

THE STRUGGLE AGAINST PRIVILEGE

By Tom L. Johnson

The greatest movement in the world to-day may be characterised as the struggle of the people against Privilege.

On the one side the People—slow to wake up, slow to recognise their own interests, slow to realise their power, slow to invoke it. On the other, Privilege—always awake and quick to act, owning many of the newspapers, controlling the election and appointment of judges, dictating to city councils, influencing legislatures and writing our national laws.

What is Privilege?

Privilege is the advantage conferred on one by law of denying the competition of others. It matters not whether the advantage be bestowed upon a single individual, upon a partnership, or upon an aggregation of partnerships, a trust—the essence of the evil is the same. And just to the extent that the law imposes restrictions upon some men and not on others, just to the extent that it grants special favours to some to the exclusion of others, do the people suffer from this evil.

These law-made restrictions and benefits are many, but substantially all may be grouped, in the order of their importance, in the following five classes: land monopolies, taxation monopolies, transportation monopolies, municipal monopolies and patent monopolies.

The greatest of all governmental favours or special privileges is land monopoly, made possible by the exemption from taxation of land values.

The special privileges growing out of conditions created by our local, State and national tax systems are so far-reaching and disastrous in their effects that one might devote a volume to the discussion of this division of Privilege, and then not begin to compass the question.

Under transportation monopolies come the governmental favours to railroads and to those enterprises dependent upon the railroads, such as special freight lines, sleeping-car companies, express and telegraph companies.

Municipal monopolies consist of rights and special privileges in the public streets and highways which in the nature of the case cannot be possessed by all the people and can be enjoyed only by a few. Under this head come the franchises which our cities grant to street railways, to water, gas, electric light and telephone companies, and in these lie the chief sources of corruption in municipal life.

Patent monopolies are the last distinct survival of a policy which once had a very much wider application and which in every other case has been abandoned because it was recognised to be unsound. At one time it was common enough to reward public service of almost any kind by the grant of a trade monopoly. Soldiers in war were tempted by the prospect of such a grant and often got it as the result of a victory. Statesmen were tempted and were often rewarded in the same way for services to the

State, or services to their party. Now this is universally recognised to be an error.

Patent monopolies cut off from us the opportunity to take immediate advantage of the world's inventions. They exert upon many men an influence as baneful as the most corrupt lottery by tempting them from regular work and useful occupations. They interfere with the natural development of invention.

Useful inventions come naturally and almost inevitably as the next necessary step in industrial evolution. Most of them are never patented. The patents that are granted interfere with this natural development. If inventors must be rewarded it would be better to pay them a bounty than to continue a system productive of so much evil.

And so by securing in different ways "special privileges to some" and denying "equal rights to all," our governments, local, State and national, have precipitated the struggle of the people against Privilege.

It matters not what the question—whether a water or gas franchise, a street railway monopoly, a coal combination, an ordinary railroad charter, or the grabbing of the public domain—the issue between them is always the same.

Owners and managers of public-service corporations may change; so may their methods. They may respect public opinion or scorn it; they may show great consideration for their employees or treat them as machines; their policies may be liberal or the reverse; they may strive for all the traffic will bear, looking to dividends only, or they may share their profits with the public.

What of it?

So, too, political parties may change.

And what of that?

A Republican boss or a Democratic boss is equally useful to Privilege. It may seek legislative power through dealing directly with corrupt bosses, or it may find the control of party machinery by means of liberal campaign contributions the more effective; again it may divert the attention of the people

from fundamental issues by getting them to squabbling over non-essentials.

This is often demonstrated when the contest is made to appear to be between two men, though in reality both are committed in advance to obey the wishes of Privilege. Superficial moral issues are especially serviceable in this particular line of attack.

But it is on the judiciary that Privilege exercises its most insidious and dangerous power. Lawyers whose employment has been entirely in its interests are selected for the bench. Their training, their environment, their self-interest, all combine to make them the most powerful allies of monopoly. Yet this may be, and often is, without any consciousness on the part of the judges themselves that their selection has been influenced by an interest opposed to the public good.

Thus unwittingly men, otherwise incorruptible, become the most pliable agents of Privilege and the most dangerous of public servants. No mere change of political names



TOM L. JOHNSON, 1854-1911.

or of men can correct these evils. A political change will not affect judges with their judge-made laws, and so long as Privilege controls both parties, a political change will not affect the legislative bodies which create judges. An effective recall of judges would furnish the machinery to correct many abuses, and this step can be taken without waiting for the economic changes which must afford the final and fundamental relief.

For it is to *economic change*, and not to political change, that the people must look for the solution of this problem. Not *lawbreakers*, but *lawmakers* are responsible for bad economic conditions; and these only indirectly, for it is business interests controlling lawmakers that furnish the great motive force in the protection of Privilege.

