

SANTO DOMINGO HGS CELEBRATES 25TH ANNIVERSARY



A special report by George L. Collins

The Santo Domingo extension of the Henry George School celebrated its 25th anniversary in September with a series of programs and conferences which have paved the way for another quarter century of important advances. Under the energetic leadership of its founding director Lucy Silfa, the school has educated thousands of Dominicans in every sphere of life on the virtue of Georgist land reform. And it shows. Everywhere around the town, people know who Lucy is and what she is about - land value taxation. It becomes immediately evident that good seeds have been planted on fertile ground.

A devoted core of volunteers have reached out from the Santo Domingo School in every direction. Some date back to her early classes 20 or 25 years ago; others are active current students. They planned three major events in observation of the anniversary. On Friday September 26th, a group of 35 teachers and close supporters gathered at the director's home to discuss the work of the school with me. Topics ranged from the changes in the Soviet Union to opportunities and impediments facing the school in the Dominican Republic. The evening was capped with a delightful performance by the youthful members of a *Ballet Folklorico* troupe headed by an HGS student.

On Saturday the 27th, a meeting at the Lena Hotel marked the public observation of the anniversary. I was billed as the main speaker, but the parade of testimonials from students old and new, some not yet 25 years old, far overshadowed the high commendation and spirited encouragement that I gave the 120-strong audience.

A dinner in my honor, the night before

my departure on October 2nd, was the final anniversary event. In what I can only describe as an example of the typically gracious spirit of Latin American generosity, they presented me with a handsome plaque on the occasion of their 25th anniversary. This evening of warmth and affection concluded with me joining my wonderfully talented hosts in poetry and song.

There was a lot more that revealed the accomplishments of those 25 years. Two daily and Sunday newspapers heralded the achievements with feature articles, editorial comment, interviews, and news coverage. Lucy, two other Georgists, and myself appeared on a total of five television programs. Numerous meetings took place with individuals occupying influential positions.

The first meeting Lucy arranged for me was with Dr. Pedro Gil Iturbides, Minister of Education, Fine Arts & Religion. Dr. Iturbides expressed high regards for the Henry George School. He has read *Progress and Pov-*

erty, and has spoken at a school graduation. His ministry, he told us, has received a total of six buses from Japan, which are outfitted with video equipment, able to be taken anywhere around the country. It will provide extra-curricular programming for adults; our *Understanding Economics* (Continued on page six)

THE DOMINICAN REPUBLIC: POVERTY AMID NATURE'S BOUNTY

The Dominican Republic occupies the eastern half of the island of Hispaniola, which it shares with Haiti on the west. Although its political life is not as turbulent as its neighbor's, there is nearly as much despair over its worsening economy. The country is beset with massive economic problems. Compared with other places, though, the poverty of this country shows some striking, ironic differences. Many of the unemployed "employ" themselves selling something. Unlike New York, where your car is approached at intersections by people seeking handouts, here you are approached by vendors selling a variety of ripe, enticing home-grown fruits.

In this country where people are close to the land, this reflects a hopeless attempt at making a spare living. Those who can afford to buy, already have these things. Although much of the country is monopolized by native land barons and foreign corporations - Gulf & Western being a major holder, and the government itself - the tropical climate and rich soil support a profusion of food-producing plants.

The grounds surrounding Lucy's house, in what she calls "my barrio", a residential section of this bustling city, are laden with fruit trees, sprouting bananas, breadfruits, oranges, mangoes, tangerines, grapefruits, herbs from which to make exotic teas, and other tropical fruit unfamiliar to North American palates. There should be enough to eat. The basics for survival may be literally at hand, but for many people, it is beyond their reach. The vast majority have almost nothing.

The shops and stores are another matter. The items are there - but prices are high. The country is in deep debt. But International Monetary Fund loans (continued on page seven)

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video is adaptable for that program. Mr. Iturbides has a cable TV channel, and the system with which to dub our video in Spanish. In addition, he will give Lucy a letter of authorization which she will use to encourage school administrators to use our materials.

Lunch with Pepe and Sasha Volman, a warm, friendly couple, was a pleasantly instructive midday interlude. They have been active in Dominican politics since the days of Raphael Trujillo's dictatorship, when they supported and advised exiles in New York. Lucy Silfa was prominent among the activists before and after her discovery of the Henry George School. When she was able to return home after Trujillo's death, Lucy did not forget Henry George, or the Volmans; she has maintained a lifelong friendship with Pepe and Sasha. Sasha Volman offered insights into Dominican politics and recommendations for effective promotion of Georgist ideas.

