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Food and the Workers

SOCIAL MURDER

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When one individual inflicts bodily injury upon another, such injury that death results, we call the deed manslaughter ; when the assailant knew in advance that the injury would be fatal, we call his deed murder. But when society places hundreds of proletarians in such a position that they inevitably meet a too early and an unnatural death, one which is quite as much a death by violence as that by the sword or bullet ; when it deprives thousands of the necessaries of life, places them under conditions in which they cannot live—forces them, through the strong arm of the law, to remain in such conditions until that death ensues which is the inevitable consequence—knows that these thousands of victims must perish, and yet permits these conditions to remain, its deed is murder just as surely as the deed of the single individual ; disguised, malicious murder, murder against which none can defend himself, which does not seem what it is, because no man sees the murderer, because the death of the victim seems a natural one, since the offence is more one of omission than of commission. But murder it remains.—Frederick Engels, "Condition of the Working Class in England in 1844."

As this pamphlet goes to press the workers of Great Britain are organising a Hunger March and a Congress of Action in protest against the lowering of their standards of life. It is the purpose of this pamphlet to discuss one dangerous form of the attack on those standards.

During the last few weeks a controversy has arisen between the advisory committee of the Ministry of Health and a commission appointed by the British Medical Association on the question of the minimum food requirements of the workers.

Workers must reject absolutely the principle of minimum diets and the idea that it is possible, in the present state of knowledge, to determine a minimum diet compatible with health. It is proposed to discuss the suggested minimum diets, particularly that of the B.M.A., and to show that these diets are inadequate, and that, even if they were sufficient, the unemployed and a large proportion of the employed workers cannot afford them.

FOOD REQUIREMENTS

The energy required to run a petrol or a steam engine is obtained by burning fuel—petrol or coal. The energy required by a man to work and keep warm is obtained by burning food inside his body. This energy is usually reckoned in Calories. The more work a man does and the less he is able to keep himself warm by clothes and artificial heating, the more Calories he needs. For purposes of calculation the food requirements of women and children are reckoned as fractions of those of a "man" (e.g., a women six-sevenths and a child of five, one-half). Numerous investigations

have shown that the average diet of working-class adult men supplies 3,000 Calories a day. The committee of the Ministry of Health* recommended this figure as sufficient for an adult man, although admitting that the standard was "not very generous" and that "no account has been taken of wastage" in cooking, etc. The Ministry's circular† issued on 4th January claimed that the present advisory committee reported *unanimously* to the effect that this amount was adequate, although at least one member of the committee was not consulted.

It must be pointed out that there is no evidence for the adequacy of this standard other than the fact that it represents the average consumption of working men. When it is remembered that during the war only one man in three was found to reach the low standard of health required for foreign service, and that the death rate from tuberculosis in working-class districts is often ten times as high as it is among the well-to-do, it is obvious that the standard of living of the workers cannot be regarded as a fair standard of what is needed to keep a man in health. Those who can afford it take more, even though engaged in sedentary occupations and therefore requiring less energy. The allowance to soldiers in England in peace time is over 3,400 Calories a day; and it was found that prisoners in Scotland required 3,700 Calories a day, when doing moderately hard work, in order to maintain health, weight, and working capacity.

A satisfactory diet must contain about 3 oz. (90 grams) of substances called protein necessary for building and repairing the body. Part at any rate of these

* *The Criticism and Improvement of Diets*, H.M. Stationery Office, 1932.

† Ministry of Health Circular 1370, H.M. Stationery Office, 1934.

should be supplied by the dearer foods—meat, fish, milk, cheese, or eggs (first-class protein). The advisory committee of the Ministry of Health recommend 1½ oz. (37 grams) of first-class protein. This is a minimum figure arrived at by laboratory experiments using milk as the source of protein and there is no evidence that it is sufficient under working conditions using ordinary diets. Those who can afford it take considerably more.

About 3½ oz. (100 grams) of fat (meat fat, lard, suet, butter, margarine, etc.) should also be taken. The fat and protein together account for less than half the total Calories. The remainder are mainly made up from starchy foods such as bread.

