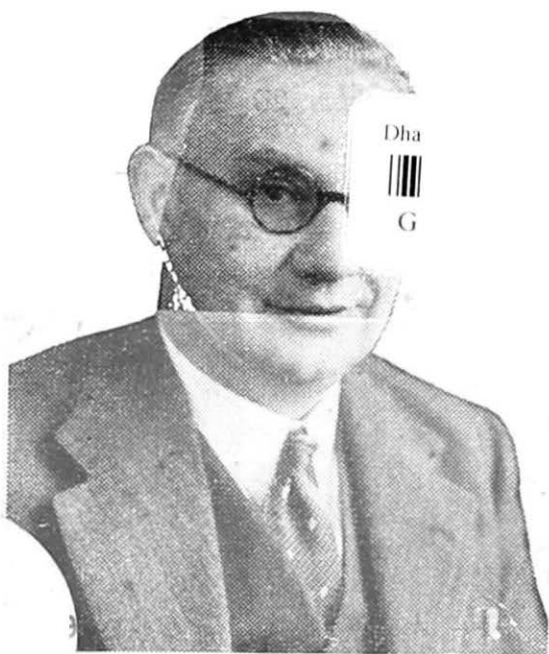


War & the Workers

by  
Ernest Benn

# THE WAR and THE WORKERS



By the Rt. Hon.

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# THE WAR AND THE WORKERS

**T**HOSE who are in charge of this nation's affairs in this grave crisis must always have regard to three aspects of war policy: one, strategy; two, the organisation of the Defence Services; three, the organisation of production. My job, as Minister of Labour and National Service, has mainly been concerned with the last of these, and it is to that aspect of war policy I shall mainly devote my time.

War, to-day, involves the whole people. Our minds are still influenced too much by the armies of the past, and we are not sufficiently regardful of the total character of modern war.

Here I want to make it quite clear that at no point, either before the change of Government last May or since, has the T.U.C. refused to assist in anything necessary to the successful conduct of the war.

We took the line of willing co-operation, even with a Government which could never have commanded our full confidence, because we realised how vital was victory to every ideal and principle for which, throughout its history, the Trade Union Movement has stood. Vital, indeed, for the very existence of Trade Unionism, and for the lives of Trade Unionists, Labour representatives and Labour candidates in every part of the country!

## German versus British Policy

It was assumed by the Germans that if they despoiled Czechoslovakia with its productive capacity and its defences, if they got hold of the raw material and food supplies of Poland, Denmark and Norway and over-ran France, Belgium and Holland, that they would have under their supreme command from 180,000,000 to 200,000,000 enslaved people.

The Prussian always acts on the assumption that the human being is an automaton, that he can be organised, ordered and driven and reduced almost to the condition of a robot.

This type of mind has been predominant in Germany since the '50's, and has followed a doctrine of force and ravaged Europe many times, believing that by adding to the number of robots and thieving the raw materials and lands of other countries they can establish a power which will succeed in subduing the rest of the world. Already those methods have succeeded in over-awing the statesmen of different countries, and intimidating the leaders of at least some of the magnificent armies, but happily they have not succeeded in breaking the spirit of the whole of the people in these countries.

But we, in this country, for more than a hundred years, have accepted the opposite view. We have believed that the road to the highest achievements of civilisation and human attainment lies in the expansion of freedom.

Even before Labour was represented as it is to-day, or even hoped to achieve actual power, there was a growing recognition, as a result of the agitation of economists, philosophers, statesmen and early Trade Union leaders that the future security of Britain lay in two directions,

One was the development of the right of self-government in the highest sense, which means the right of a people to determine such matters as its life and death, and the second the right of the masses of the people to develop independent and free organisations.

I do not deny that in the beginning it was a minority in the State that held that view and it resulted in a good many historic struggles before the majority accepted it, but it was incorporated in what is now known as the British Commonwealth. The fact we have to face is that the acceptance of these principles has resulted, if Europe can be regarded as an entity, in civil war.

## Cause of the Present Struggle

Looking at Europe as an entity, what else can it have been that caused the present grim conflict but the fighting out as to which of these principles should be the ruling factor for the constitution of governments and development of peoples. There is no doubt that it was not so much the establishment of this or that country or the creation of the boundaries drawn in the Versailles Treaty that led us into this present struggle. That was the pretext.

The real cause was the failure to base the settlement of the World War on the definite acceptance of the really fundamental principle that the government should be responsible to the people.

