

COMMENTARY

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## Thomas Carlyle on the New Poor Law, 1839

... Why [does] Parliament throw no light on this question of the working classes ...? ... It seems surprising, especially in reformed times, to see what space this question occupies in debate ... Can any other business be so pressing ...? A reformed Parliament, one would  
5 think, should inquire into popular discontents before they get the length of pikes and torches! Yet read Hansard's Debates! ... All manner of questions and subjects, except this.

The New Poor-Law is an announcement ... that whosoever will not work ought not to live. Can the poor man that is willing to work  
10 always find work, and live by his work? A man willing [but] unable to find work is ... the saddest sight ... under the sun.

There is not a horse willing to work but can get food and shelter ... a thing the worker has to seek for, to solicit occasionally in vain. ...

Half a million handloom weavers, working fifteen hours a day,  
15 [unable] to procure thereby enough of the coarsest food; English farm-labourers at nine shillings ... a week; Scotch farm-labourers who '... taste no milk, can procure no milk': all these things are credible to us.

... The master of horses when the summer ... is done has to feed  
20 his horses through the winter. If he said to his horses: 'Quadrupeds, I have no longer work for you; but work exists abundantly over the world; go and seek [it] ...' ... They gallop along highways ...; finally, under pains of hunger, they take to leaping fences; eating foreign property, and — we know the rest. ...

Thomas Carlyle, *Treatise on Chartism*, 1839.