

Free Soil in Yucatan; Its Effect in Raising Wages

ON the land reform instituted in the State of Yucatan, Mexico, by its one-time Governor, Salvador Alvarado, one may comment, in the words of the Celt, that half a loaf is better than hardtack. It is a reform which has gone only a step or two along the path illuminated by Henry George, with whose doctrine Alvarado is thoroughly familiar, but in view of the political and economic conditions against which he had to work in Yucatan it is, nevertheless, a promising reform and, what is more important, one that has had remarkable effects.

As it exists on the statute books of the Peninsular State, "La Ley Agraria," the Agrarian Law which has produced the reform, is a joy forever; unfortunately, it has never been enforced in its entirety. For instance, it sets up a method by which every native or foreign born resident of the State who is seventeen years old or more may request and hold "a plot of land large enough so that thereon he can, by his own labors, maintain himself and family." Other things having been equal, this might have resulted in starting Yucatan on the way to become the ideal Single Tax State. But other things were unequal and the power of the old owners of the large estates has for practical purposes nullified those provisions of the Law which provide for the expropriation of parts of the said estates for purposes of distribution among the landless. This nullification has been legalized by decisions handed down in specific cases by the Federal Courts of the Mexican Republic.

But other lands were available, for, says the Law, State reserves and commons may be distributed among applicants, and it is only where such lands do not suffice or are undesirable that expropriation of private holdings is to be practiced.

PROVISIONS OF THE LAW

It would be futile and tiresome to give the exact text or even an outline of all the provisions of the law here, but the recording of certain of its features is necessary in order to explain how the untutored Indian laborer is able to import a phonograph from the United States, or to buy his wife a silk shawl (the latter costing not less than forty-five American dollars after the Armenian vender swears he must starve his family for a year and be cursed by his ancestors for a fool for letting it go at such a low price).

A Local Agrarian Commission, consisting of five persons appointed by the Executive of the State and working with the aid of subordinate committees existing in every communal district of the State, comprises the simple machinery for operating the Law.

At stated periods the committees call together the inhabitants of several communal districts in order to learn which of them propose to apply for holdings. Eligible aspirants, as has been stated above, are all persons seventeen years old or over who are either natives or foreigners resident in Yucatan, but they perforce must not be owners nor holders of land in any other part of the Mexican Re-

public. After the number of aspirants has been determined in a given district, after investigation of them has been made, and after they have, in writing, promised to meet certain obligations in the event of being successful, the commons and State reserves within the district are parcelled out. Of these obligations more later.

CLASSIFICATION OF LANDS

For the purposes of this Law the lands of Yucatan are described as falling into two classifications: (1) Suburban Lands (*Tierras Sub-urbanas*), which are those within and contiguous to commons or that are situated near enough to cities and towns to be necessary for the free, natural growth of the latter, and (2) Rural Lands (*Tierras Pastorales*), which are lands not less than eight kilometers distant from the corporate limits of cities and towns. An applicant may request land in either of these classifications, as his fancy directs, but of Suburban Lands he may not hold more than twenty-five *hectareas* and of Rural Lands he may not hold more than two hundred *hectareas*. (A hectarea is equivalent to $2\frac{1}{2}$ acres.)

Actual practice has shown that the demand for Rural Lands has been infinitesimal or perhaps *nil*. Such requests as have been made under the Law, and they have been many, have been for Suburban Lands. The reasons for this are threefold. The Law itself, by providing for the amortization of the value of growing crops on granted holdings, makes rural holdings more expensive to the grantee, since only rural land was under cultivation when the Law was passed. Secondly, the one great industry of Yucatan is the production of henequen, or sisal hemp. "Cultivated land" and "land under henequen" are synonymous not only by the language of the Law but also in the common parlance of the Yucatecos. And, as present organized, the henequen industry can be carried on only over large units of area. Thirdly, the great landowners made their principal stand not against the distribution of Suburban Lands but only against that of Rural Lands in which, of course, the large haciendas are situated.

PRIVILEGES AND OBLIGATIONS OF GRANTEES

Those to whom lands are granted under this Law do not become owners nor do they become tenants, strictly speaking; they have the status of parties enjoying certain privileges in return for the fulfillment of certain obligations. They enjoy unrestrained use of their plots for unlimited periods. An individual may use a plot singly or in conjunction with others such as partners and members of his family. A plot can be willed to direct or indirect heirs and a will must be honored if it is nothing more than a simple declaration put in writing. So much for privileges.