The economic change that will correct these political abuses is one that must remove the prizes which Privilege now secures from the People. It must reserve to the public the ownership and management of public-service utilities so that they shall be regarded no longer as private loot, but as public rights to be safeguarded and protected.

That good, law-abiding corporations and good, well-meaning men cannot correct these wrongs without changing the economic conditions which produce them, has been proved times without number, and only serves to emphasise the fact that the real fight of the people is not to abolish lawbreaking, but to put an end to that lawmaking which is against the public good.

It is true that the contest looks like an unequal one; that the advantage seems to be entirely on the side of Privilege; that its position appears invulnerable.

Is there then no hope? Let us see.

The people's advance guard has been routed often, and will be time and time again. New recruits must come to the front. As the firing lines are decimated the discontented masses must rush forward to fill the gaps in the ranks. Finally, when *we are fighting all along the line*, public opinion will be strong enough to drive Privilege out of its last trench.

Agitation for the right, once set in motion, cannot be stopped. Truth can never lose its power. It presses forward gaining victories, suffering defeats, but losing nothing of momentum, augmenting its strength though seeming to expend it.

Newspapers controlled by the Interests cannot stop this forward movement, legislatures must yield to it, the courts finally see and respect it, and political parties must go with it or be wrecked.

[The above is an extract from the Foreword to MY STORY, by Tom L. Johnson.]

As we go to press we learn with profound regret of the death of our young friend Alfred Pedersen. He died suddenly on Wednesday, May 12th, at his home in Copenhagen, 20 years old. He was a gifted writer and speaker even at this early age and had a most charming personality. He twice visited Great Britain, the last visit being the occasion of the Cardiff Conference in October, 1913, where he made many lasting friendships. His memory will not soon pass from all who knew him and came to love him both for his sterling qualities and his enthusiasm for the cause. His little note of appreciation of LAND VALUES, to be found in another column can be taken as his final hand-shake with his British friends. In his brief sojourn among us he added strength and purpose to the movement in his native land, where his loss will be keenly felt. We affectionately convey to his family and to his Danish friends and comrades our deepest sympathy.

BOOK REVIEWS

SOCIALISM IN PRACTICE*

The chief value of this book to students of Social questions is that it is a compilation of a very large number of instances of State and municipal enterprise in all parts of the world. But it is more than a mere collection of facts. It is an attempt to show, by reference to what has been accomplished, that the ownership and control of industry by the community is desirable and should be universally adopted. The author denies, and here takes up a definite challenge, that the field of public industry should be restricted merely to services of the nature of "natural monopolies." He insists that:—

The only remedy visible for many of the evils from which modern society suffers, the only possible solution of the ever more threatening labour difficulty, the only method of enabling the great mass of consumers to meet the ever-increasing cost of living is that of nationalising or municipalising various services and trades, and thus reducing the tribute paid by the masses to the monopolist, the speculator, the middleman, or the non-producer.

If this is the remedy, Mr. Davies's painstaking investigation does not support nor prove it. None of the State or municipal services and trades he has described—the food supplies in Buda Pesth; the State tobacco, match, or insurance monopolies; the banks and city pawnshops; the Glasgow trams and lodging-houses; the Doncaster coal mine and racecourse; the gasworks, railways, canals, &c., &c.—have contributed one whit to solving the main problem of poverty, no matter how excellent the administration may be. Even in the few cases quoted of communities owning land, it is only here and there that the conditions of land tenure under public authority can be shown to bring any advantage to the individual citizen. Land is too often held by the community at monopoly prices, and individuals have no easier access to it than if it were in the hands of private landowners. The revenue derived under such a system no doubt enables general taxation to be reduced, but it is ultimately absorbed in higher prices and rents by all the private landowners within the district. The influence of public landownership on industrial development depends also on other considerations, the most important of which is the way in which the property has been acquired—whether it has existed since time immemorial or has had to be purchased at a recent date from private owners.

The land question, however, is not the theme in this book. It is in fact barely referred to, and we are called on to discuss the author's enthusiasm for the public control of trades and industries. Glasgow, for instance, which is cited as a "highly municipalised" city, should, if any weight can be attached to the author's contentions, be a kind of British paradise. Yet its social conditions, proved by the statistics of housing and wages and the reports of the sanitary inspector, are perfectly appalling. The French, Austrian and Italian people derive no visible or peculiar benefit (smokers certainly do not!) from the government production and sale of tobacco, any more than Seville citizens are wealthier or happier because they can deposit goods in a municipal pawnshop.

There is no denying the fact that States and cities can operate, and operate successfully, industries of all kinds, but it is impossible to see how public ownership and control have brought us a step nearer the "Collectivist state." Mr. Davies himself is uncertain about the whole matter and cannot make up his mind what to do with the profits. At one point he declares the surpluses are not a just source of revenue, since as such they are merely a

* THE COLLECTIVIST STATE IN THE MAKING. By Emil Davies, Chairman of the Railway Nationalisation Society. London: G. Bell & Sons. Price 5s. net.