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AMERICAN SOCIALISTS AND THE LAND QUESTION

The present platform of the American Socialist Party, as well as the resolution on the land question passed by the Convention of 1912, has been widely criticised on the ground of ambiguity. It was held that the demand that the land be held only by actual users and without exploitation meant one thing to Party members and another thing to many dissatisfied small farmers, whose votes were sought by some Party leaders. Fanatical believers in private property, such farmers might suppose that this language was directed merely against large landholders and landlords and not against all farmer employers.

The new state platform now being voted upon by the Socialist Party of Texas corrects this ambiguity by employing the expression italicized in the following paragraph—a phrase which, it would seem, might easily have been used also by the National Party Convention of 1912:

To tax all land in excess of that required for personal or individual use without the exploitation of the labor of other persons, in an amount equal to its rentals, exempting entirely from taxation all homesteads actually occupied and used *without exploitation of the labor of others*, thus compelling the owners of unused land to throw such land on the market at its real value.

This represents progress. But the proposed Texas platform proceeds to repeat its old demand for private ownership, and actually reinforces it by demanding *the prohibition of all collective ownership*, to say nothing of collective operation :

It is a principle of Socialism that "all property privately used should be privately owned." In accord with this principle we pledge that the land publicly owned or acquired by the state shall be sold without profit or rented in parcels not larger than may be used without exploitation of the labor of others, to persons seeking homes, *and when the rent shall equal the cost of acquirements, rents shall cease and title be vested in the renter, making occupancy and use the sole title: no land to be otherwise disposed of if needed to supply such applicants.*

Fortunately, however, the current issue of the *National Bulletin* of the Socialist Party prints with approval (in its Information Department) a document which demands national ownership and states the real grounds therefor. It is entirely non-Socialist, being taken from the memorandum of Baron De Forest, M. P., embodied in the report of a Parliamentary Committee. It places chief weight upon the need to reduce the cost of living, and as the same arguments could be used for collective *operation* it is also sound from a Socialist standpoint. Its chief points, which compose an excellent and brief statement of the whole question, are as follows :

Agriculture is stagnant to-day because of the want of capital, because of the want of wise control and of proper exploitation in the common interest.

The whole population has a deep concern in the abundance and the quality of the products of the soil. Surely then it is the duty of the state to protect the needs of the vast industrial population, and to control and direct the exploitation of this essential service.

A national administration, working not on the traditional lines of private landlordism, but with a single eye to "developing, both in amount, in quality and in kind, the whole total of our agricultural production," would insist on good husbandry, on the use of the best improvements and methods of modern science. It would supply to its tenants on reasonable, but businesslike terms, a sufficiency of capital. It would organize co-operation. It would utilize land now unused because of the improvidence or the impecuniosity, the incompetence or the caprice, of a private owner.

Satisfactory conditions of life and labor would be provided for the workers on the land. The rural housing problem would be solved by the state's carrying out on ordinary business lines its duties as owner of the land.

Above all, it would be possible to secure for the first time the full exploitation of the agricultural resources of the country, and so to secure the enormous increase in production necessary to meet the needs of the people generally. It is most of all in the interests of the whole body of consumers that the change to state control is necessary.

As in the country, so in the towns. The undevelopment and underdevelopment of land can be stopped at once. All existing areas of undeveloped or underdeveloped land can be made immediately available for development. The housing problem would be solved. For it would be possible to extend all the cities to any circumference, and to establish all those sanitary, pleasant and æsthetic conditions which are planned to-day, only for it to prove impossible to carry them into effect. The towns would spread on land belonging to the people; and instead of rising land values being a barrier to progress, the inhabitants would enjoy the increment created by their own genius, activities and resources.

For under a system of communal ownership the increased land values come automatically back into the common fund. All municipal and national improvements would thus pay for themselves, and would yield a surplus which would ultimately become available for further improvements. And a vast and continually increasing fund would be at the disposal of the state.

The fund thus available would ultimately suffice as well for all local as for all national purposes, a sufficient portion of its rent being returned to each locality for the use of its local services. The rating problem would thus have disappeared.

The American Party has been remiss in pushing this reform, more important perhaps than any other, and it is encouraging to see the *Party Bulletin* take it up. But it is now swinging rather too far in the Single-Tax direction. For besides the paragraphs above quoted, De Forest's memorandum advocates land reform as a panacea, as we can see from the following statements:

The transfer of the land to the state would thus provide the means, and, in fact, the only means, for the real solution of these various problems. And at the same time it would strike directly and effectively at the root of the evils discussed above. Under a system of national ownership the absorption of wealth by private individuals would cease at once. And all the future increased wealth, all the advantages of scientific improvements in methods of production and of transport, of developments in industrial organization, of all the great advances whose advent we can foresee so clearly, will be felt and enjoyed and possessed by the whole people.

Not only is land nationalization no panacea, but an employers' government would use it almost exclusively for employers' purposes. Only a labor government would expend the new governmental income communistically for the benefit of labor.

It is strange, indeed, that the *Bulletin* should give these latter statements to its readers without criticism or explanation and with apparent approval