

In the front line

Tucked securely into the valleys that cut a deep line between the range of mountains lying in ----, somewhere in England, are a number of small towns and villages once included among the distressed or "special" areas.

Until three years ago, industrial activity around this neighbourhood was practically at a standstill and it was the exception rather than the rule to find a working-class household whose adult males were not on the dole.

The standard of living, poor at the best of times, had sunk to an incredibly low level. Tuberculosis and kindred ailments, directly due to malnutrition, were accepted as an inevitable scourge alongside all the other evils commonly associated with extreme poverty.

But about three years ago the stillness of the surrounding countryside was broken by the clanging sound of hammer upon steel, the staccato of the mechanical drill—builders at work.

The men idling at the street corners sniffed the air like dogs picking up a fresh scent—they smelled work.

And they were right. Far-seeing industrialists, certain of the war to come, were looking for places to build factories to accommodate the needs of capitalism at war, districts comparatively safe from air attacks—not to forget a plentiful supply of cheap labour close at hand. And here they believed they had found both.

Happy mortals, to be able to look the landlord straight in the eye when the grim individual calls for rent on Monday morning, not to slouch into the grocery shop with that hang-dog look in your face, because last week's account was still unpaid; no wonder the people's misgivings at the unmistakable signs of coming war—the coat of camouflage paint upon the factory roofs and walls—were stilled and forgotten in the growing realisation that at last work had come again to the idle valley.

The factories have now been in full swing for a considerable time. Textiles, aircraft, paint, sweets—an odd and varying assortment of commodities are being turned out in huge quantities every day. The idlers have gone from the streets, a solitary clerk does duty at the once crowded local labour exchange.

True, the men are not getting the wages they hoped for, but they do not grumble much, for spells of unemployment lasting for ten years or more are not conducive to working-class militancy.

Besides, the women-folk, particularly the younger section, are all working and contributing to the household exchequer.

On Saturdays the shopping centres are literally mobbed with working people. They are charged high prices for shoddy goods, the shops always getting a fat picking out of an industrial boom.

After that there is very little left in the wage packet when the rent and other weekly payments are put by.

The working-class table is still short of many of the vital necessities of life. Fresh milk is rare, instead, tins of condensed milk, which are cheaper and save the use of sugar, expensive at present, do duty.

The price of good fruit is prohibitive for the same reason, meat and eggs make only rare appearances.

Because of the terrific strain and worry of work under war conditions, both men and women are heavy smokers, and the outlay on the now so expensive cigarettes makes another deep hole in working-class pockets. Still—there's work again on Monday and another wage packet at the end of the week.

Let me take you into one of these factories so that you can see for yourself how working-class brawn and brains are swelling Britain's war efforts and the profits of the British capitalist class.

This one is engaged on the manufacture of textiles, and the first thing that amazes you is the overwhelming preponderance of young persons, mostly girls. Large numbers of them are between the ages of fourteen and sixteen and they look what they are—children. They work a forty-eight hour week for mere pittance, sums as low as eight and sixpence per week.

Inevitably, with so much unskilled labour, much of the finished material is faulty and then the stern-faced supervisors, all of them elderly and unprepossessing spinsters who stand most of the day with folded arms watching the youngsters like hawks, rate the unfortunate miscreant soundly.

The construction and machinery are of the most modern type, and it seems anomalous for such frail, young bodies to be pitted against the giant structure and faultless precision of the machine tool they operate. Accidents occur and young fingers and hands are badly smashed or ripped, but for the most part young and flexible hands and brains quickly gain control over the intricate mechanism.

The walls are liberally adorned with posters bearing slogans such as "Go To It", "Keep At It", and so on, *ad nauseam*; even the lavatories are not immune from these harrying catch-cries.

Evidently the owners are deeply patriotic, and so they should be, for is not their whole existence bound up with the preservation of the British Empire? In this particular instance the factory is engaged on Government contracts, and the young sons of the proprietor have been excused from military service on the grounds that they are "directors" of work of National importance. What their directing consists of is not quite clear; they live some hundreds of miles away and are only seen when they arrive by car to make a brief tour of inspection.

This takes place once a month and then they are shown around the place by the manager in a manner reminiscent of royalty.

In conformity with the truly enlightened outlook of the modern capitalist, the welfare side of the employees has not been forgotten. There is a canteen which serves badly cooked and microscopic mid-day meals for sixpence, and there is also a radio, for which all workers are docked a penny a week from their pay.

This instrument is in constant competition with the deafening roar of machinery, but somehow manages to make itself heard above the din now and again.

Modern tunes set everyone singing lustily in accompaniment, but at present everyone is earnestly concentrating on their particular task, whilst a deep, baritone voice is booming out a song about "Ye Yeomen of England", or words to that effect.

Air raid warnings are a frequent occurrence, but no one takes any notice of them, certainly not the management, who would not dream of stopping work for the duration of the "Alerts".

Indeed, it would be interesting to know why air raid warnings are sounded at all, since no provision for shelter has been made in the whole neighbourhood.

Nothing much has happened during the warnings—yet. If something did happen, well that would be "hard lines", bound up with the risk of being in the front line—at the age of fifteen at eight and sixpence per week.

Then you would be informed in the usual BBC sing-song that "there were a few casualties, some of which were fatal".

Overtime is compulsory for all the older employees, and the discipline that prevails is that of the barrack room.

If you show any independence of spirit at all and "answer back" to the humiliating bark of the supervisors or managers you are discharged forthwith.

No concern in the district will entertain direct application for employment—these must be made through the local labour exchange, which transmits particulars of your last employment and reasons for leaving to your prospective employer should the latter require them. This should be sufficient to discourage any sort of defiance in a people already cowed by many years of hunger, and besides, there are always the schools, disgorging hundreds of boys and girls from time to time who can quickly be trained to perform all but the key operations essential to the smooth running of these highly rationalised productive machines.

There is constant pinching of precious minutes from the workers' meal-times; these are already finely cut: three-quarters of an hour for dinner, and a quarter of an hour for tea in the afternoon. There is no break during the morning, when the workers, including the very youngest, have to slave four hours without a break. The manager and the forewomen, of course, are not included among the "rabble"—they must have a "snack" as a relief from their arduous task of watching others work.

Do not make the mistake of thinking that what I am describing are exceptional conditions laid down and carried out contrary to regulations imposed by law or frowned on by Trade Unions.

In fact, all the female employees at least are members of a Trade Union, although the men, to the best of my knowledge, are not allowed by the management to be organised in the same way. In any case, there is no shop steward, and the local Union official, who lives many miles away, is never seen.

And are not the signatures of our big Trade Union bosses on the Government posters, exhorting us to work faster, not to make any trouble, and, above all, DON'T STRIKE! So there is no help to be expected from that quarter.

Some of the older people who remember the last war and the terrific slump that followed are apprehensive. Sometimes, they cannot make up their minds whether they would like the war to end or not. They do not seem to believe the promises of "a new world", "a better heritage", and the rest. They are afraid that when the "piping times of peace" return these factories will be dismantled and the human fodder cast adrift upon the streets and the dole.

And they may be right, unless--!

Perhaps this war will end as neither side has planned. Perhaps even workers as meek and humble as those about which I have been writing will assert themselves as HUMAN BEINGS and, joining hands with their fellows all over the globe, will put an end to this nightmare existence of poverty, tyranny and despair which the rule of capitalism has imposed upon the masses of workers.

Does that day seem far away to you? Then you do not realise the growing force for social change gathering within the present world catastrophe.

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