

Henry George Newsletter



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NEW YORK SEMINAR TACKLES HOUSING ISSUES

The New York School's panel discussion on the tenth of March, *Housing and the Homeless*, presented its audience with two vital components of the debate on housing: the true severity of the situation, and the real potential for solutions that could eliminate the causes of the problem, not simply manage its effects. The three speakers were experienced in different phases of the housing crisis. Reverend George Kuhn, pastor of St Brigid's Church in Manhattan, became an activist because it was simply "unthinkable not to respond" to the situation outside his front door, namely the city's attempts to evict the homeless from a makeshift "tent city" in Tompkin's Square Park. Louis Atlas works for the beleaguered agency whose job is to serve the needs of New York's homeless population, the Bureau of Family Services. Walt Rybeck, President of the Center for Public Dialogue, has gone across the country promoting the kind of tax reform that would provide cities with both the incentives to build affordable housing, and the revenue to ensure a sufficient "safety net."

St. Brigid's Church faces Tompkins Square Park, and thus stands in a neighborhood in which contemporary urban problems are uniquely focused. Abandoned buildings are plentiful, and the depressed land values in the area provide opportunities both for gentrification and the establishment of land trusts and other creative housing ventures. In this chaotic environment, Father Kuhn has become a sort of unwilling celebrity; he was arrested for delivering food and drink to squatters whom the police were trying to evict. His presentation included a slide show of local posters and graffiti comparing police and the city policies to those of Naziism and Apartheid. Father Kuhn reported that many of the policemen who came three times to tear down the makeshift shelters in the park told him that they didn't like what they were doing, but "they were just following orders."

Father Kuhn cited the story of the Sunshine Community Center, where he was arrested, as a clear example of the absurdity of official responses to the housing crisis. An abandoned school building had been, for some years, a meeting place for prostitution and drug dealing. This was well-known in the community, and complaints were routinely made to the police, but the police made no headway. A small group of Tompkins Square tent-dwellers were not so powerless, however -- they went in and pushed the crack trade out, and began the huge task of cleaning the building and making it habitable. When that task was nearly completed, the police arrived to evict the squatters. The building remains unused.

Louis Atlas, who presented the seminar audience with an overview of services provided by the city to its poorest residents, said that he had been homeless himself for some two months, after a conversion forced him from his rental apartment. He said that the Bureau of Family Services is an umbrella organization under which many social services have been consolidated in recent years, in an effort to weed out redundant programs and use scarce funds efficiently. He listed an impressive array of services provided by the bureau, ranging from medical care, drug and employment counseling, to special holiday meals and festivities provided in shelters. He made it clear, however, that all of these programs are designed to provide services on a temporary basis. For example, city shelters are not supposed to allow people to stay for more than thirty days. To meet the needs of a seemingly permanent, and constantly growing, homeless class is well beyond the scope and the budget of the Bureau.



Reverend George Kuhn



Louis Atlas



Walt Rybeck

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POET-ACTIVIST CATHE SMELAND WANTS GEORGE IN MARKETPLACE

Cathe Smeland, an active San Francisco businesswoman, campaign director, sometime poet and peace worker has taken the reins as President of the Henry George School of Northern California. She has challenged her new Board "to be on the cutting edge of events." A supporter of the traditional educational programs of the School, Cathe is seeking ways to make us more credible in the community by participating with many other groups on "hot events." Under her aegis, the School is now a "host" of one of the major Earth Day activities.

The new Board President is a partner with her husband Jack Alter in a public relations firm called Alter Images. She has been an active Board member for a number of years, and a former Treasurer. An ardent spokeswoman for children, Cathe founded the National Children's Agenda in 1988. She was a founder of the Sacred Arts Community in 1986, and the World Peace Project in 1984. In 1987 she was a US peace delegate to the USSR, Poland and East Germany as part of a people-to-people peace work project. A candidate for public office herself in 1977, she has directed many campaigns including those of Congressman Panetta, Secretary of State March Fong and President Carter. Cathe is married and lives in San Francisco with her husband and their daughter Cendahl.

-- E. Robert Scrofani

POLLUTION SOLUTIONS -- IN L.A. OF ALL PLACES

"Final Friday" Dinner sponsored by The Alumni Group of the LA School was held on the third Friday in March -- but at the usual place, Michael's Restaurant in Hollywood. The house was packed, LA Director Harry Pollard told the Newsletter. Folks remained quite late, with the last ones trickling out at midnight.

