

MEETING OF AGRICULTURAL LABOURERS.

A large meeting of agricultural labourers, from all parts of the island, was held at the Royal Oak, East End Lane, on Saturday evening last. Nearly 200 were present. The meeting was convened for the purpose of hearing an address by Mr. Harry Howard, of the Southfleet Branch of the Kent Agricultural Labourers' Union, and was held in the avenue adjacent to the little picturesque public-house. Several labourers in turn were solicited to preside over the meeting, but declined to do so.

Mr. Howard then mounted a table, and said that under the circumstances he must be his own chairman. He asked the meeting to hear as patiently as possible any speaker whether advocating or denouncing the Union, and not to hoot anything down. The subject was beyond hooting down, and was not confined to a hole-and-corner village, but was taken up throughout the whole breadth of the land, and lately a meeting of the most educated classes in the land had been held in one of the largest halls in the metropolis to discuss it. With regard to the Kent Labourers' Union, he asked their attention for a few moments to explain what its principles were. It was the general saying in a village that when men joined the Union they were going to join the strike. There was not a greater fallacy than this, because it was merely a combination of men to benefit themselves, so that there could not be very much wrong in joining it. He might say that a Trade Union never resorted to a strike, until everything else had failed, either by arbitration or otherwise. He would tell them why a Union was necessary. Ever since he could remember, if an agricultural labourer felt dissatisfied with what his master gave him, and complained of it, the reply he invariably received was, "If you don't like it, go!" And if the labourer did go, there was no chance, or scarcely any, of getting employment under another farmer in the parish, because it really appeared as if the farmers combined, and would not engage a man who had expressed his dissatisfaction with what he had received at another farm. The consequence was that the man had to leave his parish and seek employment elsewhere. Then plenty of men were found to come along, who rather than steal or beg, would work at starvation prices, and in many cases for want of food, would start work without knowing what they were to get. The Union was formed to remedy this evil. If a man was so discharged, and the branch to which he belonged thought his complaint fair and reasonable they would supply that man with means to travel in search of employment. Consequently if the Union became general, no man would be allowed to work under a fair and reasonable price. That would be the means of bringing things to a level. The Agricultural Union was nearly the last that had been started, but there had been another formed lately, and that was by the curates of the Church of England. These were the last, and they had only followed the example set by other men, to prevent being ground down to the lowest by the big-wigs of that Church. In Ashford the masters used to lend and borrow each other's men, and in that time the agricultural labourer was not very far removed from slavery. A combination of men was better heard and listened to than the complaints of single individuals. Masters could discharge their labourers by wholesale a short time since, because they were sure of getting others, but that time had gone by : working-men were no longer weak, and their complaints were now listened to, so that it

