

THROUGH THE EYES OF LABOUR.

The Cost of Living.

By a Trades Unionist.

Both letters and newspapers from abroad indicate that the Englishman who has been away from the home land for the last one or two years possesses a very vague idea of what the cost of living really is. It is such a commonplace, of course, here that the newspapers rarely refer to it—everybody knows that a small loaf costs 4½d. and a quart of milk 11d, so why labour that point? And it is seemingly beneath the dignity of Reuter to wire out that butter is rationed and that the individual allowance per day is just the weight of a Mexican 20-cent piece.

Seven shillings would purchase in the Spring of 1914 as many of the necessities and the small luxuries of normal civilized life as one pound will purchase to-day.

Seeing that this statement is flatly at variance with the Government estimate, a house-keeping account for one week in 1914 is printed below with the present prices for the same quantities in a parallel column.

The present estimate of the Government is somewhere between 128, and 148 per cent. increase in the cost of living to-day compared with 1914. the fact of the case being that the increase is nearly 200 per cent. when the all round cost of living is taken into consideration and not a few selected necessities.

The family, whose weekly house-keeping bill we have here, consisted of four persons, three adults and an eight-year-old child. As may be seen, they had plenty of plain substantial food. To abbreviate what otherwise would have been a very long list, about eighteen-pence worth of small items, polishers, condiments, and similar trifles, have not been included, but the advance in cost of these articles is about the same as in those that are given.

Article	Nov.	
	1914.	1919.
	s. d.	s. d.
7 quarts Milk	2 0½	6 5
3 cwt Coal	2 4½	7 0
4 lb Mutton	2 4	6 8
2 lb Beef Steak	1 8	4 0
2½ lb Beef	1 10½	4 7
1 Rabbit	0 10	2 5
8 Herrings	0 4	1 3
4 lb Cod	1 4	4 8
2 lb Plaice	0 10	2 8
2½ lb Bacon	2 1	6 9
0 loaves Bread	1 8	3 9

3 lb	Self-raising flour	0 4½	0 10½
5 lb	Sugar	0 10	3 4
1 lb	Tea	1 6	3 4
½ lb	Cocoa	0 4½	0 9½
14 lb	Potatoes	0 7	2 4
14 lb	Cabbages, carrots, etc.	0 8	2 0
3 lb	Onions	0 3	0 10½
3 lb	Margarine	1 6	3 9
1 lb	Lard	0 8	2 0
½ lb	Suet	0 3	0 10
1 lb	Cheese	0 8	1 8
2 lb	Jam	0 7	2 0
12	Eggs	1 6	5 0
2½ lb	Soap	0 10	2 3½
1 lb	Butter	1 4	2 6
1 lb	Rice	0 2	0 8
6 boxes	Matches	0 1	0 6
	Currants and Raisins	0 8	2 8
2 lb	Gas	0 9	1 6
	Total	29 3	89 1

It will be seen by this list that the cost of nearly everything now is three times as much as in 1914 and in some cases even more. Bread hasn't advanced so much because of the Government subsidy, but as the subsidy is now threatened the price may soon go up very considerably.

Margarine is another item that has not advanced as other articles have, but it does not contain the fat it used to do, and housewives complain that it is now no substitute for lard. Butter has not gone up quite 100 per cent. but seeing that there is only a ration of 1½ oz. per head each week that does not appreciably lighten a present day house-keeping account.

There are two items that our housewife has not included in her list, apples and pears, which can be bought to-day at a pre-war price, threepence to sixpence a pound, owing to the phenomenally good crop this year.

Butter, sugar and meat, are the only foodstuffs the quantity of which is rationed to each consumer to-day 1½ oz. of butter, 8 oz. of sugar and 2/- worth of butcher's meat.

People use more jam to make their bread and margarine palatable, put saccharine tablets in their tea to save the sugar for cooking, and use tinned meats and poultry more largely to make up for rationed meat, but these substitutes being more expensive, the cost of housekeeping goes up proportionately.

With the exception of these three necessities there is plenty of everything for those who have money to buy it, except whisky, so those twin evils of the past, shortage, hoarding and food queues, are almost forgotten. Whisky is still very scarce and a doctor's note is usually necessary should one want a bottle; brandy is easy to get at 25/- a bottle, and beer is plentiful in quantity if somewhat thin in quality.

Tram fares have rarely advanced more than 25 per cent. and train fares are only up 50 per cent. which is comparatively little compared with other increases.

