National guilds, an inquiry into the wage system and the way out

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NATIONAL GUILDS
AN INQUIRY INTO THE WAGE SYSTEM
AND THE WAY OUT

BY

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"GUILD PRINCIPLES IN WAR AND PEACE"
"LETTERS TO MY NEPHEW" (ANTHONY FARLEY)

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THIRD EDITION

LONDON
G. BELL AND SONS LTD.

1919


PREFACE

The substance of the following chapters appeared serially in The New Age during the years 1912–13. But for the origin of the idea of the Guilds as applied to modern industry an earlier date would have to be sought. Both the present Editor of The New Age in an article in the Contemporary Review of 1906, and Mr. A. J. Penty in his work on The Restoration of the Guild System of the same year, had put forward the suggestion that the Guild organisation was indispensable to higher industry at any rate. But whereas Mr. Penty confined his proposals to the mere restoration of the mediæval guild, without regard to modern conditions, it was in The New Age, during the period 1906–12, that the idea of the national guild was first brought into relation both with historical and with recent economic development. And the present work, the first ever published on the subject, is the outcome of that period. The tide of Collectivism, however, was then and for some years afterwards too powerful to admit of even the smallest counter-current. Some experience of Collectivism in action and of political methods as distinct from economic methods was necessary before the mind of the Labour movement could be turned in another direction. This was brought about by the impulse known as Syndicalism which, in essence, is the demand of Labour to control its industry. At the same time that Syndicalism came to be discussed, a revival of trade-union activity took place, and on such a scale that it seemed to the
present writers that at last the trade unions were now finally determined to form a permanent element in society. In short, every speculation concerning the future of industry was henceforward bound to take into account the trade unions as well as the State. Reflecting upon this in the light of a considerable experience, both theoretical and practical, the writers were driven to the conclusions herein stated. In no respect, they believe, have they written "without their book" or in the spirit of Utopianism. The analysis of the nature of wages, here made, for the first time, the foundation of a critique of labour economics, leads inevitably to the conclusion that by no manner of means can wages generally be raised while the wage system continues. There follows from that the necessity, in the minds of real reformers at any rate, to consider the means by which the wage system itself may be abolished, in the interests, in the first instance, of the proletariat, but no less, though secondarily, in the interests of society and of civilisation. The indispensability of the State, upon which the present writers lay stress the more that the Syndicalists deny it, is affirmed and maintained at the same time that the right of Labour to control its production is throughout assumed. In the conception of National Industrial Guilds the writers believe that the future will find the solution of the problems now vexing one-twentieth of our population and ruining the remainder.
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NATIONAL GUILDS

PART I

THE WAGE SYSTEM

I

EMANCIPATION AND THE WAGE SYSTEM

The more meliorist politics be tested the more certain it becomes that emancipation cannot be effected by patchwork. For over eighty years Great Britain, by parliamentary stitching and patching, has contrived to maintain social order. The worker has been docile because he believed in gradual reform, and because it was promised him and in part secured to him. Had he not believed in gradual reform—the broadening down from precedent to precedent—all the promises in the world would not have kept him in bondage. It is certain, however, that he will continue docile, until he grasps the true meaning of emancipation. He has lived patiently and worked ardentely for something that was called emancipation—a good platform word—and for three generations he has truly believed that another decade would release him from his life of degrading toil. "The day of your emancipation is nigh," is a
cry that has gone out to the wearied workman for thousands of years. It has ever been Labour’s Messianic mirage. To-day at Socialist meetings the audiences still sing fervently Kingsley’s hymn, “The Day of the Lord is at hand.” The delusion is carefully fostered by political Socialists of every school. Not that they deliberately delude their followers—that would be bad in all conscience—but, worse, they delude themselves. At least that is the only reasonable inference, for it is inconceivable that Socialist politicians could be so diabolically cruel as knowingly to deceive their faithful followers on the crucial facts of existence. There is also another explanation: Is it possible that they do not know what emancipation really is?

Whatever else it may mean, it is certain that emancipation involves a new epoch, new not only in social and economic structure but new spiritually; a new birth in which men are not only born again, but, as Mrs. Poyser remarked, “born different.” Now it is self-evident that social reformers and the most hide-bound Conservatives have this one thing in common: neither desires nor dreams of a new epoch. The Conservative says: “The present is good enough”; the social reformer says: “Not quite good enough; let me improve it so that it may continue.” It is on this vital issue that the revolutionist differentiates himself from both. But does the revolutionist in his turn really understand the full meaning of emancipation? It is certainly curious that revolutionary literature throws very little light upon it.

What, then, is the essence of emancipation? The answer is simple: the rescue from oppressed or evil living and the inauguration of a healthy method of life. The application of this broad definition depends upon our understanding and appreciation of the fundamentals upon which the existing social structure is based. It