

The British Labor Movement and Land Restoration

IN the SINGLE TAX REVIEW of January-February I wrote of the "New Movement." that is being promoted in Britain by the Commonwealth League within the Labor movement. This takes the form of a demand for a Declaration of Common Right to the Land to be followed by a Finance Bill for the collection of its economic rent and its allocation on a population basis to local authorities for the provision of communal services.

The pioneering work has proceeded to the point that one can say with full assurance that this demand would carry all before it were the means available for its adequate presentation to the people. As it is the League meets with a full measure of success among the rank and file of labor.

At the Annual Conference of the Independent Labor Party held in London in April last the League's demand

appeared on the Agenda from seven branches of that organization. Under the constitution of the Party a resolution has to be endorsed in the first place by a Divisional Conference constituted by delegates from the branches of the Division of which the remitting branch is a constituent. The distribution of the seven remitting branches shows that roughly speaking all the Divisional Conferences of England had endorsed the resolution. But the official controllers of the party machine had the last say and placed the resolution so far back on the Agenda that when it came up time for adequate discussion was not available. The usual attempt of the ex-Liberal Land Taxer to sidetrack the demand was made and ruled out of order. Then came an attempt to smash the resolution by moving the "previous question." This was defeated by a vote of 240 to 186.

In the discussion which followed the State Socialists raised the cry: "This is not Socialism." The taking of economic rent did not commend itself to those hankering after "control." The Scottish delegates were with us to a man. Eventually a motion was carried remitting the resolution to the National Administrative Council for consideration and report. The I. L. P. which during the War led the fight against the State for individual liberty, is drifting back to the doctrines of State Socialism. As REVIEW readers know, Mr. Philip Snowden has sponsored a Land Nationalization Bill which proposes to buy the land on the basis of 20 years purchase of present rental. Compensation is to be paid in 5% bonds redeemable at par in 30 years. Which means that a land-holder receiving £1,000 a year in ground rent is to be paid £20,000 and to receive in interest £30,000 up to the time when the bonds are redeemable, making £50,000 in all. A proposal that is received with scorn and derision whenever presented to a Labor gathering by the Commonwealth League. Purchase is advocated to secure "control." So within the Labor movement the League is confronting the State Socialists. The resolution as presented to the Conference ran as follows:

Socialization of Land.

19. That this Conference declares that the land is the permanent and inalienable possession of the community, and demands the immediate socialization thereof as the very foundation of the Co-operative Commonwealth. To this end it calls upon the Government to:

- (1) Issue a declaration of Common Right to the Land, founded on the Bill of Rights of 1689.
- (2) Introduce a Finance Bill calling upon each landholder to pay to a Common Rent Fund the economic rent of the land he holds as a tenant of the Common Estate.
- (3) Make provision for the allocation of the Common Land Rent Fund to the local authorities for administrative purposes on a population basis and relevant considerations.

The Annual Conference of the Labor Party is to be held in June. A page of the agenda is devoted to resolutions on the Land. All but one voice the demand of the Commonwealth League. Again, through the activity of the ex-Liberal Land Taxers we have the Executive presenting a financial resolution in which to the official Capital Levy

has been added the Taxation of Land Values. As the Annual Conference of 1920 carried the League's demand for which officials substituted the taxation and rating of land values there is likely to be a battle between the advocates of the instalment plan and those for the appropriation in full of economic rent on the lines proposed by the Commonwealth League.

A remarkable Labor Conference to consider the League's resolution has just taken place at Gateshead of 225 delegates representing 107 branches of Labor organizations and co-operative societies of Northumberland and Durham. Mr. William Straker, the veteran secretary of the Northumberland Miners, was in the chair. He laid down fundamental principles, as the following passages from his speech indicate:

"Herbert Spencer had said that if one man had the exclusive right to own one portion of the earth, all portions could be equally owned and all other men be excluded at the will merely of the landlord. Could they imagine a greater slavery? There were only three grounds on which private ownership could be claimed. (1) That a man had created what he claimed to own. (2) That he had got it from the Creator in exchange for something that he had created. (3) That the Creator had given it to him.

