

The Single Tax, October, 1901

THE LAND QUESTION IN GERMANY AND AUSTRIA.

Translation of Leading Article in the "Reichspost" (Vienna). " An independent doily paper for the Christian people of Austria-Hungary."

Land Reform and House Property.

Vienna, 13th August, 1901.

The meeting of the Central Union of the German societies of urban house-owners took place last week at Hanover. There were many fine speeches and endless debates, but the ideas expressed were such as to move a Berlin tenant to request the President of the Union "to explain publicly whether it was only the house-owners in Berlin, or also those in other German towns who had gone mad." The man who put this awkward question signed himself, "A Berlin tenant whose rent has been raised 40 per cent, three times within a year and a-half." And he was not without justification ; for at the Hanover meeting such monstrosities came to light uncontradicted that, considering the prevailing views of German householders, as expressed on this occasion, no one need be surprised if, in spite of the efforts made by many German towns and several rural authorities, nothing worth speaking of has been achieved with regard to the housing problem in Germany. From this point of view the meeting at Hanover has many warnings for us also. It is a remarkable and sad sign that no single measure for relieving the house famine in Germany has escaped the opposition of the Central Union of house-owners. Their deliberations afford an involuntary confession of the want of intelligence with which a large class of owners still confront the most important requirements of the social problem.

Just a few episodes from the debates. A Mr. Schultz took upon himself to support a resolution of the South Berlin House-owners' Society to the effect that any interference by public authorities with the supply of houses by giving encouragement or preference to the building of dwellings for private persons or officials, must be branded as an injustice towards the other non-preferred sections of society. The task was not an easy one, and Mr. Schultz discharged it by declaring categorically that it is " completely untrue that bad housing conditions

exist in the big towns;" that, " in general, there is no such thing as a house famine;" and he concluded with the original idea that the housing question in general had been invented by the Social Democrats. The speaker was not laughed down, but, according to the reports, received vigorous applause, and the succeeding speakers exerted themselves to accentuate his remarks. One speaker, described as an architect, threatened that if encouragement continued to be given to the building associations, the house-owners of Germany would "go over in a body to Social Democracy." A builder from Dresden named Hartwig delivered the sage judgment that better housing conditions could only be brought about if workmen would spend less on beer and cigars and strike funds, and more on their houses. Mr. Hartwig's ideal would be, no doubt, for a workman to pay for his dwelling, not a fifth nor a quarter, but a half of his earnings. The worthy builder is not concerned with the fact that in a well ordered household what is paid for rent ought properly to be a tenth, or, at the very most, a seventh of the net income. Another speaker, from Elberfeld, made a violent assault on the building associations, and declared that their efforts were futile, because there are immutable, inevitable causes for the house famine, and that there always will be "house famines." The meeting agreed with him so far as to resolve to circulate a pamphlet against the German building associations, which are doing so much good. The bias of the pamphlet can be recognised from the explicit demand which it contained, that building associations should be prohibited from themselves building houses, and from admitting workmen or officials as members.

The meeting of the German house-owners at Hanover stands as a monument of that blind obstinacy which opposes social reform out of selfishness, and so evokes still more serious social disturbances.

While the house-owners at Hanover deny the existence of any house famine, the Reports of the Prussian factory inspectors draw a gloomy picture of the miserable want of house accommodation in Germany. For Berlin and Charlottenburg the Reports show a continuous increase in the price of house accommodation, so that the working people are being driven from wretched to still more wretched accommodation. The Potsdam industrial officer complains bitterly about the land

speculation, which adds greatly to the difficulty of erecting cheap houses, and chokes building enterprise. A well-known instance is the Berlin Kurfiirstendamm Company, which was founded in the year 1882 with an original capital of £10,000, possessed a nominal capital of ,£400,000 fully paid shares, and on that realised £675,000 in profits and dividends.

The Inspector's Report for East Prussia states as follows: "The condition of the working people as to housing still leaves much to be desired, and rents are relatively high. It is not uncommon for a workman to have to give a quarter and more of his year's earnings as rent for his dwelling." The Report for West Prussia gives the following information: "The majority of the dwellings inspected in Elbing consisted of a single room, and on the floor there was a bricked-in stone pillar on which the people cooked with an open fire in the manner of days long gone by. For such dwellings rents of £\$ 10s. to were paid. When one considers the bad condition of these dwellings—many of them scarcely 6* feet high—one can only characterise these so-called cheap dwellings as very dear." In the province of Schleswig the want of accommodation is so great that the town of Kiel was obliged to shelter 101 roofless families 650 heads—in gymnasiums, garden sheds, barracks, &c. Equally sad pictures are contained in the Reports from Frankfort-on-Oder, Cologne, Miinster, and Hanover. All this is moonshine to the Hanover meeting, at which some of the house-owners denied the possibility of fighting against the house famine, and others denied its existence!

One wonders how, in such a class as that represented by the body of house-owners, such unfortunate ideas could be maintained. The explanation is that the majority of houseowners in Germany entirely misconceive the ends and means of a sound Land and Housing Reform. Such reform does not mean a curtailing of the private ownership of houses as such, but only of land speculation in the forms in which it confronts us as land usury, exploitation of ground values, and overburdening of urban house property. If these phenomena were effectively dealt with, the genuine industry of house-owners would not suffer, but would gain an actual advantage in being freed from dangerous parasites. The interests of decent house-owners are directly opposed to the interests of land and house

speculators. This conviction must penetrate the mind of the people, and then protective measures against the speculation swindle will not be considered as an injury to an honest industry. The conviction will then continually gain ground that the State must as soon as possible commence dealing actively with the urban housing question by means of an adequate expropriation law and A LAW FOR THE TAXATION OF URBAN GROUND VALUES. As "Hanoverian" views come up in our country also now and then, we thought it necessary to take their true measure.