

SOCIALISM AND SINGLE TAX

How to Unite Labor and Capital in the Same Man

BY W. D. P. BLISS

in Labor and Capital, ed. by Peters, 1902

p. 378-387

WHAT do we mean by “reconciling labor and capital?” If we take the words in their strict sense there is no need of reconciliation, because there is naught to reconcile. No hoe ever quarrelled with its user. But usually those who use the phrase mean reconciling one man who owns the hoe with another man who wields it, and this is a very different question. It is well to sing the praises of capital and show what it has done for the world; how it has made it possible for man to girdle the globe, erect the home, spread the table, build the library, span the continent. Without capital man is a savage (though a free savage may be happier and nobler than a prisoned heir of all the ages). Capital is power.

It is also well for people whose work is interesting, work of the head and heart, to sing paeans about “the divinity of labor, the nobility of toil.” Labor is divine, provided it be creative labor, for every laborer should be a god. The world were a hell, and a hell without hope, if man could not work with a heart in his work. (Shame on us that so many of our brethren live and die in that hell, some finding that hell on Fifth Avenue, some in East Side tenements.) Labor of the right kind is noble.

But such language becomes false, insolent, damnable alike to those who use it and those who listen to it, when under the guise of lauding the functions of tools and of work is covertly, sentimentally, or ignorantly built up a defense of a condition of affairs where one set of men own nine tenths of the tools and another set of men do nine tenths of the work. Air and lungs are both necessary to life, but when the air is on top and the lungs are down in a Black Hole, men die. And when those enjoying the free air shout down to the men in the hole learned essays or sentimental talk about the wonderful mechanism of the lungs and the marvelous composition of the air, it is no wonder that men dying for lack of air grow angry, indignant, anarchistic.

The problem of the century is not to reconcile labor and capital, nor to make one set of men content without capital and another set of men (or their wives and daughters) content without labor; the problem is how to unite labor and capital in the same man. This is the aim of what is called socialism, and socialism will not down (no matter how the mistakes and follies of socialists may delay the issue till every man has a due share of capital and every capitalist does his share of useful creative work.

How can this end be reached? Most people will admit its theoretical desirability; how

can it practically be accomplished? This is the question today before civilization.

Education.—Some people will answer by various forms of the mental, moral, and manual education of wage-earners, to make them more capable of acquiring, keeping, and making good use of capital. Education! Yes; who will say aught against education? But, like liberty, what crimes are committed in its name! All need education, and among others the capitalist, the ecclesiastic, and the economist. We should like to see schools of manual training for capitalists as well as for wage-earners; schools of political economy for ecclesiastics as well as trade-union leaders; schools of moral sense for economists as well as for those environed by physical slums. Who need education the most, it is hard to say. But will education, in the ordinary sense of the word, solve the economic problem? We answer no.

Education of the right kind may enable one man to climb on the shoulders of his fellows who have less. Knowledge is power. Those who see an educated wage-earner climb out of his class into the class of capitalists are apt to say, “Teach all men to do the same, and life’s problem is solved.” But let us revert to the Black Hole, for in such a state of affairs we are. Where men are wriggling, striving, shoving, battling to get near to the little air there is, if you infuse into a few men new strength and ability it will undoubtedly enable them to get nearer the top, and possibly out of the hole; but if one gets up and out by shoving other people down and in, is there a net advance on the problem of relief to the world? Yet such is the situation so long as life is a scramble of competition, with survival only for the most dexterous wriggler.

John Stuart Mill long ago pointed out that in a race, if one man removes his coat and the others do not, the coatless man has the advantage, but that if all should do the same it would but make the struggle more severe. Education may remove some obstacles from the path of individual competitors and enable them more cunningly to trip or defeat their rivals, but if all men were educated and the system of competition were unchanged, it would but make the race of life more desperate and severe. A wiser than Mill eighteen centuries ago declared that the development of self was not the path to heaven. They who would come to God's life must lose their selfish life. Sacrifice, not self-development, is God’s path to individuality. Economics, common-sense, and history indorse the words of Christ. Those who have sacrificed are the great ones of history.