must convince them that combinations were necessary. According to the first rule in their book, the object of the Kent Union was to secure an adequate scale of wages for work performed, overtime to be paid for in the coin of the realm, and to secure a certain number of hours as a day's work. He contended that the above had not been observed. The extra money earned by a labourer during the summer was devoted to paying off debts incurred in the winter, and if the summer proved showery, why, the result that he would have to wait till another year before paying his debts, so that in a great majority of cases the labourer was a year to the bad. Another reason was, that in villages like those in Sheppey, the labourer lived next door to the mechanic, and dealt at the same shops. The latter admitted that with his 30s. A week he found it sufficient to keep himself and family out of debt. How could they then expect a man with not two-thirds of such wages, to live and bring up his family in a proper manner (cheers)? From the returns of the Board, the Guardians, with all their boasted economy, could not keep the paupers in the Unions under 3s. and 3s. 6d. per head. Now it must not be forgotten that all provisions supplied to the Unions were contracted for, and sold at a considerably lower price than retailed to mechanics and labourers. From statistics it was ascertained that the agricultural labourer did not receive 2s. per head per week for himself and family. So much for the boasted economy of the Guardians. Those were some of the reasons why a labourer was not fairly paid. Then with regard to the number of hours. Generally they went to work at six in the morning and left off at six at night, but if the evening was light, the master, without thinking it a favour, told the men to stop another half-hour or an hour, and they took it for granted that they had to do so without extra pay. It seemed that a tradition of the past that as long as the master wanted them to stop, they had to do so. How did they pay for overtime on many occasions? If a man stopped an hour, he would suppose his overtime to be worth 4d. What did he receive for it? A pint of beer that would be dear at 11/2d (cheers). That was one reason why overtime should be paid for in the coin of the realm. It seemed hard to him that men of education like the Earl of Shaftesbury should assert that the labourer would be no better off if he had more money, because it would be spent in beer. If a master took a quarter of corn to market he knew how much he would receive for it, then why should not the working man know what he was going to receive, and how long he to work. The Union would exercise a general protection over its members. A fortnight ago they held a demonstration at Maidstone, which somewhat surprised the natives of that town. Nearly 7,000 labourers assembled; and something like 51 were discharged for going to it, but this not the worst of it. Many had to get out of their houses at a week's notice. Now it was not generally in a poor man's position to remove his goods and family at such a short notice, but the Union came to their assistance and afforded the means, and kept the man and his family while the former went in search of work, or helped to send them to a better land where their worth was appreciated. Dickens in one of his works remarked, "There's only one law for the rich and for the poor, but there are two ways of administering it." They were living instances of that. At Snodland the masters used to discharge the men at a minute's notice, when they were entitled to a week's notice,

and the men had to quietly submit because they had not the means to institute legal proceedings. A similar case occurred lately, and the Union with money at its back, made a claim for the week's money. The master with an oath paid the money, exclaiming, "It's all through that infernal Union." Now if the Union had not come to the assistance of the poor man he would have been robbed of his rights. At Chipping Norton lately thirteen women were sent by one of the great unpaid, a minister of the Church, to various terms of imprisonment, for very trivial offences, but they had no one to take their case up. He forgot, however, the Press, and the clergyman's name would be handed down to posterity, with what honor he would leave them to guess. The masters intimidated their men with "If you join the Union, you'll never see your money back again." If they were so particularly fair in their dealings, why should they be so fast to judge and accuse others of being rogues and swindlers (applause), and endeavour to crush the Union. The Union had been started thirteen months. In the first three months they had only 100 members, in the second three months only 500, but at the present time their total number of members was 8,000 (cheers). So much for the masters crushing it in the bud. With regard to the running away with the funds, as alleged by the masters, he would state that their laws were registered by Mr. Stephenson, under the Friendly Societies Act, and many of them would know that defaulters made themselves amenable to the laws of the land. Another thing, the funds of the Society were deposited in the Post Office Savings Bank. He explained the form which would have to be gone through before the money could be withdrawn, and said the Post Office authorities were not so green as to let a large sum of money go out of their hands, without being certain that the withdrawal was a genuine one. It was therefore not so easy to rob the Society as the masters would have them believe. The Union after having only been in existence, and after paying all preliminary expenses, and organising the various branches, had a clear accumulated fund of £950 (cheers). He next gave two or three illustrations, with the view of proving a combination among their farmers, to pay their men low wages; and said if they found it necessary to combine, why should not the men find it as equally necessary. It was said by some that the labourers paid no premium for their sons to be taught the trade- and it was a very poor trade indeed; but what recompense did their boys receive? Why, a paltry 4d. a day, and nothing for Sundays (Right). He knew they would agree with him in saying that the money they received for many years was not sufficient to feed and clothe them. He would touch shortly on the social question. It was said that the Union would destroy that good feeling existing between masters and men, and in his part of Kent they gave it a grander title. It was called, community of interests. What form did that take? If during a day's work in haying it rained for a short time, and they stopped till nine o'clock to make up for it, why were they only given three-quarters of a day's pay (Hear, hear)? At Southfleet, a poor old man, who had worked on the same farm for 45 years, was taken very bad in the fields, and a young man fetched the doctor, but the master stopped him a quarter of a day for so doing. The poor old fellow in a fortnight paid the debt of nature, but the master wanted the house for another week before he died, and refused to lend a horse and van to remove the furniture. The masters, therefore, had no right to parade a feeling which did not exist. It was further said that at Christmas the labourers received a gift from the

