

The Single Tax Review, Volumes 21-22 / March 1922

### Mr. Samuel Gompers Replies to Our Criticism

Mr. Joseph Dana Miller,

Dear Sir: -

In the January-February issue of the Single Tax Review there is published a letter by you addressed to me. I really regret that you did not see the wisdom or the amenities between man and man and address the letter to me for consideration and reply, but that you deemed it proper to publish the letter in the *Review* without even doing me the courtesy or giving me the opportunity of seeing it before publication and replying thereto. Perhaps that may be your view of proprieties and depending upon me to get your letter through an indirect source. However, dismissing this from consideration let me make the following observations.

When working at my trade in a factory, the *Irish World*, a New York weekly, published chapters in each of its issues of Henry George's "Progress and Poverty." These chapters were read aloud each week affording the major part of the discussion among the men. It was due to a few of my friends and myself that the chapters were read and discussed in the Spirit-and-Light Club of Brooklyn, New York, of which I was a member. Combined efforts of all were directed in being helpful in having the work "Progress and Poverty" done into a book. Later, we were helpful in having "Progress and Poverty" printed in the *Congressional Record*. Perhaps these facts might justify my statement that I aided in having Henry George understood.

I aided in the nomination of Henry George in his campaign for mayor of New York and in the campaign in the election. It was he who induced me to buy a bicycle and on our machines we frequently, and particularly on Sunday, took long rides at which most interesting discussions took place and there was established between us a very firm friendship. I have declared and now say that I am a Single Taxer. I believe the Single Tax to be the most practical, effective and generally advantageous tax which can be imposed, but you take me to task because in my article on "Abolish Unemployment" I did not declare for the Single Tax as a remedy for unemployment.

All I need say in reply is that the organized labor movement cannot wait for the establishment of the Single Tax system to have our unemployed workmen at work.

"While the grass grows, etc," Shakespeare in his time declared that proverb somewhat musty and yet its lesson is as potent today as when the phrase was coined. One of my dear friends for many years a Single Taxer after reading your letter in the Single Tax Review stated to me "The worst about the Single Tax is the Single Taxer." Is it difficult to imagine the type of man he had in mind?

Very truly yours,  
Sam Gompers,  
*President,*

American Federation of Labor.

The article to which the foregoing letter of Mr. Gompers refers was a criticism in our last issue of a contribution appearing under his own name in the *American Federationist*, dealing with the

question of unemployment. The criticism was entitled "A Few Words with Mr. Gompers." It was a review of the article which Mr. Gompers had written, accompanied with some running comments on what appeared to be that gentleman's shortcomings.

Mr. Gompers is a public man. His public utterances are subject to only so much consideration as their importance calls for. We were under no obligation to submit our criticism in advance of publication, or to extend to Mr. Gompers the special privilege of having his reply printed in the same issue in which the criticism appeared. All that is required of editorial courtesy is that the columns of the paper shall be open to reply. This reply is now before us. It is printed herewith, so that our readers may hear his side. He has the liberty of using our columns for further explanation of his position. So much for the "amenities."

The article by Mr. Gompers urged upon government the need of providing employment. As Mr. Gompers has on several occasions declared himself a Single Taxer we looked—but looked in vain—for some recognition of the real solution of unemployment, some suggestion, if but the faintest, of the primary relation of the question of unemployment to the land laws of the country. We did not find it. Why not?

We pointed out that the sole burden of Mr. Gompers' article was the *necessity of speeding up of public improvements*. Incredible as it may seem, this was all that, purged of its somewhat rotund phraseology, the article disclosed. It is true that the words were brave and breathed defiance to some powers or persons or things the identity of which remains concealed. But with supreme unconsciousness that he had proposed nothing that can solve the unemployment question, Mr. Gompers concludes with this triumphant exordium, almost shouting: "The problem can be solved. It must be solved. The time for action and solution is not tomorrow, but Now!"

We called attention to the phrases which Mr. Gompers used, "cyclical unemployment," "seasonal unemployment," when the only fact under consideration is a man willing to work and unable to find it. I have called the use of such phrases "criminal trifling." Perhaps the term was too harsh, but if Mr. Gompers is a Single Taxer—and he says he is—he knows how inadequate are such phrases. He talked of "forms of unemployment," as if being out of a job were capable of classification. He quoted, apparently by way of endorsement, the language of Mr. Hoover that a solution of unemployment might be found through "the mobilization of the fine co-operative action of our manufacturers and employers, our public bodies and our local authorities." "The mobilization of fine co-operative action" is a "mouthful," as the boys say. But it is a meaningless abracadabra. It is a fine bit of Hooverism, and successfully conceals the poverty of that gentleman's thought. Yet Mr. Gompers cites it—and apparently finds it good. Worse still, he endorses President Harding's statement that "a million and a half are normally unemployed" in these United States. Whether Mr. Harding used the word "normally" in this case in the sense of usually or naturally, is doubtful. But it fails to arrest the attention of Mr. Gompers. And he a believer in the doctrines of Henry George!

We print Mr. Gompers' reply to our criticism, and ask our readers to be as lenient in their

judgment as the facts will warrant. To our contention that he does not touch the true cause of unemployment, he replies that he took bicycle rides with Henry George; to our statement that there are enough unused natural opportunities to provide employment for ten times the number of unemployed, he relates that during these bicycle rides there was established a firm friendship between him and Henry George!

We do not impugn the genuineness of this friendship. We assume that the memory of it is to Mr. Gompers all it seems to be. But we may indicate that he could pay a rather more obvious service to this friendship by standing now and then for the principles of this revered friend? It is not enough to say, "I am a Single Taxer," and then refrain from advancing any application of the principle to present day problems.