Profit Sharing.—Others say, let us develop various forms of profit sharing and gradually make the worker share in the benefits of capital. This, too, is well, but is it a solution? Business today is notoriously consolidating at gigantic bounds; a few men are coming to own, or at least control, the commercial world. With that giant fact before us, is it aught but mockery to try and meet the situation by offering to dole out

little fractions of capital to the hungry millions? When a few men monopolize even the air (for does not the owner of an East Side tenement, himself living, perhaps, in a healthy suburb, become a monopolist of the air?)—when, we say, monopoly is in the air and controlling the air, is it any consolation to say to the men in the Black Hole: “If you will serve our interests the better and give us an increasing amount of the air of the world, we will allow you people ‘in the hole’ to have a tiny portion of our increasing amount?”

Trade-Unions.—Still others say develop trade-unions. Let capital organize and labor organize and then arbitrate between the two. This, too, is well. Education, profit sharing, co-operation, trade-unionism—all are well, and the last, perhaps, economically the best. Wages in America are high or low about in proportion to the extent to which the wage-earners in any craft are or are not organized in trade-unions. He who opposes trade-unions, if honest, is ignorant. Trade-unionists make mistakes, commit follies, do wrong, but so do capitalists, and at least as often. Trade-unionism all serious thinkers to-day believe in. Experience has taught the wage-earner that the trade-union, even if occasionally despotic, is, in the long run, his securest defense today against the greater despotism of the employing corporations. But can the most optimistic believer in trade-unions argue that here is the one path to salvation? Can trade-unions today equal, or begin to equal, or ever hope to equal the power of organized capital? Trade-unions are gaining. They are learning by their experience and profiting by their mistakes. They gain slowly. But capital is consolidating at giant bounds. Can the snail overtake the hare? Not unless the hare be stopped. Trade-unionism alone will not answer.

A Lesson from History.—What else can be done? Let me answer by an illustration with a few facts:

In the days of the struggle against chattel slavery the problem was how to free the slave. Men argued that it could only be done gradually; that the slave was not competent for freedom—a contention partly justified by the results. Then, as now, it was shown that the interests of slave and slave-owner were mutual. If the slave-owner treated his slave well, gave him more corn and mush, let him go to the “nigger” chapel on Sunday, it was for the slaveowner’s good. The well-treated slave was likely to produce more cotton; above all, he was more likely to remain in slavery. Property was worth preserving. It paid the slave-owner to be kind. On the other hand, it was argued that it paid the slave to be industrious, temperate, respectful, submissive “to his betters.” If the slave produced more cotton he could usually get more mush. If he smiled when the taskmaster thrashed him he was not quite so likely to get a thrashing the next day. If he licked his master’s boots he might even be allowed to live in the vicinity of the master’s house, and get the crumbs from his table. Fawning and

especial industry was for the slave's own good. Such arguments were common in economic writings and in sermons North and South.

By others it was argued that the thing to do was to get the slaves individually out of slavery and into Canada, and so an underground railway was organized by kind-hearted men and women and a few slaves were helped to liberty. But, unfortunately, the government was largely under the influence of the slave power, and it used the power of government to hunt and return to their owners most of the slaves who struck, much as the army is used today in our strikes.

A growing number said that something must be done, but that we must do not much or society would go to pieces and the country be ruined. And so the Whig party gave us Missouri compromises and Dred Scott decisions. Yet somehow the compromises only compromised their framers and the decisions decided nothing and the struggle went on.

Still others argued in favor of slave colonies and republics in Liberia and elsewhere. The slaves themselves made a few noble but futile efforts.

Still others argued that slavery was not an evil to be met, but a sin to be left. Through government nothing could be done. The very Constitution was a "covenant with death and an agreement with hell." Such argument was very stimulating and set people to thinking, but the sin went on.

At last, one day, at Warsaw, New York, a few earnest men formed a Liberty party. They made but a small beginning and innumerable mistakes. At their first election they only polled 7059 votes over the whole country. Their own candidates declined their nominations. At their second election they succeeded only in defeating Clay and electing Polk, and thus making Texas a slave State. After that election they went to pieces. It all seemed "infinitely pathetic." Nevertheless, in place of the Liberty party came the Free Soil party and by and by the Republican party and the war and the liberation of the slaves.

Must history repeat itself? The good, cautious, sensible Whigs who wanted to do things very gradually forgot one thing. They forgot that the slave question was a moral question and that against that moral element compromises, compacts, even the decisions of courts, were as naught. The Whig party knew not the day of its visitation; neither the policy of a Clay nor the genius of a Webster could save it against the Truth.

