

The Single Tax, November, 1897

## **WHAT LABOUR NEEDS**

By Henry George

We have been favoured with an advance copy of a remarkable article contributed by Henry George to the *New York Journal*. Mr. George says :—

I have neglected no opportunity of telling working men that what they have to fight in order to accomplish anything real and lasting, is not their immediate employers, but the false and wrongful system which, by depriving the masses of men of natural opportunities for employment of their labour, compels them to struggle with one another for a chance to work. I have constantly endeavoured in every way I could to induce men to revert to first principles, and to think of these questions in a large way; to convince them that the evils which they feel are not due to the greed or wickedness of individuals, but are the result of social maladjustments, for which the whole community is responsible, and which can only be righted by general action.

### UTILITY OF STRIKES.

Yet I realise that it is folly to tell working men, as they frequently are told, that they ought not to strike, because strikes will injure them. Not only are there many working men who have nothing to lose, but it is a matter of fact that strikes and fear of strikes have secured to large bodies of them considerable increase of wages, considerable reduction in working hours, much mitigation of the petty tyrannies that can be practised with impunity where one man holds in his hands control of the livelihood of another, and have largely promoted the growth of fraternal feeling in the various trades. The greater number of strikes fail, but even the strike that fails, though its immediate object is lost, generally leaves the employer indisposed for another such contest, and makes him more cautious of provoking fresh difficulties.

## THE SYMPATHETIC STRIKE.

Nor is it so strange, as some pretend, that one body of workmen, without any special grievance of their own, should strike to help another. The immediate purpose of a strike is to inflict damage upon opposing employers, and there are many places in which employers who could defy their own workmen can be seriously hurt by pressure exerted upon them through the medium of other employers with whom they have business relations. To be sure, third parties, with no direct interest in the quarrel, do suffer, and frequently the greatest sufferers are the men who thus go out to help their fellows. But if the strike be thus more costly, its results, in causing employers to hesitate before engaging in another such contest, are likely to be more decisive and more effective. And men may strike, as men fight, in a quarrel not originally their own, either as a matter of sentiment, or from the more selfish consideration that they thus make alliances that will render them stronger in any quarrels of their own; or, as is generally the case, from the mingling of both motives.

And when men are willing to stop work and submit to loss and suffering in the effort to aid their fellows, does it not show heroism of the same kind as that which prompts men to risk their lives in battle for men weaker than themselves? Those who would condemn a strike of railroad men in aid of coal miners must, if they be logical and assume the standpoint of working men, condemn the aid which the French gave to the struggling American Republic.

## COERCION IN STRIKES.

A favourite platitude, now finding wide expression in the American press, is that although men have an unquestioned right to stop work themselves, they have no right to coerce others into stopping work, and the disposition of working men to do this when they are on strike is denounced as not merely wicked in the highest degree, but as un-American.

This is nonsense. When our forefathers struck against England, they not merely struck for themselves, but compelled everyone else they could to join them, first by "moral suasion," which amounted to ostracism, and then by tarring and feathering, harrying and shooting, and when they boycotted the East India

Company's tea they were not content with simply refusing to drink it themselves, but threw it into the sea so that nobody else could drink it. A strike can only amount to anything in so far as it is coercive, and whatever working men may say they must of necessity feel that it is only by exerting some upon those disposed to go to work that they can succeed in a strike.

#### TENDENCY TO VIOLENCE.

For the most part, so far, this pressure has been a moral one, and the penalty of contempt as "scabs" had been sufficient to induce men to undergo actual suffering rather than assert what the denouncers of strikes declare to be the inalienable right of every American citizen. But admonitions are not wanting that in these industrial wars—for they are nothing else— there is a growing disposition to resort to more violent measures. And whether right or wrong, the growth of this disposition is natural. The labour associations which have least necessity of resorting to the coarser and more obvious methods of inflicting or threatening injury or loss as a means of coercing employers, are those in trades where special skill is required, and which carefully restrict the number permitted to learn the trade. Beginning at this primary point to interfere with the freedom of the employer and of their own members to teach a trade, and with the freedom of boys to learn it, they are able to so limit the number of those who can take their places, that they can, by their own mere refusal to work, inflict such injury and loss upon employers as will exert a sufficiently coercive power to maintain their wages and enforce their rules. But just in proportion as the organisation of labour proceeds beyond the trades to the learning of which artificial difficulties have been imposed, or which from their nature are not easily learned, do the practicable methods for the exertion of the coercive power necessary to win with employers, become coarser and more obvious.

#### COERCION THE ONLY COURSE.

The mere cessation of work on the part of a strict trades union of glassblowers may inflict such damage and loss upon employers as to compel them to accede to terms. But a strike of unskilled labourers, when there are thousands of

unemployed men eagerly pressing for employment, must be backed either by some sort of coercion to prevent others taking their places, or by some means of inflicting such injury and loss upon employers as will make them afraid to employ men outside of the association.

