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The Statute of Laborers; 1351

("Statutes of the Realm," vol. i. p. 307.)

Edward by the grace of God etc. to the reverend father in Christ William, by the same grace archbishop of Canterbury, Primate of all England, greeting. Because a great part of the people and especially of the, workmen and servants has now died in that pestilence, some, seeing the straights of the masters and the scarcity of servants, are not willing to serve unless they receive excessive wages, and others, rather than through labour to gain their living, prefer to beg in idleness: We, considering the grave inconveniences which might come from the lack especially of ploughmen and such labourers, have held deliberation and treaty concerning this with the prelates and nobles and other learned men sitting by us; by whose consent counsel we have seen fit to ordain: that every man and woman of our kingdom of England, of whatever condition, whether bond or free, who is able bodied and below the age of sixty years, not living from trade nor carrying on a fixed craft, nor having of his own the means of living, or land of his own with regard to the cultivation of which he might occupy himself, and not serving another, if he, considering his station, be sought after to serve in a suitable service, he shall be bound to serve him who has seen fit so to seek after him; and he shall take only the wages liveries, meed or salary which, in the places where he sought to serve, were accustomed to be paid in the twentieth year of our reign of England, or the five or six common years next preceding. Provided, that in thus retaining their service, the lords are preferred before others of their bondsmen or their land tenants: so, nevertheless that such lords thus retain as many as shall be necessary and not more; and if any man or woman, being thus sought after in service, will not do this, the fact being proven by two faithful men before the sheriffs or the bailiffs of our lord the king, or the constables of the town where this happens to be done, -straightway through them, or some one of them, he shall be taken and sent to the next jail, and there he shall remain in strict custody until he shall find surety for serving in the aforesaid form.

And if a reaper or mower, or other workman or servant, of whatever standing or condition he be, who is retained in the service of any one, do depart from the said service before the end of the term agreed, without permission or reasonable cause, he shall undergo the penalty of imprisonment, and let no one, under the same penalty, presume to receive or retain such a one in his service. Let no one, moreover, pay or permit to be paid to any one more wages, livery, meed or salary than was customary as has been said; nor let any one in any other manner exact or receive them, under penalty of paying to him who feels himself aggrieved from this, double the sum that has thus been paid or promised, exacted or received and if such person be not willing to prosecute, then it (the sum) is to be given to any one of the people who shall prosecute in this matter; and such prosecution shall take place in the court of the lord of the place where such case shall happen. And if the lords of the towns or manors presume of themselves or through their servants in any way to act contrary to this our present ordinance, then in the Counties, Wapentakes and Trithings suit shall be brought against them in the aforesaid form for the triple penalty (of the sum) thus promised or paid by them or the servants; and if perchance, prior to the present ordinance any one shall have covenanted with any one thus to serve for more wages, he shall not be bound by reason of the said covenant to pay more than at another time was wont to be paid to such person; nay, under the aforesaid penalty he shall not presume to pay more.

Likewise saddlers, skinnners, white-tawers, cordwainers, tailors, smiths, carpenters, masons, tilers, shipwrights, carters and all other artisans and labourers shall not take for their labour and handiwork more than what, in the places where they happen to labour, was customarily paid to such persons in the said twentieth year and in the other common years preceding, as has been said; and if any man take more, he shall be committed to the nearest jail in the manner aforesaid.

Likewise let butchers, fishmongers, hostlers, brewers, bakers, pullers and all other vendors of any victuals, be bound to sell such victuals for a reasonable price, having regard for the price at which such victuals are sold in the adjoining places: so that such vendors may have moderate gains, not excessive, according as the distance of the places from which such victuals are carried may seem reasonably to require; and if any one sell such victuals in another manner, and be convicted of it in the aforesaid way, he shall pay the double of that which he received to the party injured, or in default of him, to another who shall be willing to prosecute in this behalf; and the mayor and bailiffs of the cities and Burroughs, merchant towns and others, and of the maritime ports and places shall have power to enquire concerning each and every one who shall in any way err against this, and to levy the aforesaid penalty for the benefit of those at whose suit such delinquents shall have been convicted; and in case that the same mayor and bailiffs shall neglect to carry out the aforesaid, and shall be convicted of this before justices to be assigned by us, then the same mayor and bailiffs shall be compelled through the same justices, to pay to such wronged person or to another prosecuting in his place, the treble of the thing thus sold, and nevertheless, on our part too, they shall be grievously punished.

And because many sound beggars do refuse to labour so long as they can live from begging alms, giving themselves up to idleness and sins, and, at times, to robbery and other crimes-let no one, under the aforesaid pain of imprisonment presume, under colour of piety or alms to give anything to such as can very well labour, or to cherish them in their sloth, so that thus they may be compelled to labour for the necessities of life.

Henderson's Note

The Statute of Labourers, was issued after the great plague of the Black Death, which raged in Europe from 1347 to 1349. The same fields remained to be tilled, the same manual labour to be performed; but a large proportion of the labourers had died, and the rest could command what wages they pleased. Edward III, to stop this evil, issued this rather Draconian decree.

Source:
Henderson, Ernest F.
Select Historical Documents of the Middle Ages
London : George Bell and Sons, 1896.

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