On the other hand, the men who stood for principles without measures, who would not work through government at all because the government was not perfect, were useful

as agitators, but did not free the slaves. A party that dared to stand for principle applied in practical measures did free the slaves.

The Political Method.—What shall we do? There is no one short cut. But shall we ignore the political method? Shall we sneer because its beginnings are weak? Shall we be hopeless because some of the labor leaders in trying to play at politics show poor judgment against the shrewdest men organized capital can pick out? Slow measures might be the wisest if the situation would allow. But those who advocate simply education, profit sharing, etc., forget one thing. They forget what the Whig party forgot, that the present economic problem is a great moral issue, which the logic of events is steadily and rapidly forcing to an issue.

Capital is consolidating from Maine to California; trusts are being formed in almost every line of industry; the means of continental transportation are passing into fewer and fewer hands; the power of monopoly is steadily extending over hall and bench, over pulpit and press, over commerce and the ballot. As far back as 1871 not a socialist, but Charles Francis Adams wrote:

“The system of corporate life and corporate power is yet in its infancy. It tends always to development; always to consolidation; it is ever grasping new powers or insidiously exercising covert influences. Even now [1871] the system threatens the central government. . . . The belief is common in America that the day is at hand when corporations far greater than ever—swaying power such as has never in the world’s history been trusted in the hands of mere private citizens, controlled by single men like Vanderbilt, or by combinations of men, like Fiske, Gould, and Sage—after having created a system of quiet but irrepressible corruption—will ultimately succeed in directing government itself.”

Has that day come?

Against such a situation is it a sufficient answer to frame pretty words about reconciling capital and labor? Can trade-unions, co-operative colonies, profit-sharing schemes, boards of arbitration, even capitalist-owned churches and schools, meet the issue? Is it for men who would really serve the public need to cry peace, peace, when there is no peace? For our part we answer that the only power capable of meeting the situation is the concerted moral sense of the whole people. In this we have faith. The American people are not yet enslaved. In 1896 on a partial issue and with a confused lead more than half the white native vote of the country was cast against the party which it believed to be the party of the trusts. In 1900, under circumstances still more complicated, the same result was approximated. Is it Utopian to believe that in the near future, on the plain question of public co-operation through government—i. e., of public ownership of monopolies against the trusts—an overwhelming majority of the

plain people would be against the trusts? The first great party that sounds forth that note, standing for principle on practical measures, will win the day.

This is no plea, however, for a Utopian class-conscious socialist party that strives to apply to America a German theory. It will take the moral instinct of the whole country to down the power of the trusts. It must be an American party, believing in our country, inheriting the best traditions alike of a Jefferson and a Lincoln. It must be no class uprising. With the principle of brotherhood for all and malice toward none it must unite the Anglo-Saxon genius for practical construction and constitutional development. A practical program of public ownership for the city and the nation is the only way to unite labor and capital on the basis of equity and in the limits of the practical.

SOCIALISM AND SINGLE TAX SYNOPSIS

Hardie. Condemns trusts — Profit sharing objectionable from union standpoint—Co-operation of limited applicability—State ownership and control of land and capital.

Jones. Right of all to work—More equal sharing—The few have no right to enjoy immense profits at expense of the many—Next step co-operation in distribution—Public ownership of railroads.

Chase. Condemns trusts—Trusts a step toward socialism—Individualism disappearing—Socialism next step.

Bliss. Actual conditions—Real conflict—Proposed remedies inadequate—Benefits of trade-unionism—Does not solve problem— Socialist party with national programme—Public ownership of natural monopolies—Next step after trusts.

Hall. A parable—Definitions of capital and labor—The burden of special privileges—Social value of land ownership—Benefit of strikes—Objections to socialism—Restore land to laborer— Single tax—Abolition of monopolies.

Crosby. War of capital and labor—Social and economic inequalities—Wage-earner's share inadequate—Effects of machinery on labor—State socialism not the remedy—Trusts and monopolies the result of special privileges—Single tax—Free banking and

free trade—Equal opportunities versus monopoly of opportunities—Trade-unions a means of education of workers: a counterpoise to monopolies.