A diet must also contain vitamins, which are necessary to maintain health, and, in children, to promote growth and development. They are mainly contained in the more expensive foods (milk, butter, liver, eggs, fresh fruit and vegetables).

The recent report to the Medical Research Council on vitamins* lays stress on the necessity of abundant supplies of vitamins to children, and to women during pregnancy and while suckling babies. The chief results of insufficient vitamins in children's diets are failure to grow, rickets, and a special liability to colds and bronchitis. If the diet of a pregnant woman is deficient, "ill health, sometimes of a gross nature, is not uncommon, while disturbances of a slighter nature arising from the same cause are probably so common as to be regarded as almost normal." (*Vitamins*, p. 269.) Decay of teeth due to this cause is particularly common. Professor Mellanby (of the advisory committee of the

* *Vitamins*. Medical Research Council, H.M. Stationery Office, 1932.

Ministry of Health) with others* found that the number of women who suffered from complications after child-birth, after being given extra supplies of vitamins, was less than a quarter of those who suffered from these complications among those who had received only an ordinary diet. Also, if the mother does not receive sufficient vitamins during pregnancy, not only the "milk" teeth, but also the permanent teeth of the baby are frequently badly developed and liable to decay.

It is known that, if sufficient vitamins are not contained in the diet, certain diseases occur; and that these diseases can be prevented, but not all cured, by giving sufficient vitamins. But what is not known is the minimum quantity which is enough to prevent these diseases in human beings. There may usually be enough vitamins in an ordinary diet to prevent, for example, gross rickets, but slighter degrees of rickets are extremely common. To quote again from *Vitamins* (p. 226): "It is now becoming generally recognised that much subnormal health, and even incidence of disease, are associated with a partial deficiency of one or more of these accessory substances." Also, the amount of vitamins in different samples of the same food, milk for example, varies widely. For these reasons the authors of this report, probably the most eminent authorities in the world, recommend abundance of foods containing vitamins, and *do not attempt to prescribe minimum amounts*. It is possible to make certain that sufficient vitamins are taken by giving cod liver oil and such preparations as Marmite, instead of increasing the amounts of the more expensive foods.

It must be emphasised that although it is known that

* Green, Pindar, Davis, and Mellanby (1931). *British Medical Journal*, ii, 595.

certain constituents of the diet are necessary it is not known that the full list of these has been discovered. Any diet which is deliberately limited may leave out some as yet unknown essential factor; an ideal diet should, therefore, be abundant and varied.

THE B.M.A. REPORT

This report* gives the actual amounts of various foods which the commissioners think will form diets sufficient for men, women and children. The number of Calories allowed for an adult man is 3,400 a day. This is less than the amount eaten by men engaged in sedentary occupations (3,573 Calories; Cathcart, Murray, and Shanks)†; less also than was found necessary for prisoners doing moderately hard work. It is, therefore, certainly not enough for a man doing heavy work. The Calorie allowances for women and children are probably just enough. The amount of first-class protein (1 $\frac{3}{4}$ oz.) is less than the amount (2 $\frac{1}{2}$ oz.) allowed to soldiers in peace time.

In respect of vitamins the diet for adult men may be satisfactory. The same cannot be said of the children's diets. We have no knowledge of *how little* vitamins are necessary to prevent deficiency diseases in children. The adequacy of these diets for children is therefore a matter of personal opinion. The conclusions of the commission on such a simple objective matter as the prices of food raise considerable doubt about the value of the commissioners' personal opinions. Anyhow, the whole principle of these diets is contrary to the modern

* *British Medical Journal*, November 25th, 1933, Supplement.

† Cathcart, Murray and Shanks (1931) *Medical Research Council Report* No. 151. H.M. Stationery Office.

teaching on the subject, as shown by the report on vitamins which we have quoted already.

The diet allowed for a woman is the same as that for a man, except that the quantities are smaller. There can be no doubt that such a diet does not contain sufficient vitamins and lime salts for pregnant women and nursing mothers.

COST

Besides planning the diets required to keep workers in health, the B.M.A. commission estimated how much these diets cost.