It is really due to the fact that we in the Trade Union and Labour Movements are wedded to the principle of freedom, of mutual aid, of policy and direction of the State being really vested in the people, that has brought us now to such a grim determination to see this issue fought out.

Whatever may have been the motives of those who tried appeasement, it can be truly said that the policy was bound to fail because these two principles of government of which I have spoken are irreconcilable ; and if Europe at the close of what is virtually a civil struggle is to take her part as the great centre of culture, economic knowledge and even finance in rebuilding the world, then we in this country have to see to it that we are not influenced only by questions of geography or what has been described as vital interests—the term “vital interests” being expressed in communications, spheres of development or even raw materials.

We have to go deeper, and to place the principles of peace higher than anything else or we shall have condemned another generation to renew the struggle. We must be free men and women or slaves, and as long as the issue remains unsettled recurring conflict is inevitable.

I believe that deep down in the hearts of the men and women I have met at the Trades Union Congress, in the great factories, in the little garages and other places, and in the offices which I have visited this past week, an understanding of this is the real basis of the spiritual urge that is making them resist with unflinching courage the attempt of the Germans to browbeat us by indiscriminate bombing, the brutal form of warfare and the using of the great gifts of science for destruction, with

the object of compelling submission. I have witnessed that spirit—not expressed in spectacular displays or in demonstrations, but in the firm ring of their remark, when they shake you by the hand in the field, factory, docks or the railway and say, “We have got to see it through.”

## National Arbitration Tribunals

One of the steps I have had to take was to make provision to make strikes and lock-outs unnecessary, and I am glad it was done by consent. The National Arbitration Tribunal has been established which, together with the Industrial Court, and the other forms of independent tribunals have provided an adequate means to get all difficulties adjusted fairly, but our wage policy rests in the main on the proper and full use of the wage machinery existing in each industry.

## Powers of the Ministry of Labour

And now if I may proceed to deal with the problem of production in greater detail, one of the first acts of the Government was to hand over to the Ministry of Labour very great powers to deal with man power and the question arose as to how those powers should be exercised. The first step I took was to appoint a Consultative Committee between the Trades Union Congress, the employers and myself, over which I have regularly presided and by which I have the opportunity of gauging what would be the reaction of industry in relation to each step that it has been necessary to take.

One of the most difficult jobs was the Restriction on Engagement Order. The labour situation was in chaos. Contracts had been given out to different firms on a basis which enabled them to poach men from other employers and from Local Authorities and the steps they were taking to achieve their end would have soon resulted in a complete disorganisation of our industrial effort. What was more serious was that this was undermining the whole of the Trade Union Movement itself. Agents of a very undesirable kind, who were bribing people to leave one place to go to another and who were profiting by such exchange, were beginning to spring up, and we had to look to the future. That way anarchy lies!

We also set up a Board of Labour Directors—experienced men drawn from management and the Trade Unions, who knew the layout of the shops, who knew industrial and labour problems, and were assisted by representatives of the Department, and no Government could have been better served than we have been by this Board.

We then created the Labour Supply Committees in many districts of the country. Here again, while they had to be hurriedly improvised and appointments made with great expedition, the individuals who have been appointed have justified the creation of this machine, and I am not too sure that with the great experience we are gaining for war purposes, it may not be demonstrated that there is a place to be found for such an institution in peace time, instead of allowing men and women to stand by and skill be lost because of the lack of scientific approach to these problems.

We found that there was a mal-distribution of skilled labour and I felt that if I had to come to the craft Unions and get them to dilute for war purposes to such a low proportion they had a right to say, "We must have the fullest possible use made of the craftsman and in his proper position." We tried in the first place to aid the solution by a new agreement governing the tool shop, a problem which baffled so many in the last war. This very highly-skilled industry, I feel, still will have to be considered. Its value has certainly been recognised and its capital value to the country cannot be expressed in pounds, shillings and pence. I am sure when the time comes for the craft Unions to re-examine the experience of the war and the outcome of these developments they will not throw it away; they will see what adaptations they can make in order that those of such value to the community are properly remunerated and not merely remunerated but given the right status.

## Central Machinery

We decided that we had to create a great central machine, but in its administration we would carry devolution down to the lowest possible point, and accordingly the pivot of the organisation was based on the Ministry's Divisional Controllers. I am conscious of the enormous burden that I have laid upon them and their local staffs. It is very difficult to graft an improvised organisation on to a settled machine such as the Ministry's administrative scheme is, but they have responded splendidly. The Employment Exchanges that had to undertake this duty had for many years been engaged mainly with grappling with masses of unemployed.

