Economic Impact of the Black Death

The economy of Europe was devastated by the Black Death. With a third of the workforce dead, the crops could not be harvested, and communities fell apart. One in ten villages in England were lost and never re-founded. Before the plague, several centuries of population growth had produced a labor surplus, which was replaced with a labor shortage when many serfs and free peasants died from the Plague. Since there were not enough workers, the peasants that survived the plague were able to demand better pay or look for a new job somewhere else. This started to undermine feudalism itself, as peasants left their manors for larger cities where they could make enough money to live. Being paid in cash, instead of protection, meant that peasants had more money to spend in towns, which boosted the merchant class.

**Document 1 – The Cortes of Castille Ordinance of 1351, Pedro I of Castile.**

*This document was a law passed by a local lord about his manor and his laborers. He is frustrated with their demand for higher wages and is commanding them to continue working.*

“There have been rumors and complaints made to me, Pedro I of Castile, that some people in my land and of my realms suffer very great losses because they cannot work their estates to produce bread and wine and other things that help men survive. This has happened because 1) many men and women do not want to work while the sickness spreads, and 2) because those who do work demand so much pay that no-one can hire them. Everyone is leaving the estates. There have also been rumors and complaints made to me that artisans charge more for their work than it is worth. Therefore, I deem it necessary to make a new law to address these issues.

I command that no man or woman who is able to work can wander about idle, they cannot ask or begging for food, but that all must work hard and live by the labor of their hands. Also, I command that all the laboring men and women and persons who can earn a living must continue to perform the same work on the estates and serve for the salaries and wages at their set prices.”

**Document 2 – Chronicles by Jean Froissart (1381)**

*This document comes from a sermon directed towards English peasants in the marketplace. The peasants are complaining that they do demanding work with little reward, while the lords are rich and have easy lives.*

“My good friends, things cannot be good in England until everything is owned in common; when there will be neither vassal nor lord, and all distinctions leveled, when the lords shall be no more masters than ourselves. How badly have they abused us! and for what reason do they hold us in bondage? Are we not all descended from the same parents, Adam and Eve?

We are called slaves; for if we do not work, we are beaten. We do not have any sovereign to whom we can complain, or who wishes to hear us and do us justice. Let us go to the king, who is young, and speak with him about, telling him that something must change, or that we shall have to fix it ourselves. If we bring everyone suffering these injustices together, we can grow our hopes of being free. When the king sees us all gathered together, he will either decide he must find a solution, or he will have to watch us change things ourselves."

**Document 3 – Speech by William Langland**

*William Langland was a leader of the Peasant’s Revolt who rebelled against the feudal system and felt like the peasants were being taken advantage of. He wanted the government to help the peasants and teach them how to handle their money.*

“I found ministers preaching to the people, intentionally changing the words of the Bible to make money for themselves. To get the latest clothes, they made the stories say whatever they wanted them to. Other people also made life hard for common people by being dishonest: brewers, bakers, butchers, and cooks made bad food, and bad products which people paid too much for. King Solomon from the Bible was a wise man, and he said that people who were in government are responsible for making things better for common people. He said that if rulers don’t help the poor, they would be punished by God, and that they would be sent to hell because they overlooked the people who depend on them. It won’t matter if someone is a king, or a knight or a policeman or a mayor, it won’t matter if someone intimidates us to hold power, in the end the truth will come out, and justice will be done.”