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TWOPENCE

CAPITALISM AND COAL

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IN the history of capitalist production in this country no other industry has had the same fundamental importance as that of coal-mining. The whole fabric of manufacture and trade has been built up on the use of the one form of fuel that, until recently, was commercially utilisable. The great centres of population (outside London) are on the coalfields or close thereto. Every great industry has developed in an area which is, virtually, co-terminous with a great coalfield.

Not all the coalfields are, of course, of equal importance. Some of them, even some of the more extensive, have a diminishing influence within the capitalist system.

Those that matter are in: Fife; the Lothians; Lanarkshire; Northumberland; Durham; South Yorkshire; Derby and Notts; Lancashire; Staffordshire; and South Wales.

Having considered the last-named in a special article and nothing of vital import having occurred since that study appeared last October, except that prices have continued to fall and unemployment and low wages to prove themselves a chronic rather than a temporary feature, South Wales will not come in for treatment in this number.

The coalfields with which we are, on this occasion concerned are those which supply the steady demand for house coal, the comparatively regular requirements of the railways, gas and electricity plants, the varying needs of general industry and of the iron and steel trades, the diminished wants of the ship-bunkering business and the profoundly disturbed export market.

As a general rule, the miner does not trouble himself with any thoughts as to what becomes of the coal which he cuts and sends to the pit mouth for loading into the wagons in the colliery siding. He applies his toil to the coal and thereby gives it value and, having done that, lines up at the office, draws his pay and goes away to his home or, in some few cases, to the meeting of his lodge. He has been so accustomed to a state of affairs in which the coal that he has sent up the shaft has automatically disappeared and the manager has asked for more that he has never worried himself about the disposal of the commodity which his labour produces out of the rock face.

Prosperity and Contentment

As long as British capitalism was expanding, as long as the market for British-made commodities continued to absorb them and send over here for more, as long as British shipping was busy and prosperous, as long as British coal found a ready sale on the Continent and in South America, so long did the indispensable commodity called coal make its way, unchecked as on an endless band, from the pit-head to the mineral-train and thence by rail and dock to the market.

The British miner had some excuse for taking himself seriously and walking up the floor of every conference serenely conscious that his organisation was the back-bone of the working-class movement. The whole structure of commerce and industry rested upon his labours and without his agreement to go on producing the commodity with which steam could be generated, capitalism was helpless.

Industry runs out of coal much sooner than commerce runs out of cotton, woollens, boots and other manufactures. So long as the British miner had a monopoly of supplying coal to the export and home markets he was, given moderate intelligence and honesty on the part of his officials, in an impregnable position.

Causes of the obsolete Organisation of the Miners

It is true that the miners were slow to organise into unions and still slower to come together into a nation-wide federation. They had the advantage of working in association and of living in village communities by themselves. They had no lines of demarcation caused by peculiarities of craft and trade to divide them. They had, on the other hand, no particular skill to protect. They lived under degrading conditions and they were constantly being "diluted" by the bringing in of agricultural workers with a much lower standard of life.

In Lanarkshire and South Wales, organisation was only achieved with the greatest difficulty by reason of the fact that, in the former area, masters like Stewarts of Murdostown and Houldsworths of Collnesh had introduced low-paid Irish immigrants, the victims of famine and poverty in their own country, whose real menace of a lower standard of wages and conditions was disguised and presented as an antagonism of religious faith and national ideas.

Smillie in the Clyde Valley and Richards in Monmouthshire, to whose pioneer work so much of the miners' organisation in these areas was due, encountered almost insuperable difficulties in overcoming the jealousies of religion and of race which, in places like Motherwell and Ebbw Vale, it has for two generations been the calculated and deliberate aim of the master-class to aggravate and prolong.

It was factors such as these, counting for all too much on some of the coal-fields, which hindered the effective exercise of an industrial power which economic conditions had placed in the hands of the workers.

To-day, when not only has the coal market become international, but the proletariat of Bengal and of Kailan, newly recruited from the rice and mullet-fed peasantry of India and of China, is sending up cheap coal from the rapidly developing collieries of the East to bunker ships, formerly getting their fuel supplies from Durham and South Wales, it scarcely becomes a miner's leader to talk in terms of contempt, of "the Asiatic mind."

With capital flowing steadily from South Yorkshire to Cammell Laird's extensive colliery properties in India where, last year, the wages scaled down from 1s. 1½d. to 11d. a day (see *Report of Department of Statistics, India. Prices and Wages, 1922, p. 212*) and Ellerman cutting rates at Castleford and going more and more into Indian coal, the workings of Mr. Hodges' agile mind seem a little in need of attention and improvement.

In the nineteenth century it was Irishmen and Lithuanians who were employed to weaken the resistance of the miners. To-day, it is Indians, Chinese, and Kaffirs. Only last week there was news of the loss by South Wales of a South American coal

contract of thirty years' duration as a result of South African price-cutting. Nantgarw cannot compete with Natal. Black labour is given preference over white because it is cheaper. There can be no hope for a miners' organisation that does not take into consideration the raising of the wages and standard of life of the black, the yellow and the dark-skinned wage-workers of Africa and of Asia.

The movement of capital, the adoption of machinery and the general industrialisation of backward countries and continents makes more and more insecure the status of the British miners. The logic of events in the world coal market, the whole tendency of international economic evolution, demands of the miners that they either link up with and adopt the programme and methods of the Red International of Labour Unions or sink back into the serfdom and semi-serfdom out of which men of character, vision and of courage have, during a century and more, laboriously raised them.

At this moment, the menace in the mind of every thinking miner is the competition with British coal, of the coal produced by the low-paid and over-wrought miners of Germany. A memorandum, prepared officially for the M.F.G.B., states that "it will be seen, therefore, that the total loss of coal exports to Russia, Germany and France, as compared with the pre-war period, amounts (for 1921) to a figure of 19½ million tons of coal."

In France, in Belgium, and in Spain, as in the United States, the miners are, according to "the Iron and Coal Trades Review," being met with demands either to work longer hours--to forego their eight-hour day--or to accept less wages, to enable their masters to retain their markets. Even the Germans are not exempt from attacks on the eight-hour day, inspired by just the same arguments.

As for the position in Spain, the facts are significant. The *Compendium*, in December, 1920, recorded that Seymour Berry and D. R. Llewellyn, the South Wales coal-owners, were extending their interests in the Asturias Coalfield of Spain. The same publication, in May, 1922, states: "Coal mining trouble in Spain. The employers have notified their men of the decision, stating that it is impossible to compete with foreign traders unless wages are reduced, the only alternative being to close their mines."

The Bosses' "Double Cross"

Berry and Llewellyn, who know a thing or two, went to Spain. They cut wages in South Wales "to compete with foreign traders" on the Spanish market. Then they even matters by cutting wages in Spain "to compete with foreign traders," presumably from South Wales. Next January they will try to swing it across South Wales once again and so on--till Frank Hodges asks them to refrain in the interests of his Ten Years' Truce of Mammon.

But European competition is not the permanent danger. It may pass. The competition of Africa and of Asia has come to stay, to become more deadly.

There is no hope for the miners in this respect but in world-wide solidarity, in the Red International of Labour Unions.