

What the Farm Laborer Wants.



He wants Better Wages.—Now he gets ten or twelve shillings a week, not enough to keep himself and his family in health.

He wants a Safe and Healthy Home.—Now he lives in a cottage belonging to the farmer or the squire, out of which he can be turned at a week's notice. The drinking water is often bad and the drainage worse; and so fever comes, and ague, and rheumatism.

He wants more Freedom.—Now he must touch his hat to the Squire, or he will get no blankets at Christmas; he must go to church, or the parson will cut him out of the Village Charities, and he must obey the farmer, or he will get turned off the land when winter comes.

No laborer by himself can get better wages, a better home, or more freedom. He is so poor, that the farmer, the squire, and the parson will always be too many for him. He, like his father before him, will starve on his wages, fall sick in his cottage, often little better than a pig-stye, beg for out-door relief in his old age, and finish up by being buried by the parish.

But many a thing that a man cannot get by himself, he can get if banded together with his fellows into a union. If all the laborers in the village stand by one another, they can raise wages several shillings a week, get good homes for themselves with land to work on, and become more powerful in the village than the squire and the parson and the farmer put together.

All this an agricultural laborer can do for himself slowly, but surely, bit by bit, if he will only use the power which he already has, if he will only stand shoulder to shoulder with his fellow men and claim his right.

Two things he must do. He must

JOIN A UNION and USE HIS VOTE.

Joining the Union will cost him a few pence a week, but the Union will, in return, fight the farmer for him. The Dock Laborers in London, without a Union, used to get fourpence an hour; now that they have got a Union they get sixpence an hour, or at least five shillings a week more than they used to get; and all they have to pay to the Union is three pence a week. A Union is always worth more than it costs.

Using his vote costs the laborer nothing at all, and can do more for him than even the Union.

The laborer can vote at the Easter VESTRY; but he can't do much there yet. He can also vote every year for the election of GUARDIANS of the POOR. This election is very important to him; and he ought to see that he is not cheated out of his vote

on the excuse that his landlord pays the poor rate. Every occupier of a cottage is entitled to vote whether he pays the poor rate or not.

But the most important elections are those for the COUNTY COUNCIL (once every three years), and for PARLIAMENT (about every three or four years, or sometimes oftener).

Parliament and the County Council can do for the laborer out of the rates and taxes what he can never do for himself out of his small wages. *That is why the farmer and the parson and the squire do all they can to keep the friends of the laborers from getting elected to the County Council or to Parliament.* But they cannot prevent it, if the laborers are determined to have their rights. Nobody can now be elected either to the County Council or to Parliament, without the votes of the laborers; and the laborers must see to it that only their own friends get elected. They need not be afraid to vote as they like, for the ballot keeps their votes a secret from everybody but themselves. Remember there are at least four laborers to every man of any other class in the country; and each laborer's vote is as good as the squire's.

HOW TO KNOW WHO ARE THE FRIENDS OF THE LABORER.

The friends of the laborer are those who will pass laws to make the laborer free. What are these laws?

1.—PARISH COUNCILS.

At present the village is ruled by the squire and the parson, with the help of the lawyer and the farmer. The laborer needs to have the village ruled by a Parish Council, elected by the votes of all the village. Such a Council could grant allotments of land to the laborers, govern the parish school without interference from the parson, look after the parish charities, build new cottages, lay out pure water, make good drains to keep away the fever, manage the village hospital, open a village reading room, protect the village green and see that no one stops up the public footpaths, and in all ways take as good care of the laborers as the parson and the squire now take of themselves.

2.—RESTORATION OF THE COMMON LAND

In the old times there were plenty of common lands and roadside strips, on which the laborer could play cricket, graze his cow, or let his pig and his geese pick up a living; but the squire, who was in Parliament, made laws to rob the laborer of these rights. The law has now forbidden this robbery; but every year the squires, with the help of the lawyers, sneak acres of common land. The Parish Council must have power to make them disgorge what they have stolen, and put a stop to all future robbery.

3.—ALLOTMENTS.

Everyone knows how the farmer and the squire try to prevent the men from getting reasonably cheap allotments.

The laborer will never get land on fair terms as long as he has to look for it to a private landlord. Once get an elected Parish Council, with power to grant allotments, and the laborers will be able to vote themselves as much land as they like, at fair rents, with no fear of being turned out as long as they pay honestly. Parish Councils are the only real way to get allotments.

