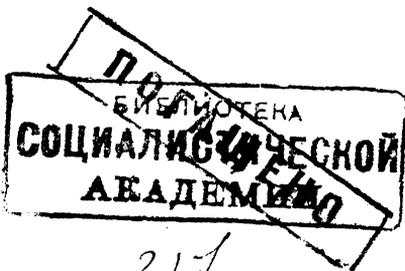


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THE NATIONALIZATION OF THE COAL INDUSTRY

By R. H. TAWNEY, B.A.

(Member of the Coal Industry Commission, 1919.)



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THE NATIONALIZATION OF THE COAL INDUSTRY

I.—INTRODUCTORY.

DURING the past twelve months the application of the policy of Public Ownership and Democratic Management to what, after agriculture, is the greatest of all national industries, has for the first time become a question of immediate political importance. It is hardly possible to exaggerate the significance of the challenge to Capitalism, which has been thrown down by the action of the Miners' Federation, and by the reports of the Coal Industry Commission. Up to 1919 it might fairly be said that the nationalization of foundation industries was an aspiration rather than a policy. The principle of public ownership had long been accepted by the Labour Movement, and had been broadened in recent years by the declaration that the workers' organizations must share with the State the control of industry. But it was still an article of faith rather than a programme worked out, as a programme must be, with the elaboration of detail needed to make it an immediate practical issue. It was attacked or defended in general terms. The majority of its supporters were more conversant with its social advantages than with the technical problems which, whatever its social advantages, it would have to meet and solve. To the common sense of ordinary citizens who were not fired with any conception of a new social order, it appeared hardly more significant than the proposal to establish a channel tunnel or to build a new dam on the Nile. They read that the Trade Union Congress had passed a resolution in favour of nationalization with the same uninterested equanimity as they read that an astronomer had discovered canals on Mars, and regarded the former as hardly more relevant to their own concerns than the latter. The Government and the propertied interests took full advantage of that indifference. Once political democracy has been established, privileged classes retain their position, not by a frontal resistance on burning social issues, but by preventing social issues from ever becoming a burning question. A century of experience has made the English plutocracy a past master of the strategy which consists in "refusing the centre." Down to 1919, it had contrived, with almost unbroken success, to keep the question of public ownership and democratic control out of the region in which it would necessitate a declaration of policy, determine the alignment of parties, and influence a general election.

The events of the last year in the Mining Industry have brought that social strategy to an end. Henceforward no government and no party will be able to pretend that nationalization is one of the questions with regard to which politicians can keep what they are fond of describing as an "open mind." It will be impossible to assert in the future that it is a wanton disturbance of a smoothly running industrial system, or that it is a "mere theory" with no solid body of economic and technical argument behind it. The action of the miners, endorsed by organized Labour through the Trade Union Congress, in making it part of their immediate industrial programme has destroyed the first position; the evidence before the Commission has destroyed the second. Both together have brought the question out of the region of generalities into one where immediate decisions are inevitable. For the first time, the evidence for and against Capitalism in one great industry has been marshalled and presented to the public, not by private individuals, but by a public body appointed by Act of Parliament. For the first time, its economic waste-fulness has been remorselessly laid bare, not by reformers, but by technical experts, administrators, men of science and officials, including the two blameless baronets whom the mine-owners find it hardest to forgive, Sir Arthur Lowes Dickenson and Sir Richard Redmayne. For the first time, *all* the business men on a Commission, not directly concerned in the industry under investigation, have affirmed that "the present system of ownership and working . . . stands condemned, and some other system must be substituted for it." For the first time, the case for transferring to public ownership property worth not less than £135,000,000, and the methods by which, when transferred, it is to be administered, have been worked out in detail, not by Socialists, but by that most venerable of British institutions, a judge of the High Court. Nor, when Capitalism is dead, will Bureaucracy be its heir. As far as the coal industry is concerned, that spectre, which the Government and the interests behind it have dressed up again to terrify the innocent public into con-