Now, it is the tendency of constantly increasing labour-saving invention to dispense with special skill on the part of the mass of workmen, and to reduce skilled labour to the status of unskilled; and the extension of labour organisations, which has been so rapid of late years, has been in the direction of the less skilled occupations. This is the reason of the growing tendency of strikes to violence, and the necessity more and more felt of calling upon men in other occupations for help, by stopping work or by boycotting, to inflict injury or loss upon the employers with whom a struggle is being carried on. If the labour movement is to go on in this direction, every man who looks ahead must see that it will at last come to violence.

#### WHERE THE BLAME LIES.

But for that, not the working man, but the "saviours of society" are to blame. Those who really hold that "whosoever smiteth thee on the right cheek "thou shouldst" turn to him thy other also," and "if any man will take away thy coat" thou shouldst "let him have thy cloak also;" they who hold that the command, "Thou shalt not kill." applies as well to the man in uniform as to the man in plain clothes, might with some consistency condemn violence in strikes. But they alone. If there are any such people, however, they are not often found in the editorial rooms of our great dailies or the pulpits of our national churches. On the contrary, the loudest denouncers of strikes —those who declare that they ought to be put down by force if necessary—are to be found among the class who have grown rich through extortion backed by force. The very men who are now calling so loudly for the maintenance, by the bayonet if necessary, of the liberty to work, are the most strenuous supporters of a system which denies the liberty to work.

## RESPONSIBILITY FOR COERCION.

How is it that a land like ours, abounding in unusual natural resources, is tilled with unemployed men? Is it not because of the power which our laws give to some men to prevent others from going to work? Let striking labourers in a city like New York accept the dictum that no man has a right to prevent another from going to work. Let them turn from attempts to compel their former employers to employ them, and where shall they go to employ themselves? Where, indeed, will they go that they will not find someone, backed by law and force, who forbids them to work? There is plenty of unused land in every city. Let them go upon this land and attempt to employ their labour in building houses. How long will it be before they are warned off? Let them cross the East River, the North River, or the Harlem. They will find everywhere unused fields, on which, without interference with any man, they might employ their labour in making a living for themselves and all depending on them. But they will not find a field, though they tramp a thousand miles, on which someone has not the legal right to prevent their going to work. What is left them to do but to beg for the wages of some employer? So if, to prevent being crushed by competition of others like themselves, they strive, even by force, to keep others from going to work, is theirs the blame?

## THE PRIMARY COERCION

The very worst the strikers do or think of doing is to prevent others from going to work, in order that they themselves may work—may earn a scant living by hard toil.

But what are the dogs in the manger doing who are holding unused city lots, farm lands, mines, and forests—the natural opportunities, in short, that nature offers to labour? They are preventing other people from working, not that they may work themselves, but that they may live in idleness on what those who want to work are compelled to pay them for the privilege of going to work. If labourers were to form societies which should by force prevent anyone from going to work without their permission; were to charge the highest price for the privilege of going to work, which the necessities of others would compel them to pay, and were then to sit down and live in idleness on this blackmail, they would only be doing to others what organised society permits others to do to them.

While it is perfectly true, as an abstract proposition, that no one ought to be permitted to interfere with the legitimate business of another, or by going out of his own right to inflict or threaten injury or loss as a means of coercion, yet it is also true that, under existing conditions, it is only by combining together to interfere with the legitimate business of others, and to coerce others by the fear of injury or loss, that workmen are at all able to resist the tendency to crowd wages down to the point of bare existence. The great fact that is ignored by those who talk so flippantly about the wickedness of coercion in strikes is that all this coercion is in reality coercion against coercion, the attempt to use force in resistance to force. What labour unions are attempting to do is to secure for themselves a monopoly in supplying labour, and the real cause and only justification of this effort is the existence of monopolies in the things vitally necessary to the use of labour.

#### AN ILLUSTRATIVE STORY.

Before the Cadi of an Eastern city there came from the desert two torn and bruised travellers.

"There were five of us," they said, " on our way hither with merchandise. A day's journey hence we halted and made our camp, when following us there came a crowd of ill conditioned fellows, who demanded entrance to our camp, and who, on our refusing it, used to us violent and threatening words, and, when we answered not their threats, set upon us with force. Three of us were slain, and we two barely escaped with our lives to ask for justice."

"Justice you shall have," answered the Cadi. "If what you say be true, they who assaulted you when you had not assaulted them shall die. If what you say be not true, your own lives shall pay the penalty of falsehood."

When the assailants of the merchants arrived they were brought at once before the Cadi. Is the merchants' story true?" he asked.

"It is, but –"

"I will hear no more!" cried the Cadi.

