

Talking It Over

By J. W. GRAHAM PEACE

A LARGE and interested open-air meeting in the market square of an English Midland town was drawing to a close. For over an hour following his address, the speaker had been busy answering the questions from his hearers—coal miners homeward bound, their grimy faces betraying their calling, iron workers from the foundries, and clay workers from the “pot-banks” on which they fashion the crockery-ware for which that district is famed: all keenly interested and seeking for light upon the problems confronting them in daily life. Out of their eager questioning, the following illuminating dialogue developed.

Interrupter: “It’s all very well to free the land, but that does not go far enough!”

Speaker: “How much farther would you wish to go?”

Interrupter: “Well, there’s the ‘capitalist’; are you going to let him off?”

Speaker: “You are a miner?”

Interrupter: “Yes!”

Speaker: “Do you like going down the pit?”

Interrupter: “Oh no! None of us does.”

Speaker: “Then why go down?”

Interrupter: “Compulsion!”

Speaker: “‘Compulsion’ in a free country! Who compels you to go down against your will?”

Interrupter: “The capitalist!”

Speaker: “I see! Which one?”

Interrupter: “Oh, I don’t know which one!”

Speaker: “That’s a pity! I had hoped to get after him with you! But since you do not know which one forces you down the pit, are you so sure it *is* the ‘capitalist’?”

Interrupter: “I mean the capitalist system!”

Speaker: “Oh, you think there is some ‘system’ which compels you to undertake dangerous and unpleasant work quite against your will. Is that it?”

Interrupter: “Yes!”

Speaker: “Would you go down the pit if you could get other work on the surface?”

Interrupter: “No, I would not!”

Speaker: “Could you work at anything else?”

Interrupter: “Oh, yes! I could work on the land!”

Speaker: “You could work on the land, could you?”

Interrupter: “Yes. I have done so!”

Speaker: “Who keeps you off the land now, ‘the capitalist’?”

Interrupter: “No, the Landlord!”

Speaker: “If the land were free, would you be able to go on to it to work for yourself, in spite of ‘the capitalist’?”

Interrupter: “Oh, yes!”

Speaker: “But what about that ‘capitalist system,’ would not that still force you down the pit?”

Interrupter: “No, I could please myself!”

Speaker: “And you think the power of the capitalist would be broken were you able to choose your job?”

Interrupter: “Of course!”

Speaker: “You understand the Commonwealth Land Party seeks to break the monopoly of the Landlords, and so free the land to the service of all who wish to use it?”

Interrupter: “Yes!”

Speaker: “Do you still say that the proposal does not go far enough?”

Interrupter: “Oh, no; I didn’t see it before!”

At this point a well-known local Communist, whom we will call “C,” took a hand.

C: “But what’s the good of land without capital?”

Speaker: “What do you mean by ‘capital’—tools, machinery, factories and instruments of production?”

C: “Yes!”

Speaker: “Where do these come from?”

C: “From the land, of course, by labor!”

Speaker: “Can labor produce ‘capital’ whenever it gets at land?”

C: “Yes!”

Speaker: “Are you sure?”

C: “Of course I am!”

Speaker: “Then all that labor needs is freedom to produce: is that so?”

C: “Y-e-s.”

Speaker: “Then you agree, do you, that it is the Landlord who denies labor that freedom?”

C: “Oh, but you have got to deal with the owners of the capital!”

Speaker: “We will! We’ll just leave them alone with their capital, and go to work to make our own, and, as the land, the only source of any capital, will be open to us, we shall be able to keep for ourselves all we produce after payment of the economic rent of the bare land. That part of our product which we

shall pay away in rent will not be lost, for it will return to us in public services, for which no taxes will have to be paid!"

"C" lapsed into silence as the running was taken up by another local speaker, who said: "As a socialist, I object to paying rent for land."

Speaker: "Don't approach this question 'as a socialist.' To do so is to limit the range of your mental processes and to clap blinkers before your eyes. In the matter of your relation to land, you are neither Liberal, Labor, Socialist nor Tory; you are a land animal, like all the rest of us, affected in just the same manner, for it is a matter of life or death, and not of party-politics, prejudices or preferences!"