The obligations are more numerous but are neither unjust nor irksome. The holding of a plot shall not continue once the holder fails to work it himself or conjointly with others. That is to say, the grantee may not be merely a

holder who hires others to work on his land or who assumes the role, if not the name, of landlord. During the first ten years as a grantee one must place improvements on his plot, the word improvements according to the text of the Law being defined as buildings, drains, wells, or anything else produced by human labor. During the first two of these ten years the total value of such improvements must equal 50% of the intrinsic value of the land and for each of the remaining ten years improvements worth 5% of the intrinsic value must be added. Failure to keep up with this obligation is cause for ending the agreement between the grantee and the State and the former must give up his holding forthwith.

TAXES AND AMORTIZATIONS

Every plot of granted land, whether Suburban or Rural, whether used agriculturally or not, must pay the State an annual tax equivalent to two and one-half per cent. of its value. For the purposes of this tax, a value is arrived at by taking the original intrinsic value of the land and adding to it the cost of surveys made and costs incurred in turning it over to the grantee. The work of arriving at this value and of determining the meaning of "intrinsic value," is done by the Registry of Real Property, an ancient institution. Failure to pay this tax is penalized by the loss of the plot.

In addition to this tax of two and one-half per cent. the holders of lands which were under cultivation at the time they were acquired must meet an amortization of the value of the crop thereon. Though it does not say so specifically, the language of the Law surely means by lands under cultivation lands on which henequen is growing. Inasmuch as the henequen plant is, roughly speaking, productive from its sixth to its fifteenth year, the arrangements laid down for the amortization are of a nature too particular to be of interest to any but those familiar with the technical side of hemp producing. Furthermore, these arrangements are of little moment because there have been practically no requests for such plots as would be governed by them.

Expropriated land, land taken from private parties to be distributed under this act, is paid for with bonds issued by the State. The said bonds mature after a period of fifty years, bearing an annual interest of four and one-half per cent. and are guaranteed by what is known in Yucatan as the Territorial Tax (el Impuesto Territorial). In paying for expropriated lands their values are determined by adding to the values, as they appear in the Registry of Civil Property, the values of improvements thereon.

WHAT RESULTED FROM THE LAW

The one great result or effect of the Agrarian Law of Yucatan has been to cause a great shortage in wage-earning labor and a consequent increase in the incomes and prosperity of the laboring element. Thousands of laborers who depended formerly on a daily stipend, which was not always given in currency, have applied for and have been granted holdings. On these, by devoting only a part of their time to cultivation, they are well able to supply all that they and their families require in the way of food, for

in addition to garden truck, oranges, papayas and other vegetables and fruits which they raise for their own consumption, they have their pigs, their chickens and their turkeys. When they want cash they can get it by working as laborers on the large hemp plantations; but, naturally, they are independent and will work for high wages only. For instance, the wage rate for cutting the hempen leaves is one American dollar per thousand; double this number is well within a day's work. In many cases, by starting very early in the morning a laborer will have earned two American dollars by noon and then loaf or give his time to his own plot of ground. In other cases, instead of taking off only part of a day for work on his own plot, he will take off a whole day or perhaps as many as three days a week. There can be but one outcome of such a situation—the planters, in order to keep up the production of their haciendas must not only make special inducements in addition to the wages paid, but also have to call in more laborers than formerly. Any one familiar with economics may work out for himself the manner in which this has boomed things for manual laborers at the bottom of the economic ladder, right on up to the trading and professional classes.

There is no denying the fact that the cost of living has gone up at a tremendous rate coincident with the rise in wages and salaries. Rents, too, are at unheard of levels. On the other hand, it cannot be denied that there is not in Yucatan the vicious circle of high wages being overtaken by a high cost of living; wages have kept well ahead of the latter and will continue to keep well ahead of it.

A MAD LIFE

The visitor to Yucatan nowadays has his eyes opened to a mad life. His first astonishment comes at the moment he steps on to the dock at Progreso and starts for the railroad train which will take him to the metropolis, Merida; he there and then engages an independent son of toil to carry his luggage to the train and the rate comes to one American dollar for one minute of the man's time.

In Merida he pays, if he is lucky, only two American dollars a day for a hotel room; with this and his meals, laundry and the necessary incidental expenses that go with barbers, tailors and that ilk, he will find that life for one week in Merida is worth seventy-five American dollars—and it will not be the life of a plutocrat, either.

In Yucatan you can see your *camarero* (the man who takes care of your hotel room) spending his free hours riding around the Plaza Principal in an automobile at one and one-half American dollars for an hour, and this ride keeps up from about seven in the evening until about ten, while the Band of the Municipal Police gives a public concert. The writer has had this experience as well as that of sitting behind his *camarero* in the best orchestra seats in a first class theatre, not once but three times in a month.

