

A LESSON IN ECONOMICS

A sketch by W. B. Bland

CHARACTERS

The Father, an "upper middle class" company director
The Son, a boy of about twelve, innocent and guileless

SCENE

The scene is the drawing room of a well-appointed house in Chelsea. The father is sitting in an armchair, reading the "Financial Times", the boy on the floor at his feet.

Father: I'm afraid I have some bad news for you, son. You'll have to stay at home with your mother for a while.

Son: Why is that, Daddy?

Father: The special school you go to -- it's closed. The social workers are on strike.

Son: What's a strike, Daddy?

Father: It's when people refuse to work. It's a sort of blackmail -- trying to force people to do something they don't want to do.

Son: You mean -- like when you said you'd close down the factory unless the workers did what you wanted?

Father (quickly): No, no, son -- nothing like that. It's much too difficult for you to understand.

Son: Is that because I'm what Mummy whispers to people -- "mentally handicapped"?

Father (embarrassed): Well, all of us are better at some things than others. That's why you go to this special school.

Son: Why have they gone on strike, Daddy?

Father: Greedi, son; they want more money. It's the curse of this country. That's why we can't compete with other countries -- like Germany.

Son: Do workers here get much higher wages than they do in Germany?

Father: Well, no; actually they're considerably lower. But that's because since the war Germany is a rich country and we're a poor country.

Son: Because Germany won the war!

Father (coughing): Well, no; actually we won the war and Germany was defeated. It's all very complicated, son; don't worry your head about it!

Son: Is it wrong to go on strike, Daddy?

Father: Well, I wouldn't say it was always wrong. Very occasionally you do get an employer who is so pig-headed . . .

Son: You mean, like that Mr. Ward who used to be on television?

Father (reluctantly): Well, yes. Mind you, there's no doubt that George Ward was a fine, principled man; but he didn't understand that modern industry needs trade unions.

Son: Why, Daddy?

Father: To keep it running smoothly. Without trade unions there would be (he searches for a word) . . . anarchy!

Son: What's anarchy?

Father: It means disorganisation, disruption.

Son: Like strikes?

Father (admiringly): Now, that's very clever of you, Tristan! Yes, there's no doubt that moderate trade union leaders play a vital role in preventing strikes in industry.

Son: What's "moderate", Daddy?

Father: It's the opposite of "militant".

Son: And what's "militant"?

Father: A "militant" is someone who's always fighting for higher wages and shorter hours.

Son: So a "moderate" is someone who doesn't fight for higher wages and shorter hours?

Father: He wants them, but he doesn't fight for them -- that's the point, son. He believes in negotiation.

Son: What's "negotiation"?

Father: It means "talking", son. Both sides sit round a table: the workers' representatives say why they think the workers should have a rise in wages, and the employers' representatives reply.

Son: They say why they shouldn't?

Father: No, it's not as simple as that. Both sides try to reach an agreement.

Son: And supposing they talk and talk and talk, and still can't agree. Is it all right for the workers to go on strike then?

Father: Oh, I'm not opposed to strikes -- under certain conditions, and as a last resort. The right to strike should be one of the rights of man in a democratic society -- like the right to vote and the right to hold meetings.

Son: So it's all right for anyone to go on strike if they've talked without getting anywhere?

Father: Well, no, son; only if it doesn't hurt innocent people, only if it doesn't harm the country. If you think about it, you'll understand why certain people shouldn't ever go on strike -- people like soldiers, . . . and policemen, . . . and firemen, . . . and doctors and nurses.

Son: And social workers?

Father: Of course. A child could be battered to death just because there was no social worker to stop it.

Son: Yes, I see. (Pause) But if social workers shouldn't ever go on strike, nobody need ever give them more money, need they?

Father: No, it's not like that, son. Councillors are sensible people, on the whole; they want their workers to be contented — within reason, of course!

Son: It's the councillors who pay the social workers? They must be very kind people!

Father: Well, they don't pay the social workers out of their own pockets. It comes out of the rates.

Son: What are rates, Daddy?

Father: They're local taxes, that everyone has to pay. If the council agreed to the social workers' demands, the rates would have to go up. Everybody would have to pay — I don't know exactly how much, but I suppose it could be as much as an extra penny every year.

Son: So it's the local people who've said they won't pay the social workers any more?

Father: Well, not directly. But the local people elect the councillors and they act as the people's watchdogs.

Son: What kind of dogs, Daddy?

Father (ignoring the interruption):

Besides, when you give one set of workers a big wage increase, all the others want a big increase too. You have a wages explosion, which is bad for the country. That's why the government is trying to keep wage increases to 5%.

Son (after a pause): Daddy, why are big wage increases bad for the country?

Father: Because they cause inflation.

Son: What's "inflation"?

Father: Inflation is when prices keep going up.

Son: And prices go up because wages go up?

Father: That's it, exactly, son. A firm which has to pay higher wages has to put its prices up to keep in business.

Son: Yes, I think I understand now, Daddy. You know the Japanese hi-fi you bought because it was cheaper than the British one?

Father: Yes.

Son: It was cheaper because wages in Japan are much lower than they are here?

Father: Well, no, not quite, son. Actually wages are considerably higher in Japan than they are in Britain. But Japanese goods are cheaper in spite of this because since the war industry in Japan is technically much better equipped, more modern, more efficient. Do you understand?

Son: Yes, I think so, Daddy. And that's because Japan won the war?

Father (wearily): No, Japan didn't win the war; we defeated Japan. (Then, irritably)

Look, all this is much too difficult for your little mind to understand. Why don't you play with your train set?

Son: Oh, but I like learning about things from you, Daddy. You remember the social worker said it was good for my mental development if you answered my questions.

Father (grimly): I remember!

Son (after a pause): Daddy, you know, earlier this year, when Mummy was so pleased, when the directors of your company gave themselves an extra £10,000 a year. Was that bad for the country?

Father (tight-lipped): It was not.

Son: But didn't that cause inflation?

Father (controlling his temper): No, it didn't. Because there are very few directors, so that a rise in our income doesn't affect prices.

Son: I see. (Pause) Daddy, didn't I hear you telling Mummy the other day that we were going through a recession.

Father: That's right, son.

Son: What's a "recession", Daddy?

Father: It's when business is bad: unsold goods pile up in the shops, so that firms have to cut back on production and put people out of work.

Son: Why can't they sell the goods? Because people don't want them?

Father: No, son; it's because people can't afford to buy them.

Son: Well, surely, Daddy, if everybody had higher wages they'd be able to buy more goods?

Father (angrily): You stupid, stupid boy! Higher wages would cut into profit, and profit is what makes the wheels go round.

Son (after a long pause): Daddy, why does it have to be profit that makes the wheels go round?

Father (now furious, picking up a stick): I don't know where you get these filthy, disgusting ideas from! Certainly not from your mother or me!

Son (frightened); I'm sorry, Daddy! Please don't beat me, Daddy! (The father raises the stick) I'll tell the social worker!

Father (beating son over the head with the stick): The bloody social workers are on strike!

CURTAIN