

Land and Freedom

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Comment and Reflection

I HAVE never claimed to be a special friend of labor . . . What I stand for is equal rights for all men." These memorable words were pronounced by Henry George before an audience of workingmen, and were in reply to an intimation by the preceding speaker that George was a patron of labor. The author of "Progress and Poverty" refused to conceive of laborers as wards who needed guardians, and disowned any idea of friendship which included special rights or privileges for particular groups. Aware of the evils associated with privilege, Henry George constantly sought to instill in labor an appreciation of its inherent dignity. He did his best to discourage the paternalistic order which labor was helping to bring about in government, and which today has grown to Frankenstein proportions.

BY a seemingly curious development, the servility which seeks special favor ultimately takes on the cloak of tyranny as its objects are attained. It is the old story of the swing of the pendulum. The development of picketing illustrates this point. It began apparently as a defensive measure; it was a device for apprising the public of the "unfairness" of a particular employer in his relations with his employees. Today, aided and abetted by preferential legislation and judicial acquiescence, it has become an instrument of intimidation to coerce not only an immediate employer, but those in business far removed, and the public itself.

PICKETING is said to be justified as an expression of the freedom of speech and assembly—but this sort of unchecked "freedom" usually leads to "Stand and deliver!" The truth is, that strikes and picketing and the other devices of organized labor, are part of the distortions caused by our unsound economic system. The basis of it is indeed a "lock-out"—but not of the capitalistic variety assumed by workingmen. Denied free access to the resources of the earth, workingmen, sensing that they have some rights, resort to picketing to *force* others to employ them. The "freedom" to engage in this type of activity would automatically be inoperative in a true economy of freedom. This is what Henry George had in mind when he sought to champion the dignity of labor rather than curry a debasing friendship. Certainly he would condemn all legislation sought by trades unions aiming at monopoly. He would oppose, as being contrary to the spirit of freedom, those ordinances and regulations which forbid any but union members to be employed, not only in skilled professions but in the most trivial occupations.

ANOTHER of the growing pains of a patronized labor is the so-called jurisdictional fight between the different unions. This farcical performance compels the employer, once the only conceivable "foe" of labor, to witness the internal disputes of his employees while the plant lies idle. When not brick-battling each other, the rival camps engage in petitioning the government to certify this and that in their respective favors. Here is a chance for labor to learn the lesson that paternalism is fickle, and that to depend on it is to put one's faith in princes. Perhaps there was something more than mere irritation in President Roosevelt's "A plague on both your houses" to the C.I.O. and the A.F.L. It may be that in that utterance the workingman may find a clue to the distinction between the special friend of labor and the deeper friendship of Henry George.

DESPITE the errors of its ways, we cannot bring ourselves to falling out with trades-unionism. Some one has said that you cannot indict a nation; we will concede as much to the workers. Even in the matter of sit-down strikes there is reason to believe the men have not been behaving as badly as has appeared. To be sure, law-abiding citizens revolt at the spectacle of employees seizing the property of their employers. On the other hand, the men reason that sitting down on "capital" is necessary to safeguard their livelihood. Certainly the "capitalists" have done very little in educating labor to the realization that capital and labor are not antagonistic in the politico-economic sense. "Capital" signifies to labor only a conglomerous mixture of land, resources, wealth, etc. It is therefore a fact that in sit-down strikes, especially in the case of the larger industries, whose owners are not only capitalists, but landlords and monopolists withal, the workers are to a great extent ousting their employers from the possession of unearned wealth and natural resources.

NEEDLESS to say, however, the strikers are only blundering into the real cause, and while they may incidentally be challenging their employer's right to monopolize natural resources, the great truth remains obscured. The mass of workingmen do not yet realize that the primary workshop of labor is not the factory but the land. They are not aware that a much more grievous "sit-down" is being perpetrated by the owners of the earth and its resources. What a great force for progress would be released if mankind's heritage were truly understood and the idea of sitting down on "capital" were translated into more intelligent action!