Sasha is a consultant and has been an advisor to heads of state in the US and elsewhere. He has worked in that capacity for many Dominican leaders, including John Bosch. Es-pousing land reform, Bosch was elected president in 1963 and held the office for seven months before being ousted by a military coup. During his brief leadership, however, he was able to do little more than exhort landowners to give up some of their land. He made weekly public announcements of how much land which company, or which individual, had surrendered for distribution.

Over the years Bosch has been friendly to Lucy and her Georgist ideas. There was a tentative appointment for us to meet, but Bosch, in his 80s an very much in demand as the leader of the most popular political party, was unable to work our rushed timetable into his busy schedule.

A reporter for *Listin Diario*, the largest-circulation daily newspaper, was to meet us at Lucy's house at 4 PM; at 4:20 the reporter was still waiting for transportation. Marcello Puello, Lucy's right-hand man, (and the chief economist for the Chamber of Commerce) suggested we go to the paper. We arrived there to find that the reporter, and everyone else, had been summoned to a meeting. After another seemingly endless wait, the Director, Don Rafael Herrera, extended a most cordial welcome to us.

José Diego Baez, the reporter assigned, conducted an extensive interview, which appeared with my photograph in the

Sunday, September 28th edition under the heading "**Director Escuelas Desplaza Predicando Justicia Social**".

Back in Don Rafael's office after the interview, there was pleasant conversation and picture-taking. I asked Señor Herrero for his prognosis of the Dominican economy. Quite amazingly, he said that with Dominicans in the US sending money home, tourists spending money in the country, and three or four well-established free trade zones, he saw big improvements ahead. It was hard to understand how someone who must certainly have his finger on the pulse of his ailing economy could find encouragement in these few positive facts.

Juan Bolivar Diaz and Pedro Caba conduct one of the most popular morning TV news magazines from six to nine AM. I



At the City Hall in Santo Domingo: José Alfredo Guerrero, Lucy Silfa, George Collins, Marcello Puello, Mario Méndez

was on with them from 8:30 to 9:00. Lucy served as the interpreter. In a genial manner, Juan asked me sharply incisive questions, while Pedro threw softballs. While my lack of Spanish made it difficult to fully appreciate the flavor of the show, the general impression it gave was of a serious interview in a relaxed, upbeat atmosphere. Engineer Pedro Breton, Administrator of Banco Agrícola, stated his strong agreement with the land tax reform during a very friendly meeting in his office. Two days later, *Listin Diario* ran an article entitled "*Afirma Reforma Tributaria Podría Afectar Producción*." The meeting and prior acquaintance with Georgist land reform within the bank was the work of its Assessor General, Dr. Dario Bencosme, who was a student of Lucy Silfa's. Since that meeting, an HGS class has been arranged within the bank.

Although Osvaldo Leger, the president of the Dominican Senate, had to miss an arranged meeting with me because of the press of business, I did see his assistant, Fernando Aquino, who has knowledge of the land tax ideas. Just upstairs, Eddie Pereira, Director of the Library of Con-

gress, and his assistant, Elena Hernandez, both graduates of the Henry George School, bade me welcome.

At the *Ayuntamiento* (City Hall), the leaders of four political parties represented on City Council and the President of the Council, Nelson Frias, engaged me in lengthy questioning about the potential of a land value tax for the city of Santo Domingo. At the present time the City Council raises no revenue of its own. The idea that the value of land in this populous city could provide a revenue sufficient to meet its many burning needs was met with undisguised fascination. The President extended an open invitation to return, indicating that he intended to make it specific at a later date.

José Alfredo Guerrero is a US-trained economist for the Foundation for Economy and Development, a business organization that has mounted a determined opposition to the country's high tariff. Through his auspices, an extensive article accompanied by a color portrait of Henry George appeared in the daily newspaper *El Siglo* on September 24th. Guerrero additionally organized a combined meeting with a number of members and an interview with Mario Méndez, economic editor of the newspaper *Hoy*. The three-hour interview produced a detailed story covering the major issues of the Dominican economic problem and the Georgist perspectives on their solution.

Protestant religious groups have grown considerably in the Dominican Republic as well as in Latin America in general. Alberto Martinez, a university professor of political science and philosophy, heads a country-wide Methodist group active in social change issues. Having explored European and North American religious activism for an economic philosophy, and found them lacking any, he outlined to be his aim to make Georgism the guiding principle of their economic liberation efforts throughout Latin America.

So many dedicated Georgists worked and contributed in so many ways to crowd that week of celebration with events to inform me and to prepare their country for a new phase of Georgist advance. There now exists an expectation that is energizing. When the North American Georgists gather there next June 17th to 22nd for the annual conference of the Council of Georgist Organizations, they will find a place well-prepared for Georgist reform and people working to bring it about. 