The whole outlook had to be changed. They had to be directed to placing people and not merely paying people.

The Exchange machinery had not been expanded as it ought to have been to meet this contingency. Even the accommodation in many cases was totally inadequate, and it had to be so extended with great rapidity. Staff had to be collected who had not had previous experience. I mention these things because sometimes in the Press, when there are little slip-ups, they are immediately exaggerated and there is a total absence of appreciation or mention of the enormous part the Employment Exchanges have played.

We know how difficult it is to handle the various temperaments, not to become irritated, and when dealing with complaints, claims and disappointments how trying it is to keep a smooth temper and not reply with an impatient answer. But I have had experience in the most intensely bombed areas and it is a matter for admiration and pride the way the staff of the Employment Exchanges have stood up to it. Here let me say, in passing, that in one Exchange that was bombed out and our records all put out of order, we had to rely on the people's own statement of their claims and it speaks well for the honesty and integrity of the working people that in scarcely a single case was our staff misled or were over-claims made.

## Mining, Agriculture, Shipping

Some industries, of course, had to be singled out for treatment on a national or industrial basis. For example, the mining industry. It was our intention to give to that industry a labour force on the basis of the production then contemplated ; but with the loss of the continental markets the situation changed. Immediately, the order to send men back to the pits had to be modified and subsequently virtually removed altogether. Certain areas in the country found themselves with large numbers of unemployed. The mining industry, however, being under a separate Department, my course of action, as Minister of Labour, must to a large extent be influenced by the recommendations I receive from that Department. I am glad that no panic action was taken because of the markets referred to.

Stacking of coal was indulged in, a policy which I think was extremely wise. In fact, I take the view that more stacking even for the export market should be indulged in so that when the war is over, instead of making the blunder we made in the last war, of charging high prices and destroying our own markets, we should have ready and available large quantities that could be shipped immediately to get our market back. In addition, the steps taken by our good friend D. R. Grenfell to avoid the shortages that occurred last winter should prove very valuable indeed. But even with all this, there are certain numbers of men who cannot find employment during the war in certain export districts. The only course open to us in those cases is to transfer them to the districts where the production is highest or to other industries.

Agriculture was another industry calling for men, although very exaggerated claims were made, and when the problem was tackled it was found that many of the claims were unjustified. In that case an order was made restricting people from leaving the land and sending others back to the land. But before doing this we felt it necessary to put the wages of the countryside right, and I think the steps which were taken have met with the overwhelming approval of the nation as a whole.

In the case of the sea, we have operated again on a national basis, through the Ministry of Shipping, although too in all these cases the exercise of the powers conferred have been of a minimum quantity because of the voluntary response of the workpeople themselves.

## The Building Industry

In the building trade various devices had to be resorted to. In the first place what was known as the Uniformity Agreement was established and certain minimum hours guaranteed on Government work, travelling and lodging allowances as defined by the agreement were approved.

The call upon the building industry is very great and in this connection it was one of our objectives that there should be created a Building and Works Ministry for the purpose of co-ordinating the whole of the building work under the Government, carried out by the Government or on the Government's behalf so that the labour might be utilised in the most



effective manner. This need has become even more acute now when not only have we to deal with new construction, but there is too the question of demolition, clearances and the repair of damaged houses.

The shelter programme has created an enormous demand. We found that there was a shortage of material. Not only so, but there was a constant demand made upon the building material industries in order to cope with the Defence works which were necessary to prevent invasion. Unhappily, due, I think, to a lack of foresight, many brick and tile yards were allowed to go out of production and the men were scattered. We had to take steps to give firm orders for a good period in advance; to get the wages put right in the industry; and then to bring men back, either from the Army or from other industries in order to produce the necessary material to cope with the problem.

In this and in other industries there is one fact brought out which is very disturbing—rationalisation and monopoly may have some virtues but they create an attitude of mind which is not easily adapted to the urgent requirements of war. There is a tendency to argue “What is going to happen if we increase our capacity and have a surplus at the end of the war?”

Not only in this industry but in others, one has come up against the effect of allowing large interests to use their position to cause the closing down of works which may not be so efficient but which would be invaluable at extreme moments. Where the production is needed for war we shall have to have regard to what I might call these reserve forces being maintained in such a position that they can be brought into full use very quickly.