Agricultural labourers - U. K.

4.—BETTER HOMES.

But allotments of bare land are not much use so long as the laborer can be turned out of his cottage at a week's notice. They know this well in Ireland, where the Board of Guardians often builds cottages and lets them to laborers at fair rents. Our Parish Councils must have the same power. When the laborer has no other landlord than the Parish Council which he and his fellow laborers elect, he will no longer run the risk of being turned out of house and home merely because his master is angry with him. The Parish Council could give him, too, a good supply of pure drinking water laid on by pipes to every cottage, so that his wife need not fetch it in pails from some foul well. The Parish Council could drain and light the whole village, and keep every bye-road as clean as the road up to the Squire's house.

5.—FREE SCHOOLS AND BETTER ONES.

Why should the laborer have to pay twopence or fourpence a week for the schooling which the law compels him to give to his children? The Squire's sons are being taught at schools like Eton and at the University at the expense of charitable funds which were left for all alike, and have been stolen by the rich. The laborer must now vote for making the parish school free to all, with a free dinner to the children, as well as the best possible teachers and books. There should be public scholarships too; so that every clever boy and girl—whether from the cottage or from the Hall—could go to College at the public expense. Above all, the parish school must be a public school, managed by the people, and not by the Parson.

6.—PENSIONS FOR THE OLD PEOPLE.

When the laborer gets old and so broken with rheumatism that he can work no more, what happens to him now? He becomes a pauper and either goes into the workhouse, or (if he is lucky) gets half-a-crown a week outdoor relief to starve on. He loses his vote; he is no longer a citizen. When he dies, he is buried as a pauper.

This is not what the rich provide for their own class. Perhaps the squire is an army officer: if so, when he is too old to go to war, he will get a pension, paid regularly out of the taxes. While he lives, even in his old age, he keeps all his rights and dignities; when he dies he will be buried with all honor.

Why should not the laborer have a pension in his old age, like the army officer and the government clerk? Instead of the workhouse or parish pay, the worn out laborer must demand an honourable pension of four or five shillings a week from his own Parish Council. Then, while he lived, he could hold his head up with the rest; and when he died his Parish Council could bury him as decently as a Burial Club.

7.—REFORM OF TAXATION.

All these things will cost money; and it is quite certain that the laborer cannot pay for them out of his scanty wages. But at present he actually does pay for them in taxes, and does not get them. Whenever he spends threepence for tobacco, he pays *only* a farthing for the tobacco itself: the other twopence-three-farthings

is a tax. Every glass of beer, every cup of tea, every mug of cocoa, every pound of currants is made dearer because the Government has taxed it. But all the money got by this taxation is used up, before it comes to the laborer, in making things pleasant for people like the squires, parsons, and their relations. Now the laborer must vote only for those members of Parliament who will take the taxes off his tobacco and his beer, his tea, his cocoa and his currants, and put in their place new taxes on the backs of those who can best bear them.

Whose backs are these? Why, the backs of the landlords, of course, those people who take their rent out of the land, though they never do a stroke of the hard work that raises the crops. They did not make the land: why should they have the power to make other men pay for it? In past times much of the land belonged to those who worked on it, and they kept for themselves the whole of the crops. Now the land is owned by a few landlords who, between them all, draw fifty million pounds a year as rent of agricultural land alone. This amounts to over a pound a week for every agricultural labourer in the country. Is not this reason enough why wages are so low?

We cannot take the land from these landlords, or get back the rent which they take from us—at least not all at once. But it is only fair that those who draw the rent should pay the rates. All the things which the Parish Council can be set to do for the village, can be paid out of the rates; and the landlord and the tithe owner must pay those rates.

These, then, are the wants of the Farm Laborer:—

BETTER WAGES. PARISH COUNCILS.
RESTORATION OF COMMON LANDS.
FREE SCHOOLS & BETTER ONES. ALLOTMENTS.
PENSIONS FOR THE OLD PEOPLE.
BETTER HOMES. REFORM OF TAXATION.

All these things you can get for yourself by your Union and your vote, if you and all the other laborers in the district will join the Union and will agree not to vote for anyone who will not promise to help to get them for you.

THE FABIAN SOCIETY.

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