

COAL MINES AND MINERS' WAGES

The State control of the coal mines ceased at the beginning of this month. During its existence it coincided with an absolute monopoly possessed by this country in the supply of coal to other countries in Europe. It was that monopoly which provided the funds to finance State control, and it throws some light on the gloom in which the industry is now enveloped. The Coal Controller was able to raise the price of coal to foreign consumers, and did raise it to such a height that great sums were available to replenish the British Treasury, to provide extra profits for mine-owners, to meet the demands of miners for increased wages, to keep poor mines working at a dead loss, and to sell coal below cost to the consumer in this country. Now comes decontrol, just as the bottom has fallen out of the foreign market. German coal for France and the resumption of overseas trade with America, Australia and China have caused a collapse in British export prices. Thus disappears a large part of the "pool" out of which the industry was financed and the State has no further interest in the control of coal. As the WESTMINSTER GAZETTE of 29th March says: "For three years the Government has played with the coal industry, and after disastrously muddling its commercial basis and price levels now throws it back at short notice to mine-owners and miners to make the best they can of the result." It is stated that the coal mines have been carried on latterly (since the fall in export prices) at a loss of £5,000,000 a month. The statement is not controverted by the Miners' Federation. On the contrary, the Secretary of the Federation declares that the industry is "insolvent," and calls upon the Government to vote millions of pounds as a subsidy to the mines, which will enable them to carry on while miners and mine-owners try to come to some workable arrangement. That is the policy to maintain wages in one industry at the expense of the taxpayer, and of all other industries, and it is not likely to be listened to for a moment. The ultimate

working arrangement demanded by the miners is another form of subsidy and is equally futile—that paying mines should subsidize non-paying mines and a pool should be formed for the provision of both wages and profits. If the mines as a whole are being run at a loss, how could such a pooling arrangement maintain the present rates of wages and profits unless prices are to be raised and the consumer is to pay a subsidy in another form? The mine-owners on the other hand, declaring that the loss is incurred in the less productive mines, say that wages must be reduced or these mines must be closed, and they have announced a very large cut in wages to take effect immediately. The miners refuse to accept, and the result is a national stoppage. To-day the whole coal industry is closed down. Meanwhile the Press, the politicians and the organized trade union movement are at a loss for suggestions. Every attempt to unravel the tangle leads but to a counsel of despair, and there the issue is left to the course of events.

How to reconstruct an industry, or rather how to facilitate its return to natural conditions after it has been "disastrously muddled" by State control and interference, is to discuss riddles. The same problem faces many other trades, particularly the building trade, which has been brought to similar chaos by subsidies and officialdom.

So with agriculture and the Corn Production Act. The laws made by Parliament have protected privilege and handed private enterprise over to the tribute exacted by land ownership. The State has stepped in to do what private industry could not do in these circumstances, and the inevitable result has been the stoppage of production, driving millions of men into unemployment. It is not the time to fashion schemes or consider the problems of any one industry. Miners are rightly concerned for their wages, but they cannot expect to enjoy an income at the expense of the rest of the community. If they would raise and maintain wages in coal mines they must see to it that wages outside coal mines—in other employments to which men may turn their hands—are also raised and maintained. That takes the whole wage question on to a much broader plane and gives point to the publicly expressed lament of Mr. Robert Smillie, late President of the Miners' Federation, that the miners and the Labour movement generally had paid so little heed to the land question. This means that without first breaking down land monopoly there can be no safe nor abiding cure for the hydra-headed labour problem.

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