Had any man created the land? Had anyone purchased it from the Creator? Did the Creator give it to any one man? Trade unionism could only deal with the sores from which humanity suffered. They could never accomplish the salvation of the workers until they got down to the root cause of the sores—the private ownership of the Land."

The Resolution was unanimously adopted. A pleasing and significant feature of this Conference is the fact that it was arranged by a young sailor, son of a local miner whom we first heard of through his writing for the *Commonweal* from Buenos Aires. He returned to England to become an "out-of-work," but to take up the cause of the Restoration of the Land.

So it is that the Commonwealth League has flung into the Labor movement a demand which the rank and file readily adopt, but which the officials, the State Socialists and Parliamentarians, regard askance, or denounce as "confiscation." It has to be borne in mind that this demand for payment of rent by landholders has behind it an ancient principle which still remains the law of the land. No man owns land in Britain, but only an "Estate in land." Our "landowners" are in law landholders as tenants of the Crown. In past days the landholders paid in rent or services for the privilege of holding a portion of the King's estate held in trust for the nation.

It was only when Parliaments elected solely by landholders and in which landholders alone could sit became supreme in the realm of finance that the obligations of the tenants of the Crown were cast on to the people. The Commonwealth League in demanding that all landholders shall pay rent is but seeking to restore an ancient principle of our jurisprudence. It is largely for this reason that the demand for the payment of rent appeals to popular sentiment. To

seek to substitute for this ancient principle of rent payment something called the "Single Tax" or the "Taxation of Land Values" is therefore in Britain to throw away a great constitutional asset. It is as well that American taxers should realize this, as it will explain in part why the Commonwealth League is fighting the endeavor of our "taxers" because it confounds the work we are doing in the Labor movement. The Liberals never dared in the past, nor would they now dare, to demand the assertion of the Common Right to the Land, but instead advocated the Taxation of Land Values as a fiscal reform. We seek to secure through the Labor movement an economic revolution by a pacific and constitutional method and one that follows the lines of ancient constitutional principle and practice.

So the issue between the taxers and the Commonwealth League has become a Party issue which will develop as such. Consequently, when American delegates attend the "International Conference on the Taxation of Land Values" convened by our land taxers for August next at Oxford they will be somewhat embarrassed. If the Conference is to be used to strengthen the position of those who stand for the Taxation of Land Values rather than the full application of the principles of Henry George, the Commonwealth League, for reasons indicated in this article, must regard it as detrimental to the propaganda that it is conducting. We know that as we win over the rank and file for our uncompromising demand the politicians hasten to proclaim their adherence to the Taxation of Land Values.

The position is very much like in America when real Free Trade was espoused by the rank and file and the politicians sang

"Tramp, Tramp, Tramp—don't be afraid,
Tariff Reform is not Free Trade."

We know the result in America for Free Trade and fear the same here for the cause of economic emancipation at the hands of the land-taxer.

The Oxford Conference should have been convened to discuss how best to secure the realization of the principle enunciated by Henry George—Liberty through Justice.

With Europe rushing headlong into chaos and dragging Britain down with her, the day has gone by for little men and little measures. With such a storm brewing as that upon the horizon the safety of the ship can best be assured by pulling up the anchor and setting out to meet it on the open sea. Anyhow, it can at least be said that the Commonwealth League is provoking a fight for the Restoration of the Land such as this country has not yet seen. The workers are with us. The machine is against us.

R. L. OUTHWAITE.

PULPIT orator talks of the "Struggle between Capital and Labor," but has in mind only certain employers, some of whom are productive workers, and certain organized employes, many of whom are small capitalists.

PROMINENT Cleveland tariff seeker and philanthropist is advertised to lead a "Great Men's Bible Class."