"You admit having reviled men who had not reproached you, and having assaulted men who had not assaulted you. In this you have deserved death."

But as they were being carried off to execution the prisoners still tried to explain.

"Hear them, Cadi," said the old man, "lest you commit injustice."

"But they have admitted the merchants' words are true."

"Yes, but they may not be all truth."

So the Cadi heard them, and they said that when they came up to the merchants' halting place they found that the merchants had pitched their camp around the only well in that part of the desert, and refused to let them enter and drink. They first remonstrated, then threatened, and then, rather than die of thirst, rushed upon the merchants' camp, and in the melee three of the merchants were slain.

"Is this also true?" asked the Cadi of the merchants.

The merchants were forced to admit that it was.

"Then," said the Cadi, "you told me truth that, being only part of the truth, was really a falsehood. You were the aggressors by taking to yourselves alone the only well from which these men could drink. Now the death I have decreed is for you."

#### WEAKNESS OF THE STRIKE

In the attempt to meet coercion by coercion, working men, under the present conditions, are at fearful disadvantage. It is not merely that the capitalists and corporations against whom they fight have control of the organs of public opinion and of the courts, but that they can combine, can coerce, can inflict injury and loss in a much more quiet and effective way than can working men. They can evade or take advantage of the law, while working men, to do things of essentially the same kind, must defy the law. Labour, surrounded by law-made and law-supported monopolies of all kinds, is virtually told by the law that the only coercive force it can apply to tight off the coercion to which it is subjected is to stop work and starve.

Conscious of the coercion those who have only labour to sell are subjected to, though without fully realising its cause, there are active men in the labour

organisations who have dreamed (if so fully organising all kinds of labour in mutually supporting combinations as to make labour, by the stopping of all work, master of the situation. But this dream is hardly capable of realisation. For, putting aside all the difficulties of inducing so many diverse trades to act in concert with any persistence, and putting aside the surety that there must, remain outside of any possible combination a body of labourers pressed by the direst necessity to take work on any terms, the great fact is that labourers as a class live from hand to mouth. They, therefore, are of all classes the least able to maintain a contest of endurance, and would quickest and most severely suffer from any general stoppage of the machinery by which the community is fed and its necessary wants are from day to day supplied.

#### THE POOR SUFFER FIRST.

A partial strike is now maintained for any length of time only by contributions from workmen who remain at work. In the check put upon the supply of coal to New York during the great strike, they who suffered quickest and suffered most were they who buy coal by the bucket, not those who could lay in a season's supply. If the thirsty men in the desert had attempted to compel the merchants to let them in to drink by forming a cordon around the camp and refusing the rights of labour by a general refusal to labour, the merchants could have remained quiet for a long time. How long could the travellers have gone without water?

Suppose, however, that to such a plan were brought the strength of the law-making power. Suppose that by properly using their votes labouring men were to succeed in giving the labour associations just such a local monopoly of supplying labour as is now given by our laws to monopolists of things necessary to the exertion of labour. The trades union ideal would then be realised. No one could then go to work without permission of a trades union, just as now no mere labourer can go to work without the permission of a landowner or capitalist.

But, if this were practicable, would not the placing of such power in the hands of managers and trade unions lead to tyranny and abuse of the kind which, as experience has shown, always attend the concentration of power! And outside of the trade unions or labour associations, would there not remain or grow up a class deprived by one set of monopolists of access to the natural means of



employing labour, and deprived by another set of monopolists of the power to sell their labour to those who could give them opportunity to use it?

#### THE ONLY REMEDY.

The true line to follow for the emancipation of labour is not the emancipation of restrictions, but the sweeping away of restrictions— not the creation of new monopolies, but the abolition of all monopolies. And the fundamental and most important of all monopolies is that legalised monopoly of the earth itself, which deprives the labourer of all right to the use of the natural means and material for the employment of labour, and which, by thus making him helpless to employ himself, and forcing him to buy some other human creature's permission to even live, compels him to compete with others disinherited like himself for permission to sell his labour.

Out of the multiplying and menacing labour difficulties of our time there is but one way to escape, and that is by the restoration to all men of their natural and inalienable rights to the use upon equal terms of the element on which and from which all men must live—the land. If there were a brisk demand for labour, there would be no surplus of labourers anxious for work upon any terms upon which employers could draw. That there is not such a demand for labour is due simply to the fact that labourers are prevented by the monopoly of natural opportunities from employing themselves. Here is the point on which the efforts of labour should be concentrated. The restoration of these opportunities can easily be obtained by the ballot. In the ballot, working men have in their hands the power of so adjusting taxes as to make tin; dogs in the manger let go their hold. When this is done there will be no necessity for strikes, and competition, instead of crushing the labourer, will secure to him the full reward of his toil.