However, the speed with which things are moving now ought to enable us to make up a good deal of the leeway in connection with the building industry. We have been seriously handicapped in this work due to the insufficiency of timber and home production has had to be increased. There were brought in, prior to our coming into office, men from Newfoundland and elsewhere to cut timber, but, unfortunately, the whole of the forestry business has been attached to agriculture and has never been looked upon as a real factor in the nation's requirements. The conditions associated with the forestry workers and the agricultural workers are not the same and the attitude of mind in the part towards this problem has seriously handicapped the provision even of home supplies. We are now taking steps to remedy this position.

I have arranged that conferences of the trade shall be called, and I am hoping they will put forward proposals of a character which will not only justify recruitment but enable us to recruit a much larger number of men to enable us to increase supplies from our home resources.

## Mills, Docks, Ships and Munitions

In the food trades, such as milling, agreements were reached which resulted in a quick transference of the men. Schemes were also designed to group the ports of the country to enable men to be moved from one place to another to grapple with a diversion of shipping.

Shipbuilding Committees have been established to deal with the mobility and the full use of shipbuilding labour in order to deal with the demands of the Admiralty, merchant tonnage and repairs, but there is need of very great acceleration, particularly on the repairing side. Anyone who hampers in this work is playing Hitler's game. The Navy can beat the submarines but where now and again they do manage to damage a ship and escape the vigilance of that wonderful force, then we must make that good.

The greatest difficulty of all is the munition trade. It divides itself up into many parts. There is the making and the equipment of the munitions of war, there are the ordnance factories, the equipment, the clothing, the small arms, domestic needs, food and so on. It all comes in as part of the munitions programme. The nation will be for ever in the debt of those Trade Unionists who have co-operated with us so magnificently. But if our Army is to be equipped and the millions of men who will be called to the fighting line when the initiative takes place are to have at their disposal overwhelming resources so as to enable them to secure a quick and smashing victory, then more and more people must be trained. Every employer's works in the country must take a percentage. We will restore the situation at the end of the war, you need have no fear.

## Welfare Work in the Factories

In connection with the great factories, there has to be a tremendous movement of labour from one part of the country to another and this involves both careful work, careful administration and a great intensification of the development of the amenities in order to care for the work-people transferred. For the purposes of dealing with this problem I brought into being the Factory and Welfare Board. As you know, the Factory Department was transferred for the period of the War to the Ministry of Labour and that placed both an experienced and a splendid staff at our disposal. But the problem was not confined to inside the factory only. The health and welfare and billeting of the people outside had to be dealt with, so while the Factory Inspector deals with the problems inside I had to create a staff of Welfare Officers to cater for the people outside the factory. The hours of labour were getting into a state of chaos and we were losing production in consequence. We have now issued and strengthened the Welfare Orders to enable the Department to do their work more effectively.

We have made available opportunities for training welfare workers and agreed to pay them while at the University or in the works during training at a rate similar to that paid to other trainees.

This gives an opportunity to anyone who has taken an interest in welfare to go in for these courses. I want this welfare work to be put on as high a plane as it can be, because we desire that more and more attention should be given by managements to the personnel. You can have the cleverest engineers and planners in the world, but unless you have someone who understands how to handle the human being

you cannot get the desired results, and I do not limit this merely to the narrow outlook of the psychologist or the efficiency expert. It covers the whole field of health, recreation, advice and care. In the factories run by the Government themselves, it is a matter of regret that the treatment of the welfare side has been behind, in many cases far behind, the more modern employer, when really the State ought to have been leading in it, and the Ministry has raised the whole question in order that we may put it upon a proper footing.

We have tried to develop an industrial medical service. This will prove a great economy. I have had a long experience in dealing with workmen's compensation cases, injury and re-habilitation, and I know that much suffering and large amounts of money could have been saved had adequate advice been available at the outset.

The works' doctor must become a friend and adviser of the work people so that he may be looked up to. It requires a different technique from that of the general practitioner, the casualty ward, or the hospital, and to that end we have established refresher courses at the London School of Hygiene in order to enable those who are anxious to enter this service to take short courses of training.

## Communal Feeding

In the case of food there must be a great development of communal feeding. I doubt whether we shall be able to continue, especially during this winter, with the difficulty of cooking, to maintain the stamina of our people if we rely solely on home feeding. With bombing in certain districts, gas cut off, electricity disturbed and communication interfered with, it may be necessary to have more than one meal a day in the factory canteen. In many respects this canteen development is totally inadequate, and we must take steps to make it more universal.