It is claimed that the prices of foods from which the costs of the diets are calculated are based on prices during two weeks of the summer. This alone means that the costs arrived at are not fair estimates. For example, the price of an egg is given as 1d. The price of milk is given as 2 $\frac{3}{4}$ d. a pint; the price now fixed by the Milk Marketing Board is 3 $\frac{1}{2}$ d., with a fine of £.50 for retailers selling at a lower price. Other prices which will sound remarkable to anyone with a practical knowledge of buying food are: frozen meat, without bone, 6d. a lb.; cod, 5d. a lb.; suet, 6d. a lb.; tea, 13d. a lb. Nor is any allowance made for the fact that the workers, with limited means and restricted storage space, are forced to buy in small quantities—and so pay higher prices. The costs given are in general considerably lower than the figure at which the foods could be bought. If the correct figure for milk alone is used, the cost of food for a man, wife, and three children is raised by 1s. 6d. If cod liver oil and Marmite are added to insure sufficient vitamins the cost will be raised by 1s. 6d. a week per individual.

WHAT IT MEANS

There can be no disputing (1) that a man and family cannot continue to live in health on *less* than the diets given in the B.M.A. report; (2) that the diets cannot be bought for the prices given. If, therefore, a family cannot afford to spend on food the amounts considered necessary in this report, they certainly cannot afford enough to keep them in health. Below we compare the cost of diets according to the report, and the cost recalculated using the current price of milk, with full unemployment benefit. We also show cost of diet figures given in the Bowley Report as published in the *Week-end Review* of 1st April, 1933; they are calculated on the standards of the Ministry of Health—3,000 Calories and 1 $\frac{1}{3}$ oz. of first-class protein. It is evident that even on this meagre standard it is impossible to support a family on unemployment benefit.

	Cost of Diet according to Report.	Cost corrected.	Bowley Report.	Unemployment Benefit.	Left over for rent, fuel, clothing, etc.	
					B.M.A. Report.	Bowley Report.
	s. d.	s. d.	s. d.	s. d.	s. d.	s. d.
A Man, 18-21 years	5 10 $\frac{1}{2}$	—	5 0	12 6	6 7 $\frac{1}{2}$	7 6
Adult, Man	5 10 $\frac{1}{2}$	—	5 0	15 3	9 4 $\frac{1}{2}$	10 3
Adult, Woman	4 11	—	4 2	13 6	8 7	9 3
Man, wife, child, 1-2 yrs.	13 6	14 2	11 11	25 3	11 0	13 4
Man, wife, 3 children, 1-2, 2-3, 3-6 yrs.	19 3 $\frac{1}{2}$	20 9 $\frac{3}{4}$	18 10	29 3	8 5 $\frac{1}{4}$	10 5
Man, wife, 3 children, 6-8, 10-2, 12-14 yrs.	22 6 $\frac{1}{2}$	23 7 $\frac{1}{4}$	22 0	29 3	6 7 $\frac{3}{4}$	7 3

It is obvious that full unemployment benefit is not sufficient even to pay for diets which this commission consider the minimum necessary for health, together with the other necessities of life. Further, the com-

mission report that they found it impossible to prepare a diet for a child at a cost of less than half-a-crown a week. The diets which they give cost from 2s. 8d. for a child of one to two years, to 5s. 4d. for a child of 12 to 14 years.

The Report on Diets in Poor Law Children's Homes (H.M. Stationery Office, 1932) has the following significant statement: "In a home containing about 200 children we estimate that the weekly cost, allowing one pint of milk daily, would be about 4s. 1½d. a head if all the provisions were bought at contract prices."

The unemployment allowance for a child is only 2s. a week for everything.

Dr. Crowden, lecturer on Industrial Physiology at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, has published a more practical study* of the relation between family diets and incomes. He concluded that food for man, wife and three children (ages 8, 6, and 3) must cost at least 25s. 3d. a week. He also found that the amount spent on food by actual families was, in a large proportion of cases, little more than half that required to keep them in health. His report shows that it is impossible for a man, wife, and three children to meet expenses on rent, fuel, clothes, and a sufficient diet on less than 45s. a week. As a result the amount available for food may, according to the recent report of the Newcastle Dispensary† be as low as 3s. 1¼d. per head, and according to the Medical Officer of Hammersmith (Annual Report, 1931) can be as low as from 2s. 9d. to 3s. 8d. a week per adult man in the case of employed workers and 1s. 9d. to 1s. 11d. in the case of unemployed.

