

## Mike Curtis: "A Great Place to Teach"

*Georgist education in prisons has been identified for many years with Mike Curtis of Arden, Delaware. He has been Director of the Henry George School in Philadelphia since 1989, and has been teaching Georgist economics to anyone who would listen since 1970. From 1980 to 1995 he regularly taught classes in Delaware state prisons. He spoke with Lindy Davies in February.*

*GJ: How did you get started teaching in prisons?*

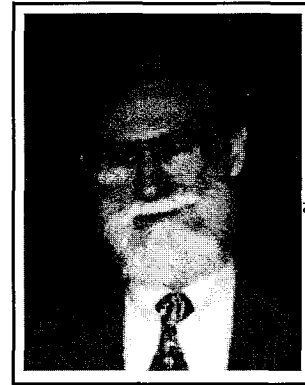
When I first went into prisons, I had been teaching Henry George for ten years or so, and I had spoken to a great many upwardly-mobile people who just weren't interested in the message, except maybe as investment advice. I thought prisoners would be a perfect audience because they had nothing to lose — no investment in believing the system was right and just. They felt that it wasn't, and wanted to explore why.

*GJ: How do you respond to critics who say that we shouldn't devote so much effort to reaching people who have little potential to influence society?*

Well, I have often wondered what would have happened if Malcolm X and other influential reformers — for whom prison learning was a huge turning point — had discovered Henry George there instead of Marxism.

When we talk about influencing society, I think the real question isn't "Who do you talk to?" but "Who can you really get to listen?" Many of our better-educated or middle-class students hear us, say it's interesting, and go invest in real estate. In a depressed inner city, a land value tax is immediately discredited by the powers that be. But here is a constituency that has heard of it, understands it — and has credibility in the community where the effects of land speculation are the worst. When LVT is offered as a solution to urban blight, here is a group that will be in favor of it.

I've also found that the benefits of teaching Henry George go beyond spreading the ideology. It makes a difference to them as individuals too. It allows them to resolve what I call the community/individual dichotomy: "who is to blame for my being here? Myself? That's what society says, and maybe they're right." But when they learn the root cause of poverty, they learn why opportu-



nities are scarce, and see that they have to try hard to succeed.

*GJ: You have said that most of what you've learned about teaching, you've learned from teaching prisoners. Tell us more about that.*

We tend to think of prisoners as arrogant, contemptuous of laws and rules. But most of them have an incredibly low self-esteem. Being able to tackle George's books, and these courses, can be very important for them in that sense. That is where I learned my first rule of teaching: never make a person **wrong**. Tell them they are "wrong", and you lose them. You have to build on whatever is positive, and show how the wrong answer is always the foundation of the right answer. And it feels good to impart this way of teaching to inmate instructors, too.

Of course I learned more basic techniques of improvising with whatever props and materials were available, and devising ways to teach the concepts to students who hadn't read the book. Over the years, I'd say about a third of my prison students have read the entire book. But as I got more effective at reaching those who didn't read — and this has been true in my other classes too — I have given them less of an incentive to read it. I don't know what to do about that paradox — novice instructors who must stick

close to the text always have an easier time getting students to read it.

But, of course, we have to reach those who don't read it, for whatever reason. Instead of calling students failures, I think it's a teacher's responsibility to build on students' successes, no matter how small.

*GJ: How has prison teaching changed over the years?*

Well, it got harder and harder to deal with the prison administration. The reason it went on as long as it did was that I was stubbornly determined to jump over every hurdle they threw in front of me — but

**N**ot every student that Mike has taught over the years has been unknown, or uninfluential. "I had a former state legislator who laundered some campaign money, and the son of the billionaire W.L. Grace," he reports, "but the most exciting was the Highway Commissioner who took a bribe to approve a zoning change. He was plotting to get control of the exact same land that I was using as an example of the effects of speculation!

"I also got a chance to teach, in my 'captive audience', Wilmington's most notorious Slum Lord and speculator. After hundreds of housing violations and contempt-of-court citations, the judge put him in jail for six months. When I saw him in the seminar, I thought, 'this is going to be great'. I was particularly thorough at showing how land speculation is profitable, and how it causes unemployment and homelessness." Throughout the seminar he listened impassively, and afterward he commented, "This sounds like Henry George." He knew "all about Henry George," it turned out, from when he used to own a place in Arden.

there were many. Classes would be cancelled without warning after I'd driven 50 miles, because of "fog" or a "leaky roof", or one thing after another. It was too much trouble for the prison administrators — there was nothing in it for them. So I just had to keep pushing.

The only change I've seen is just more and more bureaucracy, more and more rules. Less local control of policy, just because of the huge growth in size. Now, recently, we're seeing this move toward privatization of prisons, which to me is a disaster. So far, they're only managing to lower the taxpayer cost somewhat. If prisons actually start to make a profit — watch out. There will be an irresistible incentive to put more and more people in.

But all in all, there have been fewer changes than you might think. I think drugs — either addiction to them or association with them — have always been the biggest source. I knew some who were there for murder, and they had perhaps less self-restraint, but were often the most interesting or intelligent. I wonder whether others share that observation — I do know that of all classes of prisoners, murderers are the least likely to return.

But — it is a kind of ground rule that you don't ask what they're in for. Of course I'm curious, but I don't ask. There are plenty of other things to talk about.

*GJ: So how did your program finally get discontinued?*

It didn't officially get discontinued. I just didn't have the energy to fight the battle all over again. In the 90s I got involved with what the Department of Corrections called their "Key" program, a series of encounter groups and motivation sessions which inmates could sign up for to get "good time" consideration. It meant I would have classes of as many as 70 people, who were on their best behavior — an ideal situation. But — I got a call from the Assistant Warden saying that he had a brother-in-law or something who taught economics, who told him Henry George wasn't very relevant today, and so he was cancelling the program — and that was it. I wrote him a long, careful letter — but of course he had no incentive to listen to me. I could go back in now and start from scratch — but frankly, the uphill battle right now is just too steep. And I'm glad that the Institute makes correspondence courses available, which is probably the best way to do it anyway.

There were many weeks when I would drag myself back to teach one more class — only to leave invigorated by students who would come up to me afterward with gratitude — and really thoughtful questions. I can't tell you how many times that happened to me. It's not easy — but it is a great place for a teacher to teach. GJ