The Right To Work

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The recent controversy in our coal fields makes the reprint of this article, which appeared in the Single Tax Courier, June 14, 1894, quite timely. That in over a half century our labor problem is as acute as ever merely indicates that our methods of approach have been inefficacious, and that only by applying fundamental principles, as enunciated by Henry George, can we permanently solve this basic problem.

The right to work, involving as it does the right to life and the right of property, is indeed a fundamental right, which it is the first duty of government to protect. That this right is being violated by the coal miners in half a dozen states, who are forcibly preventing the working of mines by men willing to work for less wages than they themselves demand, is true. But is it the whole truth? Is the illegal violence of these striking miners the only, or the first, violation of the right to work? Will the right to work be really vindicated when "law and order" has been restored by clubs and machine guns, and the mine operators are free to set to work whoever is willing to take what wages they offer?

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This is a question which concerns not merely the coal miners, but all labor organizations, for the methods by which the coal miners are striving to keep up their wages are but carrying to the point of violence methods which all labor organizations must employ. Every strike and every threat of strike depends for its efficacy upon the power of preventing from working those who are willing to work. This gone and the power of organized labor is gone.

"Every man who is willing to work has a right to work." This is true—as true of the "scab," the "blackleg," the "knobstick," as of any member of a labor union. And that no one shall be compelled to work against his will (save as punishment for crime), and its correlative, that no one shall be prevented from working when he is willing to work, is an essential principle of liberty.

How then is it that such great bodies of workingmen as are engaged in these miners' strikes are willing to incur danger and defy law in violating the right of labor, and that so far from workingmen in other trades feeling wronged by this, the general feeling of workingmen throughout the country, even in occupations directly injured by the cessation of the supply of coal, is that of sympathy with the strikers?

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The truth—a truth ignored by those who only denounce violations of the right to work when committed by strikes and strikers—is that beneath the illegal wrongs that these striking miners are committing are legal wrongs from which they suffer; and that it is violation of their own right to work which impels them to blind efforts to violate the right of others.

The true reading of the principle invoked against the striking miners is this: Every one has a right to go to work for himself; hence, no man has a right to prevent others from going to work. But how can these coal miners go to work for themselves? Coal cannot be mined in the air or on the high road. To mine coal, the coal miner must have access to coal land. All around the districts where coal miners are striking there is an abundance of coal—of coal land which no one is using. If the coal miners were free to use this

unused coal land there would be no strikes, no violence. But they are not. Though there is unused coal land all about them, it is all monopolized, treated by our laws as the private property of those who have legally appropriated it, and who will not permit it to be used unless they are paid, in royalty or purchase price, a heavy tribute for their permission to apply labor to what God provided for the use of labor long before man came. Hence, so long as this monopoly exists (and its pressure tends constantly to increase, by the steady increase in the value of coal land) coal miners have no way to prevent the lowering of their wages but to stop work themselves, and, to make that efficacious, must prevent others from working in their place.

And the operator against whom the miners strive to direct their pressure is also under compulsion. For the operator as operator cannot pay the coal miner what his labor is really worth, since he must pay to the coal owner, for the privilege of taking the coal from the veins, a price in many cases as much as he pays for labor. Behind the struggle of endurance between coal miner and coal operator lies the coal owner. The miner must eat or he will starve. The machinery and buildings of the operator will rust and decay. But the veins of coal! They do not eat; they do not rust and decay. And, secure in his legal possession of God's bounty to men, the land owner commands the situation.

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Here, in brief, is the heart of the labor problem—the primary wrong that lies at the bottom of the blind and bitter struggle that is everywhere going on. It is as true of all production as it is of coal mining, that it cannot be carried on without the use of land. For all human production, in minutest part, is resolvable at last into the expenditure of labor on land. Production is not the creating of anything; it is the mere changing in form, place or combination of matters and forces already existing, the ownership of which is involved in the ownership of land.

"Every man who is willing to work has a right to work." How this principle is mocked in present social conditions! In this country of abounding unused opportunities for work, and during a time of peace, millions of men willing to work have found it impossible to exert the right to work, and men only anxious to work are today suffering and starving.

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The reason is clear. That every man who is willing to work has a right to work, means that the right to work is equal; and that the right to work is equal, means that the right to the use of land is equal. This principle we have ignored. We have made the right to the use of the land, and consequently, the right to work, the special privilege of some, who are thus enabled to compel others to pay them for the exercise of the right to work. So labor, the producer of all wealth, is made a beggar; and monopolists grow rich while laborers become poor and helpless.

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The method of the strike is essentially wrong, both in principle and in policy. The true way to improve the condition of labor is not by denying the natural right of any one, but by asserting the natural rights of all. Laborers under present conditions are weak in endurance, which is called for in the strike; but they are strong in votes, which is the way by which equality of rights is to be secured. And while in the strike they are soon forced into opposition to a self-evident principle of justice, they would in the other way have its power in their favor. The ownership of land is the key of the labor question. Let all taxes be removed from labor and the products of labor, and let the owners of land be made to pay the community for the privilege of holding valuable land, whether they use it or not, by the taxation of land values irrespective of use or improvement, and the power to monopolize land would be gone. Wages all over the country would rise to their natural rate, the full earnings of the laborer, and we should no more hear of men willing to work, but unable to find work.