* Crowden, 1932. *Lancet* i, 899.

† *Report on Costs of Living and Nutrition*, Newcastle Dispensary, 1933.

It is evident that as the number of children in a family increases, it becomes more and more impossible for a person on unemployment benefit or on low wages to afford proper food. The result is that the total amount of food (Calories) is cut down, and particularly that less of the more expensive foods containing the essential constituents proteins and vitamins are eaten.

According to the report of the Newcastle Dispensary the daily amount of first-class protein eaten by unemployed men in Newcastle is only $\frac{3}{4}$ oz. and by employed men just over 1 oz.

Even with the amazingly low prices prevalent in Stockton-on-Tees the amount of first-class protein eaten both by employed and unemployed was found by Dr. M'Gonigle* to be below the 1½ oz. allowed by the Ministry of Health. The examples of actual diets bought by the unemployed, published in the enquiry of the Save the Children Fund,† contain wholly insufficient amounts of first-class proteins and vitamins.

The relation between income and the Calories and total protein in the diet is well illustrated by the report of Cathcart, Murray and Shanks‡ on the diets of different classes in St. Andrews, which shows that the higher the income the greater the amount of protein and number of Calories taken.

Cathcart and his colleagues make the quaint suggestion that the "professional class" take such strenuous exercise that they need more food than unskilled workers. A less far-fetched explanation may suggest itself to the workers. They also suggest that the wealthier classes are of better physique and therefore

* *Proceedings of Royal Society of Medicine*, 1933, page 677.

† *Unemployment and the Child*, London, 1933, page 51.

‡ *Loc. cit.*, No. 151.

need more food. Later on, however, they show that this difference of physique is itself due to better food! This agrees with the observations published by the principal medical officer of the Board of Education.*

The physical development of boys of fifteen in four well-known "public schools" was compared with that of boys in a south London riverside district. The Calorie value of the "public school" diets varied between 3,325 and 3,879 as compared with 1,935 to 2,421 for the south London districts. The "public school" diets were superior, especially in the proportion of fat and animal protein. There was a difference of 15 to 20 lbs. in the average weight of the "public school" boy and of the boy of the same age from the south London districts.

The effects of cuts in wages and unemployment are now showing themselves in the increase of diseases due to insufficient food and lack of vitamins. Owing to sacrifices which they make for their children the main suffering falls on the mothers. An insurance doctor with a large panel in the Byker district of Newcastle† considers that "there is no general sign of malnutrition, but some increase of anaemia and slow recovery among pregnant women, nursing mothers and overwrought family women with young children." A report‡ of the dispensary of Newcastle for 1931 records "the presence of anaemia and a low percentage of haemoglobin in the blood of a number of women selected out of approximately 40,000 patients attending the dispensary per annum."

The medical officer for Belfast, reporting to the

* *Health of the School Child*, 1927, H.M. Stationery Office.

† *On the State of the Public Health in 1932*, page 34, H.M. Stationery Office.

‡ *Ibid*, page 38.

city council on December 1st, 1932, said: "... There can be no doubt there is a marked state of malnutrition and debility in many expectant mothers which makes the production of vigorous and healthy infants difficult. . . . Tea and bread lead to rickets, anaemia and marasmus [wasting]."

According to the Deptford medical officer "the signs of malnutrition are insidious. There is a loss of vitality with mental depression, apathy, anaemia, decay of teeth with inflammation of the gums and an unhealthy appearance of the skin with spots or rashes and a tendency for cracks sores and wounds to remain unhealed . . . chronic colds and a liability to catch any infection, usually described in medical certificates as general debility. Among the mothers on the list, a large proportion showed these signs."

In spite of these sacrifices there is evidence that children also are suffering. From 1925 to 1931 the number of undernourished children in schools increased from 9.5 per thousand to 11.2 per thousand. The Save the Children Fund state in their enquiry, *Unemployment and the Child*,* that, since in certain places where adequate school meals have been supplied there has been a definite improvement, where there has been deterioration it must have been on a scale which may be much higher than that indicated in Sir George Newman's reports. This enquiry shows that the number of children showing malnutrition has increased in Merthyr Tydfil from 2.3 to 13.0, in Middlesbrough from 0.6 to 6.5, and in Pontypridd from 0.4 to 21.0 per thousand.† In the majority of places in which enquiries

* *Loc. cit.*, p. 76.