I have discussed during my tour in Lancashire this past week the problem of men and women working 10 to 12 hours a day and two or three hours spent in travelling. I pointed out the tremendous value it would be if, when leaving late at night with a long bus ride ahead of them, there were a short break, perhaps only five minutes, with the barrows going round the factory with good hot tea or milk and just a snack. It makes that journey home much more pleasant and not nearly so fatiguing. I want employers and the Trade Union in the factory to give consideration to this immediately; that short break may represent in the year a great saving in labour turnover, absenteeism through illness, and a great increase in production.

Then, of course, you have to remember that the Department has to administer the National Service Act. The question of the whole of the problem of calling men to the Colours and getting back those to skilled work who were in the Territorials, has to be dealt with. The administration of this is a colossal task, but in all this work the adjustment of the claims of man power between industry and the Services has to be worked out with meticulous care.

## The Social Services

Since we have been in office, we have not neglected the social service side. I am sure there will be appreciation of the fact that we raised the insurance income limit to £420 and brought within the scope of insurance many people who otherwise might find themselves in a precarious position at the end of the war. The Pensions administration has been improved, and added to that there has been thrown upon the Assistance Board and its officers the enormous task of dealing with the numerous claims of homeless people for immediate compensation. One very vital step taken was the compensation for loss of tools and the method of immediate treatment that has been devised.

On the question of the "hard core" of unemployment, the examination by the Committee has demonstrated that with proper treatment there is no such thing. One interesting thing was brought to my notice recently—in one case it was arranged that a public works contractor should discharge no man sent to him under three weeks. The result was that the number of people who had been out of work for years who had to be discharged as unfit was a very small percentage. What had happened was that three weeks had given a chance for the muscles to be developed, time for the first effect of using the body in heavy work to be got over and better food as a result of wages to have its effect.

## Economic Adjustment

Coupled with all these problems of unemployment is the continuous economic adjustment that must go on. As a result of war we have to restrict production for the home markets. That will possibly have a very serious repercussion on such trade as the cotton and other domestic trades, but we are endeavouring by consultation, between the production departments and the Board of Trade, to work out a carefully co-ordinated scheme so that it may synchronise with the demands for labour being made on the supply and munitions and equipment side. We are not going to leave it merely to chance and I shall be very glad of the whole-hearted co-operation of the Unions and the employers in this task.

On the other hand, we must try to increase exports. Exports mean the creation of wealth to buy the raw materials to keep the war machine and our food supplies going and there must now be an endeavour to maintain a proper balance. In doing this we may make mistakes in adjustments here and there and this will need immediate attention. Do not stand aside and grumble, but let us now take the facts as quickly as you can and we will do our best to minimise any loss of labour power arising out of this policy.

## A Two-Fold Purpose

What is the purpose of all this? It can be said to be two-fold. The main objective, of course, is to win the war. We are developing the great reserve power of labour in order that our Forces may be equipped, fed and put in such a position that loss may be minimised and yet victory

secured in quick time, and we are under no delusion as to what we have to face. The enemy is not going to stand still on the French coast, the danger of invasion is by no means past, indeed it may become more acute, or he may go East, and he is quite likely to make an attack in other directions. We know that in many respects his desperation grows; it must grow; he must try and produce further victories to satisfy the rapacious appetite he has created in his people. Therefore, that is the first objective—to win the war.

The second is that in all that we are doing we are gaining a great experience which can be of vital use in peace, and we are determined that such experience as we gain shall not be thrown away but shall be used in the development of the new Britain we want to see.

Those of us whose public life and outlook has been influenced by the principles we learnt in our Socialist youth find that those same principles are of tremendous value when applied to the necessities of war and the prospects of the world that follows war. The reason is fairly obvious. Immediately a nation is involved in a great crisis of this character it has to act collectively, and that brings into play great social forces. Individualism is bound to give place to social action, competition and scramble to order, and the rule of law has to be applied in the place of anarchy. There is no other way by which a nation can save itself. The individual worker has to be evaluated on a new basis. Skill, ability and energy become the great vital forces for success. Thus will we defeat Hitler. We can, at the same time create conditions upon which a new advance is possible.

There is an accepted position by all people that the world can never be just as it was again when wars of this character are declared. Some institutions disappear; systems are modified; revaluations take place; forces are unleashed the end of which no one can foresee.

But the guiding principle that must still actuate those who stand for the principles that I adumbrated in the opening of this address must be that, in working out the destiny of our people we guide them towards a new world order, an order that involves the expulsion of the unworthy idea, willingness to restrict voluntarily our sovereignty, and an acceptance of obligations to work with others in the world in a great common endeavour to produce a higher civilisation.