

The Single Tax, July, 1896

The A B C of the Land Question.

THE REPORT OF AN ADDRESS DELIVERED BEFORE THE BRADFORD LABOUR CHURCH ON 21ST JUNE, 1896, BY L. H. BERENS.

The primary object of this institution is, I am given to understand, to spread amongst the people a right understanding of the Social Question—that is, not only an increased appreciation of the wrongs and injustices from which they suffer, but also the knowledge of how these can most speedily, most simply, and most effectively be remedied. At all events to assist in such work is the object of my Address this afternoon. And as in my opinion an understanding of the Land Question is the necessary precursor of a right understanding of the Social Problem, my remarks will deal almost exclusively with that great root question.

Now, to obtain some insight into it, one must first clearly appreciate three points: (a) What is Man? (b) What is Land? and (c) What are Land Values? The first two points can very briefly be disposed of; for whatever else man may be considered to be, economically speaking, he is a land animal. It should not be necessary to emphasise the fact that man cannot create anything, all he can do is to produce—that is, to draw forth—from the natural sources all those things necessary to his existence and comfort. And it is just these natural sources that in economics are included under the term "land." For land is the element, the control of which gives control of all other natural elements and forces; and hence the possession and monopoly of land is equivalent to the possession and monopoly of nature.

True it is that the air, the rain, and the sunshine are nominally free to all; but how can the individual enjoy them, or avail himself of them, without using land? To grow food, to build houses, to mine, to manufacture, to trade, in short to live requires the use of land; and hence if we have equal rights to life—a proposition which I think none would care publicly to deny—we must all have equal rights to the use of the land. To secure this right to some only is to infringe on the equal rights of the rest of the community. And unless the equal rights of all to life be made the foundation and touchstone of all our social laws and institutions, then we have no other criterion of social right and wrong save might: a position which it would be most unwise, not to say dangerous, for the privileged classes of to-day to take up. And those who do not accept this most immoral doctrine, and who

desire the well-being of the Nation and the progress of the race, should not cease their efforts until they have secured the abolition of every law and institution that is a direct infringement of the equal right of all to life.

But the private ownership of land is not only a direct infringement of this fundamental law of equal freedom, but is a direct infringement of the only principle of which the institution of private property itself can be defended. For the institution of property has for its object to secure to each individual what is due to his own industry and abstinence. But extending this institution to land—to nature—secures to some what is due to the labours of others.

Before an intelligent audience it should be unnecessary to dwell on the essential difference between property in commodities, in things produced by human labour, and property in land, in the natural sources whence all commodities can alone be drawn forth. A man may claim as his own everything due to his own activities; but on what—save on might can he base any claim to the monopoly of nature; in other words, on what can he base any claims of pre-eminence over his fellow citizens in respect to the bounties of nature? It may be well to point out here that while Land Reformers claim for all equal rights to the sources of wealth, they do not claim for all equal rights to wealth already produced.

This may or may not be in possession of those who are morally and rightfully, as well as legally, entitled to it. But with this we have nothing to do. We cannot undo the wrongs of the past. What we can do, and should do, is to prevent once and for all similar wrongs in the future. We know that the power of the spoilers, of the misnamed "capitalist" classes, does not depend on the possession of commodities already called into existence, nor on possession of the stores of food, clothing machinery already produced, but on the power they are now secured to control the natural sources whence alone further production is possible.

The power of the masters during the recent great coal strike did not depend on the possession of the comparatively few tons of coal already drawn forth from the bowels of the earth, nor on the possession of the spades, shovels, trucks, and other machinery, by means of which production is assisted. What it did depend on was the power to hinder the miners—their hands—from access to the great natural storehouse, whence alone coal, as all other commodities, is derived. Break up this power, and, as they well know, the power of the so called "capitalist"

classes will be abolished, and the masses will be free, not in name only as at present, but in reality and for ever. But how is this to be accomplished? you may well ask. Are we to divide the land between all the members of the community, and have periodical redivisions as occasion may arise? This would be a very crude and unsatisfactory way of solving the problem. The true remedy is, not to divide the land, but the value of the land. But to enable at least some of you to understand the justice and effectiveness of this simple remedy, a few words are necessary on the third and last point raised at the commencement of the address, viz.:—What are Land Values? By Land Values are meant, not the selling, but the annual rental value of land irrespective of any improvements in or on it. Land Values are natural and inevitable ; they must spring into existence wherever a community of men settle clown; that is, of course, in such places where the natural advantages are such that men can maintain existence by utilising them. In all such places some portions of the land will be either more fertile or more advantageously situated than the rest. It is to these two advantages of fertility or situation that the existence of Land Values is primarily due; while all public and private action that tends to add to the prosperity or increase the productive powers of the community, tends to increase these values, and the question we would urge on every community to consider is as to whether these values shall in future, as in the past, be allowed to enrich a few only, or whether they shall be appropriated for the equal benefit of all.

Now if every member of the community has equal rights to nature, they must all have equal rights to these natural advantages, or to their value. And if each member of the community has a right to claim as his individual property all what is due to his own activities, then the community as a whole has a right to the possession of what is due to its activities, viz.:—The increased value accruing to land owing to their presence and united exertions. And it is just these Land Values that land reformers claim as the proper and natural fund to supply the common revenue required by the community, Moreover, they contend that by appropriating these values for common purposes, every member of the community could be secured equal rights to labour, the full possession of the results of his own toil, and his equal share in the bounties of nature. More than this no honest man can claim or desire; with less than this no free man should rest content.

In another address to be given this evening, on "How to raise wages," I shall deal almost exclusively with the effects of such a system of taxation. Here I would only point out that over financial questions, over the Budget, the House of Lords has practically no control; and hence the power to take the steps necessary to the realisation of this root reform rests entirely with the House of Commons. And if we had, as we can have when the mass of the workers once desire it, a political party Liberal in spirit as well as in name, then the next Liberal Budget, instead of taxing the necessities and earnings of the masses, would impose a tax on Ground Rents, on the unimproved value of land irrespective of what is being done with it or of the improvements in or on it. In conclusion the lecturer urged on his audience not to be misled by any side issues, but to study the root question, in which alone the key to the social problem was to be found.