† *Loc. cit.*, p. 87.

were made, the proportion of malnutrition was worse in 1932 than in 1931. This report of the Save the Children Fund is particularly significant, as this organisation—including as it does such well-known members as Lady Muriel Paget and the Duke of Atholl—cannot be described as consisting of socialist agitators.

More detailed reports from various medical officers leave no doubt of the results of this malnutrition. The medical officer for Monmouthshire said in 1931: "The children of Monmouthshire are not so good as they should be; and the probable reasons are these—they get insufficient good food, insufficient rest and insufficient warm clothing and sound footwear." The medical officer of Preston: "No one can deny that the ex-baby and the toddler are both definitely much less robust and much more in need of medical attention and much more prone to rickets than was the case a year ago."

THE BANKRUPTCY OF CAPITALISM

Such then is the condition of the generation now growing up. But cripples and invalids are useless as soldiers and inefficient as workmen. The humanitarian sections of the bourgeoisie realise that the starvation of the workers is being carried too far.

Besides the report of the B.M.A. commission several other enquiries into the diet of the workers have been published. In all these enquiries the advance of scientific knowledge is being used not to raise the standard of the workers' diet to the best that is possible, but to discover the minimum compatible with health and working capacity. The scientific authorities

are quarrelling over the lowest possible allowance of Calories and first-class protein; and are proposing standard diets containing dangerously small quantities of vitamins and milk with microscopic amounts of fruit. But there is never a suggestion of using the resources of modern science and modern production to the full to provide a diet that will raise the health of the workers to the highest level, still less that the workers have any but bodily needs. Under none of the schemes proposed could a worker spare anything for the books and papers necessary if he is to keep in touch with the progress of knowledge and with what is going on in the world. Such things are not for the workers.

Thus the bankruptcy of capitalism is reflected in the scientific world; science, instead of serving mankind by increasing the powers of production and so raising the universal standard of life, is in fact employed in degrading that standard. At the same time world-wide agreements have been made to reduce the production of wheat, of sugar, and of tea. Above all, bacon and dairy produce are being kept out of the country by quotas and tariffs. The East Coast fishing fleet has been reduced by 150 vessels, and tons of fish are thrown back into the sea or used as manure. The price of milk for human consumption is raised to 3½d. a pint, while ten million gallons a month are sold to manufacturers at ½d. a pint to turn into buttons or knife handles. Newcastle Dispensary Report shows that in a slum area the population have only 0.39 pints per head per week of tinned milk and 0.33 pints of fresh milk. In Paisley the consumption is little over one-half of a pint per day, in Wakefield one-third of a pint,

and in Bethnal Green one-quarter. The fruit orchards in America are burnt to reduce production, while one and a half million oranges were thrown into the sea last year, in order to keep up prices.

The spokesmen of capitalism admit that, even if their best hopes of prosperity are realised, there will still be no hope of employment for a large body of workers. All that this two million or so of human "scrap" will have to hope for will be these minimum allowances in the midst of plenty. Nor are the unemployed alone concerned. The amount paid to this large body of unemployed is intended to be the standard to which wages can be reduced. The Save the Children Fund* recommends that assistance should be given to the unemployed in the form of meals for children, since, if assistance is given directly to the father, he may be as well off when out of work as when employed. In effect this bourgeois organisation admits that if unemployment benefit is raised to a decent subsistence level wages will be forced up.

This then is the *best* that capitalism has to offer the workers: the vision of food production being limited and stocks of food destroyed, and for themselves an animal existence, with just enough to keep up their efficiency for work and support their children.

In order to rise above the degraded standards of capitalism, to put an end to the social murder so vividly described by Engels, the workers must use their combined strength not only to resist all attacks on their standards of living but to overthrow the system under which these are inevitable.

January, 1934.

* *Loc. cit.*, p. 51.