

By BASIL BUTTERWORTH (Hampshire, England)

(The author recently made contact with some members of the Georgist movement in the Netherlands and when they learnt that he could read Dutch, they sent copies of their journals and expressed the hope that he would bring some of the contents to the notice of English-speaking colleagues. This article is a report on the subject.)

All shades of opinion within the Georgist movement are represented in the Netherlands, from the radical wing which drew its inspiration from the Commonwealth Land Party before the last war, to individuals who tend to favour land nationalization, or rather municipalization. There has been a tradition of municipal ownership and leasing of land in the Netherlands, and some of our Dutch friends seem to regard it as politically expedient to become involved in this question, pressing the point that any municipal leases should provide for adjustment of the canon (or rent) so that the holder of a long lease is not allowed to keep the community's land for a rent which, through rising land values and depreciating currency, comes to be far below the true value. This, they say, would stop the evil for the future, even though the municipality buys the land at its present value.

There are two Dutch journals dealing with the land question: Ons Erfdeel and Grondvest. Ons Erfdeel (Our Heritage) was founded in the 1930's by Jan Willems who was introduced to George's ideas by Graham Peace. Peace saw the big Dutchman listening intently at the back of the crowd at one of his open-air meetings in London and Willems later went to see him for a fuller discussion. Willems went home and started his own movement, modelling Ons Erfdeel on Peace's Commonweal.

During the war, Willems was captured by the Germans and tortured to death for his part in the resistance movement. My informant says he died heroically without giving away any information about his comrades. None of his associates was in a position to edit a journal in the difficult conditions after the war, and the title Ons Erfdeel was taken over by the journal of the Dutch Georgist movement which, before the war, had been called Recht en Vrijheid (Justice and Freedom).

Grondvest is a much more recent publication, its first number having appeared in 1973. It is not easy to provide a translation of "grondvest" as this is a made-up word. As it was explained to me, it was formed by analogy with "handvest" which means "charter." The sense of "grondvest" is therefore "the charter of the land," or to give a freer translation, "the Land Chartist." The organization which publishes the paper, the "Stichting Grondvest," could then be called "the Land Chartist Foundation."

The first issue of Grondvest carried the banner headlines, "All Taxes Can Be Abolished - the Authorities Can Get Their Money From Our Land." The first paragraph under this heading will show that Grondvest is passing on the original Georgist message much as George himself would have proclaimed it:

"All men have to live and work on land, and to live from it. Not farmers only, town dwellers too! All members of the human community have an equal right to their share of the earth. Is this right recognized? Is it applied? No. The best and richest portions of the earth have long been declared to be private property and laws have been made to protect this property. The laws are unjust since they are in conflict with the rights and interests of the human community in that they undeservedly favour a small number of people but seriously disadvantage the majority. Pure gifts of nature - light, air, water and land - are in principle at the free disposal of the community."

The following statement also appears in the first issue of Grondvest:
"Grondvest turns against the existing economic system, not against people. When we speak critically of private property in land, our criticism applies exclusively to the system that this form of property makes possible and maintains. Indeed the great majority of individual landowners derive small advantages and great disadvantages from the existing system. In fact, they too are victims of private property in land."

With the Dutch Georgists displaying this attitude, it seems unfortunate that they should also circulate a leaflet put out by the "Movement of Working Youth" which has adopted the Grondvest platform, but which includes a crudely drawn set of cartoons which caricature land owners and clearly aim to incite class hatred. This kind of thing is far removed from the spirit of the Georgist movement.

I conclude with a translation of a short article from Ons Erfdeel (July-Aug. 1974) by the editor, Siebe Sevenster, to give an impression of its style:

"Agreements and Differences: Trades-unionism and Georgism:

1. Both movements stand for more justice.
2. In the opinion of both, income differences are greater than is good.
3. Both feel that there are powers and forces in society that stand in the way of justice.
4. For trades-unionism and for the Georgists the social involvement of each member of society is central.

Now, in the same order, the differences:

1. Trades-unionism strives by propaganda to improve the working and living conditions of its members. Georgists want to make these conditions just by changing the distribution of the social income from the ground up, to a just basis. This will give the workers their natural place as members of society having equal rights.
2. Trades-unionism wants to level incomes by detailed regulations; Georgists by the universal equal right of all to the rent of land.
3. Trades-unionism finds the power of the firm to be primary; Georgists that of the proprietors of land.
4. Trades-unionism sees social involvement for the community differently, as their propaganda also involves the pursuit of power. Georgists try to put social involvement at the service of society as a whole.
5. Trades-unionism values general universal suffrage within parliamentary democracy. Georgists find that universal suffrage is violated by individual appropriation of the rent of land."

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FROM STICHTING GRONDVEST we have received a two-part report, Van Erfpacht tot Grondrechten (From Long Lease to Land Dues), addressed to the city fathers of The Hague who have been considering revision of the rules for long lease. Part 1 urges annual revaluation of rent and the creation of land value maps. Included are examples of maps for Port Credit, Whitstable and Copenhagen. Part 2 discusses objections to the proposals, statements of principle and calculations of the effects of the proposals. It was urged to make land-value maps before any decision is made. On December 2 the city fathers decided never to sell community-owned land but to lease it on a continual basis. The lease will be calculated from the market value of land with periodic revaluations every 10 years as opposed to the previous period of 78 years!). Within six months the program will be reconsidered, giving Stichting Grondvest a further opportunity to advance its proposals.