

A vigorous national policy requires for its fulfilment the fullest use of the Wheatley Act of 1924 and the Greenwood Act of 1930. Only by a combination of these two Acts can we hope to deal with all aspects of the housing problem—overcrowding, shortage of houses, annual depreciation and slums. The Wheatley subsidies should be restored and Local Authorities should be requested to proceed at once to carry out the five-year plans they prepared under the 1930 Act; and Local Authorities which did not then submit plans should be requested to do so within a stated period. Responsibility for carrying out such a programme should be vested in the Minister of Health who should have complete power to build houses in any area where the Local Authority is neglecting its statutory duty.

Meanwhile the Minister of Health has just issued to Local Authorities a circular asking them to prepare a survey of the slums not later than September, and demanding that they shall deal with slum clearance in five years. The circular is vigorously worded, but it contains no suggestion that compulsion will be brought to bear on backward authorities. Further, since the problem of the slums cannot be successfully dealt with apart from the housing problem as a whole, and the abolition of the Wheatley subsidies has tied the hands of the Local Authorities in dealing with the problem as a whole, it is difficult to believe that the circular, in spite of its strong words, is anything but window-dressing.



Labour groups on Local Authorities should, however, press for full discussion of the circular by their Councils, and for the necessary surveys being taken and plans made, as it is important that Local Authorities should be made to face the responsibilities placed upon them by the circular. It would then be possible to test the intentions of the Minister by his action towards Local Authorities which refuse to move, and toward those which bring to his notice difficulties in regard to slum clearance which have been created by the cessation of the Wheatley subsidies and the absence of any guarantees in regard to the continuation even of the subsidies under the 1930 Act.

No attempt has been made in this Report to deal in detail with the finance of the various Housing Acts, and nothing has been said about the severe unemployment among building trade workers which has increased during the past year as house building has decreased. We have confined ourselves to a record of what has been done since the war and the need that still exists. While that need exists, no argument about financial stringency can be accepted as an excuse for inactivity, and the need is sufficient justification in itself for the demands we make, without the added weight of the very important fact that there are building trade workers who require jobs. A society worthy of the ideals of the Labour Movement must have a decently housed population as its basis; attainment of that basis cannot be left to the whim of the private investor, but must be regarded as a national responsibility to be shouldered by the community itself.