This was the first in a series of dinners dealing with the theme of external pollution (the previous two dinners considered legal and illegal drugs -- internal pollution). Speakers on March 23rd were Gary Flo, Jeff Smith, Harry Pollard and Margil

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ILLINOIS GEORGIST RIDES AGAIN

Volume 3, Number 1 (Winter 1990) of *The Illinois Georgist* was published this March. Articles include a full-length interview with long-time Georgist Bob King conducted by Adam J. Monroe, Jr (grandson of the late John Lawrence Monroe).

According to King: "The battle over tax abatement for particular projects focuses public attention on the wrong issues. The important question is not whether a particular hotel, office building, or factory will benefit the community, but whether public squabbling (and whispered private deals) is really an efficient and fair way to promote development... Everyone wants abatements, but only the favored few get them. As more abatements are granted, those who do not obtain them may rightly feel that they will be left holding the bag... Moreover, it is likely that decisions to grant tax abatements will be influenced by politics... Better rules can be written. The defect in the present system is not tax abatements, but that they have to be granted as special favors."

Other articles in this issue include: *Reflections on Illinois Property Tax Statistics* by Bob Jene, *Cook County Assessor Demonstrates an Advantage of Site Value Taxation* by Chuck Metalitz, and *God Help the Poor -- God Help Us* by Sam Venturella. This last piece is a well-considered reply to one by David Frum in *The Wall Street Journal* (2/15/90) entitled: *Free to Beg, Free to Intimidate*. Mr. Frum had deplored a recent federal judge ruling which protects begging as "informative and persuasive speech." Mr. Venturella takes Mr. Frum to task for ignoring the problem that many who beg have been

denied access to opportunity due to our laws protecting land monopoly, citing homeless Mexican farmworkers who built shacks on vacant land which they did not own in San Diego, aided and abetted by local clergy and public officials. "Could it be," asks Sam in defense of the ruling, "that there are within our governments some humane persons who recognize that something is rotten in America?"

To obtain a copy of this very interesting issue of *The Illinois Georgist*, contact the Chicago Henry George School.

SACRAMENTO UPDATE

Bill Holden, author of *Sacramento: Excursions Into Its History and Natural World*, spoke about Sacramento's Two Sesquicentennials: 1989 and 1998 at a dinner sponsored by the Sacramento HGS extension on March 21st at the Old Spaghetti Factory in Sacramento. Extension Director Evelyn Friend also reports that a meeting with Common Ground was held with Bert Anderson speaking.

WHO ARE THE HOMELESS?

Recent studies by the National Coalition for the Homeless reveal the following rough portrait of the nation's homeless population, which is increasing at a rate of approximately 25% per year:

- About 40% are families with children
- About half are single men
- About 14% are single women
- About one quarter are employed
- About 30% are veterans

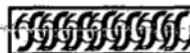
(from the Winter 1989 issue of *This Time*, published by Homeworkers Organized for More Employment, a land-trust group in Orland, Maine)

HOMELESSNESS

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Walt Rybeck's presentation offered a glimmer of hope. He focused on the Georgist reform that has the most immediate political viability: the two-rate, or graded property tax. Here is a way, he said, to meet three all-important challenges: to provide adequate revenue to meet the needs of the urban poor, and to provide incentives for the building of affordable housing, and to discourage land speculation. Mr. Rybeck pointed out the tremendous unused productive capacity of our cities. In the 106 largest cities in the United States, fully one-quarter of the land (excluding parks and publicly owned land) is currently idle. A tax on the value of that land would provide an incentive to put it to productive use. He cited studies on the effects of a proposed two-rate tax in Washington D.C., showing that under such a system, more than 80% of property owners would pay less tax than they do at present. Thus, Mr. Rybeck said, we have a reform that is not only effective, but one which can be sold.

It was generally agreed, however, that the problems of housing and homelessness go beyond technical fixes. "We are all squatters on the earth," Father Kuhn said, "And that is a fact that many people simply are not willing to face. This crisis is a symptom of a spiritual problem in our society." But Father Kuhn found encouragement in the fact that the movement for which Father Edward McGlynn risked his career in 1887 was still around, and addressing the same issues of social and economic justice.



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