After one adjusts himself to that state of affairs, he can get more light on it by going into the market districts where he will see barefooted women—unshod through preference and not on account of poverty—take their basketfuls of

purchases and hail a cab or even an automobile to take them home.

In Yucatan an American dollar will buy four eggs, or three collars, or a little more than a half a bottle of beer, or one-half a pair of silk socks, or a box of talcum powder. One must pay fourteen American dollars for an ordinary pair of shoes, or seven of them for an ordinary hat. Other prices are in proportion.

But these prices are not prohibitive. Far from it! They are high, yes; but not high enough to keep even the so-called lower classes from having the bottle of beer, the talcum powder, the eggs and the things that "hall-mark" the middle class of the rest of the world.

And what about the merchants? Do they fare well? The answer, as they themselves give it, is that they are being ruined, shamefully, disgracefully ruined. One who becomes familiar with the matter inevitably comes to the conclusion that overwork in figuring profits is causing this lamentable ruin and that the headaches they get from swollen credits are what drive them to their physicians, who, by the way, are suffering from the same ailment.

GABRIEL S. YORKE

Who Owns America?

WE, the people," answers with patriotic fervor the Republican candidate for sheriff.

"No one has a better title than the taxpayer," says the plutocrat.

"The capitalists," say the muddle-brained, machinery worshipping Socialists.

"The government, which is the sovereign power," declares the legal light.

Before we can determine the ownership of America we must first determine what this America is. Having learned what America is, we can the more readily find out in whom the ownership of it is vested.

When was America "discovered?" In 1492, by Columbus. Did he discover a large shirt waist factory, a tenement house, a palatial hotel, a tramp's "flop," a billion dollar Congress, a bread line, an army of unemployed, and other characteristics of America as we know it? No. What, then, did he discover?

He discovered some red-skinned people, whom he called Indians, and they spoke a peculiar language and used tomahawks for weapons and wore hardly any clothes, and were in many ways different from the peoples he knew. The Indians lived on some Land which somebody later called America.

These Indians were later driven from a good part of the Land by white folks from Europe. And these white folks later had a war with other white folks in England because the former wanted to be free in America.

Now, during this war the soldiers used flintlocks instead of tomahawks. And the new American people lived in houses, and had town meeting halls and a continental Congress, and they wore silk breeches and powdered wigs and hoop skirts—so different from the Indians. Yet, like

the Indians, they lived in America—this same America, whatever it is.

Then the people in this free America made their own laws, and wrote a great constitution, and elected public servants, and in many ways did things differently from the way things were done before, and very differently from the ways of the Indians whom they had displaced in this same America. Pretty soon a man built a steamboat; then everybody sailed up and down American rivers on steamboats instead of on sailboats. Another man built a railroad, and another an automobile; so in a few years the people travelled all over this America in these things, instead of on horseback as they had done.

It came to pass soon that instead of making pies for her family in the great kitchen oven, the housewife found it more convenient to purchase these edibles at a bakery store, which was in this same America. And the honest workman, whose wont it was to wear home-spun clothing, soon discovered that good clothing was made in a factory where hundreds of other fellow-citizens worked, and where there were many complicated machines. This factory was in America. He was told that there were clothes made in another factory; but that was in England.

In Europe there were a lot of dissatisfied people. Many were dissatisfied because no matter how hard they labored they did not have enough to eat—a Land Lord took everything away from them except a bare living. Some were dissatisfied because they could not worship God in the manner they thought best. And these people heard that in this America they could get Land for nothing, could keep for themselves more of what they produced, and could worship God as they pleased. So they broke up their homes and took a long voyage over land and sea to this wonderful America.

There were among them Italians and Irish and Jews and Poles—any number of peoples, with different languages and customs. So there came to this America many that became dominant factors in the social, political and economic life. These peoples from Europe so changed things in New York that the former inhabitants of this place, if they came to life, could not recognize it. Yet it is the same New York that was discovered by Hendrick Hudson many, many years ago.

And this America was divided up into States and cities. One of these cities was called San Francisco. A very disastrous earthquake nearly wiped out this city. But America remained. It seemed as though nothing could happen that would wipe out this America.

In fact, America remains—somehow or other—no matter what happens. The Indians are gone, the Revolutionary Americans are all dead, American women discard hoop skirts for short skirts, whole cities burn down, factories replace farms, Republicans defeat Democrats, negro slaves become "free" tenant farmers, new diseases are discovered, in fact everything about America changes so often that one hardly recognizes it from one day to another—and yet America remains.