

Georgists and the Labor Movement

By GEORGE B. GREENE

When a Georgist states that Capital and Labor should have no conflict, a "labor union" man might agree, or might remain to argue the point with a pleasant tolerance. When the Georgist states that there is no conflict between Capital and Labor, the same "labor" man will certainly decide that the Georgist is either ignorant or imbecile.

This state of affairs is due, of course, to a confusion of terms. Capital and Labor are fundamental economic terms to a Georgist. The label "labor" on our unionist means that he is in sympathy with, if not actively associated with, the organized labor movement. The primary designation of the word "Capital" to him, even if he is familiar with the economic term as such, would be reference to the control and use of capital by owners and management, especially relating to the employment of wage-earners. It is important that Georgists recognize this discordant use of terms, if it is desired to extend the ideas of Henry George appreciably to the largest group in the nation having common economic interests.

The laborite knows there is conflict between the wage-earner on one side and the owner and manager on the other. The evidence is too manifest, and in some cases too appalling to be disregarded. He may or may not realize to what degree the exploitation of rent is involved.

Present-day unionism is unfamiliar with George's theories, generally speaking. Let Georgists examine themselves and answer truthfully the question: "Are we honestly sympathetic to, and cognizant of, the fundamental aspects of modern unionism?" The accusation has been made that Georgism is making its present appeal to the upper middle-class circles, and neglecting the broader missionary field. There is at least an element of truth in this accusation. Examination would probably disclose that ignorance of

Georgism on the part of labor leadership is due less to antagonism than to simple failure of Georgists to attempt an intelligent approach.

That George's ideas have a strong appeal to organized labor is proved by the fact that George himself was successful in promoting that appeal during the time of his greatest influence. Further proof is that PROGRESS AND POVERTY remains a textbook in the library of radical labor economists. In order to utilize that popular appeal, and to insure correct direction, a practical and intelligent course is imperative.

Georgist publications and lectures should be more perceptive and tolerant in the approach and treatment of the problems and errors of organized labor. Sound students of George can have no quarrel with the fundamental principles and goals of unionism. With a broad and informed knowledge of the subject as a basis, understanding and appreciation of the very human faults of these very human institutions is not difficult. Criticism of these faults should at least be accompanied by criticism of the faults of ownership and management that are their cause to a great extent—if not entirely.

Georgists tend to be so engrossed in basic theories that they are impatient and inattentive concerning immediate current problems. Hence the term "impractical idealists" being often applied to them, regardless of the justification. Men in futile search of employment, men who can scarcely exist on a low wage scale, and men who perceive that their wages are inordinately low in proportion to their part in production—all these see the excessive profits benefiting the few owners and the managers at their expense. They seek immediate methods of equitable distribution. The fact that some measure of success has been achieved by unionism, as Henry George repeatedly pointed out, is the paramount reason for their loyalty

to union leadership and methods. They believe, with justification, that it is proved that any increase in their social and economic welfare is due to their unionism.

The duty of Georgists is not to combat this loyalty, but to demonstrate that unionism can be even more beneficial under single-tax, and increase the possibilities of improving their conditions. In order to disseminate George's ideas to the intelligent workers, Georgist organizations and schools must interest men and women who, if not actually "laborites" themselves, are sincerely in sympathy and thoroughly informed regarding organized labor. Your labor man can spot a dilettante in a hurry! Georgists of the right type will find the way to a correct approach. That there is such a way is beyond question, as there is nothing esoteric or complex about George's ideas.

Today's Georgism has failed to touch the popular response that is necessary to engender an active, enthusiastic, and extensive movement. To neglect the possibilities in cooperation with the largest, most vital, and best organized group in the community is "to miss the bus."

The Georgist who dismisses this opportunity with the assertion that unionists are "not educated enough" or "not intellectual enough" is displaying those very defects himself. The fact is that the modern worker is both literate and astute, and he does not have to be profound to understand George's ideas. That he is not better acquainted with these ideas is the fault of the Georgists.

The progress of the labor movement in the last decade has been due not only to numerical growth, benevolent government, and consequent power, but also to improved leadership and methods. The theories of Henry George should be much better known in labor circles, and it will be to the discredit of the Georgists if it is not.

Unionists & everybody else too.