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## **What We Henry George Men Want.\***

Speech by HENRY GEORGE, November 1887

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WHAT WE AIM AT is the abolition of poverty. We propose to accomplish this by abolishing injustice, and our particular aim is to abolish that fundamental injustice which deprives so many human creatures — aye, in cities like this, the majority of the population — of their natural right to the land which the Lord their God has given them. The relation between man and the planet he inhabits is fundamental, and the laws which affect the tenure of land, the relation between man and the land on which all must live, are the most important of all laws. We do not mean to say that there are not many other wrongs to be righted, that there are not many other things to do, but we do say that the fundamental injustice which deprives men of their natural right to the element from which and on which all must live is most important, and is the one with which we ought to begin. Until we do away with that injustice we cannot abolish minor wrongs or make minor improvements that will effect any permanent good. We do not say that this is the only thing to do, but we say this is the first thing to do.

We propose to establish equality between men with relation to the element on which and from which they must live; not by dividing the land up into equal pieces; not by taking land as the formal property of the state and renting it out; not by taking from anybody any land that he now has, but simply so changing our system of taxation as to abolish all taxes now levied upon labor and the products of labor and take by taxation for public purposes that value which attaches to land by reason of the growth of the community.

We do not propose to interfere with the rights of property. On the contrary, we are sticklers for the rights of property. What a man makes by his own exertion, whether of hand or of brain, that we hold to be his against all the world. If a man plows a field and plants a crop, we say that he alone is entitled

to reap it. If a man builds a house he ought to have it and all of it; and we say that it is unjust and a violation of the sacred rights of property when our tax gatherers come down and say to a man because he has cultivated his soil, because he has built a house, because he has produced or accumulated wealth, therefore the state demands a certain portion of it from him. We say that such a system is unjust and that not one penny should be taken from a man because he has been industrious and thrifty.

We propose to leave to labor its entire product; we propose to take for the use of the community that value that is produced by no individual, that value which attaches to land, not by reason of what its owner does, but by reason of the growth and improvement of the whole community. We say that that is just, that it will give to the community what belongs to the community and leave entirely to the individual what rightfully belongs to the individual; and being just, we say that it is wise.

We say that it is bad policy to tax men for what they add to the common stock of wealth; that he is a benefactor who makes two blades of grass grow where one grew before; that the man who builds a house is doing something not merely for himself, but for the whole community; and that it is stupid to tax man for building houses, or cultivating fields, or erecting factories, or building ships, or doing anything whatever that adds to the common stock of wealth; that the state should encourage industry, not discourage it; that no tax should be laid upon the industry that produces or the trift that accumulates; that in this great fund that comes from nothing that the individual does lies the proper, the intended means of supplying all public wants. That fund we propose to take by abolishing our present taxes and laying a single tax upon the value of land irrespective of improvements, increasing it as far and as fast as we can until it shall take as nearly as may be the whole value of the land.

Look in whatever direction you choose and see what benefits will spring from this simple change, how much fraud it will prevent, what temptation to bribery and corruption it will avoid . . . Now the enormous advantage of the system of taxation that we propose is that the tax can be certainly assessed, easily collected, and will give no room for much of the fraud that is now carried on, and will not offer the inducement to evasion that now exists.

Land can't run away; it can't be hidden; it lies out of doors; its value can be estimated with more certainty than any other value. And in putting taxes upon that single item we shall get rid of a horde of officials; we shall get rid of all these oaths that people in every direction are now required to take, of all the temptations to perjury that our present laws give, and shall raise our revenue without imposing any restriction upon production or diminishing it in the least. On the contrary, by imposing our taxes in this way we shall prevent that monopolization of natural opportunities† which everywhere restricts production, and in this broad and rich country is already producing the tramp and the pauper; that monopolization of natural opportunities that makes us, in the midst of abundance and plenty, think of work as something good in itself; which forces upon us even in the best of times the spectacle of thousands and hundreds of thousands of men willing to work, anxious to work, but unable to find the opportunity to work.

There, we hold, is the cause of all labor difficulties; there, we believe, is the cause of poverty. It is not the fault of the Almighty, this horrid, bitter struggle for existence that is the lot of so many thousands today; it is not caused by the niggardliness of the Creator. He has placed here enough, and to spare, for all of us. All we have to do is to prevent monopolization; all we have to do is to secure to each one his natural right.

This simple plan of ours will utterly stop the monopolization of land† by making it unprofitable. What is the temptation to the monopolization of land? Commissioner Sparks in his last report paints in very vivid colors the manner in which the public land has been appropriated by speculators and grabbers, by stretching grants, by making false entries, by everywhere getting hold of the land ahead of the settler. Why? In order to profit by the value that will begin to attach to the land as soon as there is a prospect of settlement coming.

The moment it is made certain that whenever a value shall attach itself to the land irrespective of the value produced by the labor upon it, such value will be taken for the use of the community, then the temptation to all this land grabbing will be utterly gone; and not merely will the temptation to land grabbing in the future be destroyed, but all the land that has been grabbed in the past will be released. Once tax the speculator who holds 160 acres of agricultural land vacant as heavily as the

farmer who has plowed his land, has cultivated a farm and made improvements; once tax the holder of a valuable building lot as much when it is vacant as a lot of like quality with a splendid house upon it; once make sure that as the value of land increases the tax upon it shall increase likewise, and the monopolizers who all over this land are holding vacant city lots, untilled agricultural lands and unworked mines from the man who would be glad to use them, will be forced to let them go.

See how the system would operate here in New York. Our vast population is crowded together, yet one-half the area of this city is not built upon! Why? Not because there is not need for more houses; not because there are not plenty of sites for houses; but because the building sites are held by men who will not or cannot use them themselves, and will not allow those who want to use them to have access to them unless they first pay an enormous price. The simple effect of the change in taxation which we propose would be to compel these men either to build upon those lots themselves or to sell them to somebody else who would. The moment the men who are holding land without using it shall be compelled to use it or give it up there will be an abundance of land for all who want to use it. I don't mean to say that under those circumstances every man would go and build himself a house, or that all of those unemployed men throughout the country would take up farms and open mines; but this I do say, that enough could and would make use of these natural opportunities [i.e., land] for employment to relieve the glut in the labor market; taking themselves out of the fierce competition for wages of an employer, they would not only employ themselves, but in doing so — in producing wealth of some kind — they would be creating a demand for the labor of others in production. In that way it would be possible that any man willing to work should be able to find abundant opportunity to work; and the setting this vast force of unemployed men at productive labor would create a demand for commodities that would give new vigor to every branch of business.

These, in very brief outline, are the doctrines for which we stand.

NOTE — \*Original Title, *What The United Labor Party Want*.  
†Land monopoly yields monopoly rent. See *Condition of Labor*, first footnote.