When we ask Mr. Gompers to speak the word that will make for the emancipation of Labor and Capital from the crushing imposts of monopoly, he replies that he was helpful in having "Progress and Poverty" printed in the Congressional Record, which he could not have been, since "Progress and Poverty" was never printed in the *Record*!

Protection or Free Trade, however, was printed in the Congressional Record through the efforts of Congressman Tom L. Johnson, of Ohio, Jerry Simpson, of Kansas, Judge Maguire, of California, and others during the tariff debate in which these members of the House of Representatives took advantage of the "leave to print", and thus secured the appearance of the entire work in the columns of the *Record*. We never heard that Mr. Gompers aided in this work, nor do we see how he could have done so.

Mr. Gompers says in his letter to the *Review*: "You take me to task because in my article on unemployment I do not declare for the Single Tax as a remedy for unemployment." Surely we are justified in asking why not? We know of only one way to provide employment. That is by opening up natural opportunities. Public works can be undertaken, it is true, but these must be provided for by taxation, and this means taking something away from those who are now employed, and thus diminishing employment in another direction. "Organized labor," says Mr. Gompers, "cannot and will not wait for the Single Tax system to have our unemployed workmen at work."

We would point out to Mr. Gompers that these public works that are to provide employment for the unemployed have not even begun. The Single Tax, however, has been on the ballot in California and Oregon; 260,000 votes were cast in one State and 37,000 in the other. It does not appear from the records that Mr. Gompers was impelled to add his enormous influence to increase the vote in these States, yet had he done so, and kept at it, the movement would by this time have been much further advanced than his own programme of public works.

Mr. Gompers occupies a unique position. His power and influence probably exceed that of any man in America today. With this power goes a great responsibility. If Mr. Gompers sees the truth as Single Taxers see it, it is his duty to announce it publicly, to proclaim it bravely. He is false to

the light that is given him if, on the contrary, he does anything to prolong the intolerable situation that results from the conflict of Labor and Capital, with its concomitant coercion, strikes, lockouts, and all that these bring in their train.

He is faithless to his trust as custodian of the welfare of the workers that comprise his organization if he neglects to point out the real road to freedom. For against the doors of monopoly what avail are all the puny efforts of the American Federation of Labor? More than thirty years ago, in a small office in this city, Mr. Gompers began his labors for the amelioration of the worker's condition. At the close of these thirty years' labors, what is it that confronts him? Nearly or quite three million men out of employment! Does the rapidity of progress attained by the movement to which he set his hand these many years ago not suggest to him that perhaps the Single Tax movement might, with greater effort on his part, have secured a momentum that would have given a larger measure of success in an infinitely shorter time?

Surely here is sufficient demonstration of the futility of the organized labor movement to effect any permanent betterment in the condition of the worker most in need of relief? Is this the net result of Mr. Gompers' labors? Conceding the trifling results obtained—and we admit the few benefits that have come from organized labor—were they really worth all this pother, all this destructive warfare, all these restrictive measures, all this weary waiting?

Mr. Gompers entirely misses the point we raise, which is that at a time when there is more need than ever to point out that unemployment results from the monopolization of natural resources, and that these resources would be open to labor by the Single Tax, this foremost spokesman of labor in a studied article on unemployment makes no mention either of the Single Tax, nor of the existence and effect of land monopoly.

"While the grass grows the horse is starving." Granted the need of immediate relief. But when will the seed be planted and the harvest prepared for permanent relief? We could put up in a somewhat more patient spirit with the expedients of labor organizations if these were frankly labelled expedients, if in the meantime the immense power of Mr. Gompers and the Federation of Labor were being bent to the planting of the seed for the more abundant harvest. But because Mr. Gompers keeps silent, because he is putting off the planting of the seed, he is postponing to some indefinite period the coming of the harvest time.

We are glad to agree with the gentleman, "many years a Single Taxer," who says that "the worst about the Single Tax is the Single Taxer." We are interested in the identity of the gentleman, but after all it makes but little difference. What he says is all too true. The men who keep back the Single Tax movement are those who solemnly avow their Single Tax beliefs and then advocate other things. These other things were amusingly characterized by E. W. Doty at the Niagara Falls Conference several years ago as "half sisters to the Single Tax." He intimates that the trouble was that they were not "half sisters" at all, and were not even distantly related.

Mr. Henry George himself years ago in a public address said, "Here comes my friend, Sam

Gompers, with 24 remedies for our labor troubles and not one the right one." Would our friend, for many years a Single Taxer, say in this case "that the worst enemy of the Single Tax was the Single Taxer," in this case Henry George himself, in whose company we would rather be found than in that of the gentleman who seeks by his criticism to confirm Mr. Gompers in the course he has taken.

We have cheerfully paid to Mr. Gompers the tribute of our admiration for his valuable public services. He was a steadying and worthy influence in the war when the motives of our entrance into that conflict were being questioned by the unreflecting, and the extremists in the ranks of labor. It is not too much to say that he helped as no other single influence did to "win the war."

It is due him, too, to say that his leadership which held, and still holds, in abeyance the extreme socialistic and communistic elements in the A. F. of L. has been, on the whole, a healthy influence. We pointed out in the article which seems to have excited Mr. Gompers' ire, that to the degree that this conservatism lacks the element of constructive proposal it must cease to be a restraining influence on the wild-eyed radicalism in the organization. Men impatient of the dilatory programme that is being held out to them as the sole remedy for conditions as they exist, will demand some social change. One or another of those social theories—the one most clamorous and insistent— will sweep over the dikes which Mr. Gompers has so carefully erected for the protection of the organization, and he will see the labor movement transformed to something which he least desires.

There is but one way of meeting this, and that is by opposing to them the doctrine of social justice—the destruction of the monopoly of natural resources and the removal of those artificial restrictions which bar the way to a world of peace and plenty.

Joseph Dana Miller.