minister of his parish, but did not this cause more row in the parish than anything else under the sun? Who generally had the best of these legacies? Why, the distributor, who was paid £1, and sometimes more, for preaching a sermon. He thought the time had arrived for the labourer to be above receiving charity, and if they were properly paid they would be so. Some belonged to a Benefit Society for years, and this relieved the parish of paying out-relief, but when they got old—as he knew in portions of his district—they were sent to grub up woods during the winter, ready for the spring, and this they all knew was not easy work. What did the masters say? Why, that they merely set the old men at grubbing to keep them through the winter, and that it was money out of their pockets. Did they really believe this? No! Because the profits made from hop plantations, where woods once stood, was something considerable. If any old man went to the Board for relief, there were three or four of these good feeling gentlemen ready to jump down his throat, and say, "Mr. So-and-so will set on at once grubbing." What was the price paid? Not above one shilling a day, after paying for repair of tools. When those instances of the good feeling existing? He would ask any of them if they knew of a master who ever employed a man when he didn't want him (No)? What was the social position of labourers? He would quote the words of the rev. Mr. Fraser in the Blue Book, who said, "They are below the level of swine." No words that he (Mr. Howard) might use, could better express their social position. He next referred to the Royal Commission appointed to inquire into the state of the agricultural population in 1832 or 1833, but the result of which was that the labourer was left in the same position as he was found. Previous to the last twelvemonths, at the annual ploughing and other matches, the labourer was quite ignored in the various toasts, but as soon as the Union was started, the toast "the employers and labourers" got quite general. This was because they began to dread the strength of combination, and knew that some good to the labourers would result from it. He said the employers quoted the stereotyped remark that if more money were given, the men would spend it in public-houses. Because some would do so, was this to prevent them giving man a fair day's pay. They forgot that if a poor man did frequent such places, that their own and superior classes sanctioned card and billiard playing in Clubs on the Lord's day. The working-man was thus not the lowest in the scale, if it became a religious question. Mr. Howard then spoke about the election of delegates to represent the various branches. He called upon all to give their children a good education, as the progress of a Union depended upon the intelligence of its members. By education, men would find it better not to be paid by the area marked on a map, but to have such intelligence as to measure the work themselves, and they would find in many cases a quarter to half-an-acre more ground than usually allowed by employers (Right). The only kindness the men received from employers, if it could be called kindness, was to get for them an order for the Workhouse in their old age. He said the farmers were always complaining of their losses, but he asked those assembled if they believed it, when they saw their sons started in life as farmers, solicitors, officers and their silly ones in the church (laughter); and the daughters receiving marriage portions. He didn't pretend to fathom the amount of their losses, but would leave his hearers to judge whether the complaints were just ones. He then quoted other instances of what he called oppression, and concluded by asking all not to believe all he said, but to

consider whether his statements were not nearly correct ones, and to determine whether they would form a branch in combination with their fellow labourers in Kent. He asked if any one had anything to say for or against the subject. –As no one answered, he suggested that the meeting should adjourn to one of the rooms of the Royal Oak, and if unanimous on joining the Union, to choose officers, and he would give the Branch, if formed, further information how to proceed.

The men then adjourned to the Inn as suggested, and 70 joined the newly-formed branch. Mr. G. Vandeppeer was chosen, chairman; Mr. J. Crockford, secretary; and Mr. Logan, treasurer of the Branch. Other members have joined since.

Sheerness Times and General Advertiser, Saturday 7th June 1873, p5