In very few towns where the rates have largely increased has more than 20 per cent. been added to the rent of a £52 (or less)

house, and in many cases the rent of these small houses has not advanced even 5 per cent. owing to the Rent Restriction Act, which has up till now protected the tenant from any charge above that incurred by the landlord for repairs and extra rates. These lesser compensations, however, are more than counter-balanced when we consider the next series of items on the cost of living, clothes and hardware; and in any true estimate of the cost of living these must be taken into account.

A family may ignore the renewal of clothes for a period of six months or less should prices during that time be abnormal; but if prices remain abnormal, and clothes and boots wear out, the abnormal prices will have to be paid and reckoned in the cost of living; and if the period of high and exorbitant prices is maintained for years, as it has been, then all sorts of essentials in a home, towels, sheets, blankets curtains, oilcloth, brushes and crockery, will require renewing and have to be charged in the cost living. Here is a list of prices for some items of a man's clothing to-day compared with prices for the same articles prior to the war:—

	1914	1919
	£ s. d.	£ s. d.
Suit	2 5 0	7 10 0
Union Shirt	0 3 6	0 13 6
Socks	0 1 0	0 5 0
Boots	0 10 6	1 18 6
Woolen Vests	0 4 6	0 17 6
Cap	0 1 6	0 6 0
Total	£3 6 0	£11 10 6

Women's clothes and boots have advanced in almost exactly the same proportion and children's outfits are in comparison even more expensive.

Now we come to hardware and household necessities. It is impossible to make a full list but the following items are amongst the more important and cannot be done without:—

	1914	1919
	s. d.	s. d.
Cups and saucers	0 3	1 0
Saucepan	1 6	5 0
Bucket	0 6½	3 6
Dinner Plate	0 3	0 9
Curtains (pair)	4 6	13 6
Sheets (pair)	6 6	22 0
Woolen Blankets (pair)	16 0	56 0
Towels	0 9	2 0
Linoleum	2 11	9 11
Brush sweeping	0 9	3 0
Brush scrubbing	0 4	1 3
Glass Tumblers (doz.)	1 0	10 0
Alarm Clocks	2 6	15 0
Total	32 9½	143 8

Unfortunately the tendency is for prices to go up even higher than those we have quoted, while in furniture prices are so exorbitant that it seems incredible they should remain at their present figures.

If it is thought that the cost of living has been broadened to embrace too many items in this little article, it might be as well to analyse a brief list of articles printed as an advertisement to prove a reduction in prices by a

famous store in a Socialist daily paper. This enterprising firm thought apparently that it might do something to stem the rising flood of discontent among the proletariat by showing how prices were coming down since this time last year when the Amstice was signed.

It titled its half-page advertisement "Evidence that the cost of living is going down at Selfridge's," and gave a list of 250 items "chosen at random throughout the store." A study of the 250 items, the cost of which in 1918 was £210 9s. 5d. and to-day is only £177 3s. 4½d. must have made amusing reading for the wage-earning classes who chiefly buy the paper. Should you want for instance a blue serge suit made to measure it will cost you £8 13s. to-day, compared with last year's price which was £7 13s., but you can compensate yourself with the thought that though a Japanese screen cost £4 4s. in 1918, to-day you can buy one for only £2 12s. 6d.

What working man will grudge 16/6 to-day for a union shirt which according to the advertisement was 13/6 last year, if he can buy a tortoise shell lorgnette for 30/- compared with the old price of £2; and though men's overcoats, socks, mackintoshes, umbrellas and wollen scarves have all gone up in price since 1918 he can still buy a "dainty coloured, China puff bowl" or an "evening frock with silk net over jap silk trimming" for less than they cost in 1918.

Turning to provisions in the same advertisement, household soap, soda and lard, have all gone up, an advance however more than counterbalanced by the fall in tinned peaches, spaghetti, and custard powder, and at the "Bargain Counter" one can easily make up the advance in the price of a boy's overcoat, by buying a yard of lace

edging fallen from 8/11 to 2/- in one fell swoop.

How wages have advanced to meet these increased costs would take too long to detail here. Suffice it to say that the average wage of a skilled artisan to-day is roughly about 82/- for a 48-hour week, miners and builders get much more, workers in luxury trades get much less. For a labourer it will be 50/- to 88/- according to the occupation and degree of skill, for instance a labourer trucking stuff about in a factory will get the lower figure, and a bricklayer's labourer the higher.

Very high wages are usually the result of overtime at increased rates, and cannot be maintained for any length of time without injury to health.

Enough, however, has been said to break the news gently to the joyful home-comer that things are not what may be expected a year or more after the war has ended. With exchange at 6/- to the tael, however, one is about as well off as in 1913 or 1914, with the exception of the rationed items and the lack of travelling facilities.