Socialist: "But if land belongs to us, why should we pay rent for it?"

Speaker: "Do you agree that the land belongs to all of us for use?"

S: "Yes, of course I do!"

Speaker: "Equally?"

S: "Yes!"

Speaker: "Land, you will admit, is not all of equal fertility or desirability; some, by reason of special natural advantages of soil, situation, rainfall and sunshine, yielding a greater return to a given amount of labor than other less favorably situated areas. In the case of town lots this same difference exists: a site on Oxford Street, London, presenting greater opportunities to the trader than a similar area in some back lane would do?"

S: "Oh, yes. That is so!"

Speaker: "Our rights to use of land being equal, it follows, does it not, that we both are entitled to the most fertile (or desirable) lots; otherwise one of us is going to be in a position of disadvantage compared with the other?"

S: "Yes, I see that!"

Speaker: "The question then is: How may we ensure in practice that equal opportunity which we are agreed is the natural right of each?"

S: "That's it! The theory is good, but what about the practice?"

Speaker: "Obviously, we cannot both be upon the same plot together!"

S: "No. I don't see how that would work!"

Speaker: "Well, it is just here that rent comes in to equalize the position between us. If you were allowed to hold land free of rent, you would be in a similar position to the Landlords of today, which would be unfair!"

S: "Yes, I see that, and wish to take away the land from them!"

Speaker: "Where would you put it if you did take it away?"

S: "Well, you know what I mean!"

Speaker: "Taking it away from present holders to pass it to

other holders would not be any solution of the inequalities we both seek to rectify!"

S: "You would let them hold it?"

Speaker: "Certainly; but subject to their paying us full yearly rent for holding. You understand they do not own the land?"

S: "Yes, I understand that; but I still do not see why I should have to pay rent for what belongs to us!"

Speaker: "Consider what happens now. The Landlords collect the rent for themselves. They take from the occupier of the least fertile land a low rent; from the occupier of that of better fertility they take a higher rent; and the rent they take increases with the increase in fertility or desirability until they get the highest rent for the very best land in use. In this way the Landlords equalize the return to labor, taking off to themselves all the value of land above that of the least fertile."

S: "You want us to go on paying in this way, but to the State instead of to private Landlords?"

Speaker: "To the community—that is, to all of us!"

S: "But what about the control of the land?"

Speaker: "Who control now?"

S: "The Landlords, of course!"

Speaker: "Well, who will control when the community is in possession of the rent?"

S: "I see. The community would, of course! But I would abolish rent!"

Speaker: "Rent—that is, economic rent paid for use of land—must not be confused with the so-called rent paid for house accommodation: this is *hire*, as one hires a taxi. Economic rent is the measure of the differences in fertility or desirability between the various plots of land. Those differences will remain under any form of government, and before you could abolish rent it would be necessary for you to make all land of equal desirability. That is an impossibility: you can no more abolish rent than you can abolish the law of gravity. What we can do is to collect all land rent into a common fund, and share it out to the community in public services to be enjoyed by all, and free labor from taxes. In this way rent will function as the natural equalizer; you on better land paying the higher rent, myself on inferior land paying a lower rent."

S: "But what about houses, factories and so forth?"

Speaker: "Do you agree that the laborer is entitled to the full product of his toil?"

S: "Certainly, I do!"

Speaker: "So do I; and that is why I am not concerned with anything other than the land. Those houses, etc., are the product of someone's labor; the land is not, and so does not belong to a producer but is there for all mankind to use upon equal terms."

S: "But these are socially produced!"

Speaker: "On the contrary, they are produced by individual effort, acting, sometimes, in cooperation, but more often quite unconsciously. There is but one 'social product'—economic rent. This arises in every community, grows with its growth, and is maintained by the presence, needs and activities of the community. Because of this I claim every penny of economic rent for the community!"

S: "Well, this is a new angle to me; I will study it!"

Speaker: "Do. It will well repay you!"

"And so to bed," as Pepys might have said had he been present.
