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# Land, Labor, and Liberty

by Eugene V. Debs

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Population is steadily increasing, but the quantity of arable acres of land in the world is fixed, there can be no increase of land. The land question, whether recognized or not, has, from the first, been the supreme question. It is not worth while to burden our columns with argument showing that labor has created the wealth of the world, that capital is the child of labor, that without labor there would be no capital, without labor there would be no revenues, not a dollar would ever find its way into exchequers of governments. All writers capable of comprehending the simplest proposition in political economy, give to labor this supreme prominence, that labor creates all revenues, pays all debts and taxes, and yet these same writers with rare exceptions, if indeed an exception can be found, in classifying population, place laboring men at the bottom, and those who have been the most successful in robbing labor of its rights, at the top of the social system, made them the governing class always and invariably, seeking by various methods to impoverish and degrade labor. A writer, in describing the workingmen's program of the times, goes back to the middle ages and finds the same social grades existing as at present, and that

one grade and one element — the landed interest — dominated all the others. The reason is a simple one — the economic conditions of the time. Agricultural produce was the staple wealth. Trade was but slightly developed, manufacturing still less, and movable possessions were so little thought of in comparison with possession of the soil that chattels were alienable without the consent of the heirs, while property in land was not. Four highly important social consequences resulted from this predominance of the landed interest. First, the feudal system with its obligations of service in the field; second, the limitation of the right of representation to the owners of real estate; third, the exemption of landed proprietors from taxation, on the principle that a ruling, privileged class, invariably seeks to throw the burden of main-

taining the existence of the state on the oppressed classes that have no property; fourth, the contempt with which every labor and profession not connected with the land was socially regarded.<sup>1</sup>

To obtain possession of the land enabled the land owner to rule all other classes. The landed aristocrats were despots, their rule was "blood and iron," and if it be asked, has this rule come down to our times, to our day and generation, it is only required to study affairs as they exist in Ireland, and to note the tendency of land monopoly in the United States. The shibboleth of the working men of America is not only the equitable distribution of the capital which labor creates, but the equitable division of land, and eternal hostility to land monopoly. It is true that land monopoly in the United States has not met with the stubborn hostility the enormity of the crime against the welfare of the country demands, and this is all the more inexplicable since in the United States the workingmen have the ballot, and by federation could put an end to the monstrous iniquity. Such action is postponed, we assume, for various reasons. In the first place, we are lulled into security because it seems impossible that the vast area of our country admits of anything approximating land monopoly as it exists in European countries. The vastness of our domain seemingly precludes the possibility of land monopoly to an extent that shall at any future time embarrass the people. Such conclusions indicate stupidity, a total ignorance of the growth of population, of the tendencies of the times and of the grasping designs of men who have it in their power under the laws as they exist to obtain possession of the land of the republic. With 60 million people land is already scarce, and when another hundred years are gone, unless laws are enacted against land monopoly, a condition of things will exist in the United States in many regards not dissimilar to those which constituted the colossal curse of the middle ages. There is but one thing which can prevent it and that is the intelligence and the independent action of the working men of America. If they fail to comprehend the situation, if they can be hoodwinked by the monopoly press of the country, if they can be debauched by the money power, if they can not be influenced by considerations as vital as were ever set forth in any campaign for life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, then results

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<sup>1</sup> The editor believes it likely that this is a quotation extracted from an early English translation of work by **Ferdinand Lassalle** (1825-1864).

may be foreshadowed as certainly as if a skeleton hand were to write our doom on the blue vault of the sky. But there are encouraging signs of the times. The government is taking hold of the subject and millions of acres of arable lands are taken from the grasp of monopolists and given back to the people. Apostles of right are coming to the front and the work of agitation is going forward. Public opinion is assuming a more healthful tone and workingmen are federating and “Land, Labor, and Liberty” are becoming battle cries all along the line, and though victory may be delayed,

Still from the sire the son shall hear  
Of the stern strife,<sup>2</sup>

Until the battle is won and the victor’s shout shall be heard,  
“There is land for the landless.”

*Edited by Tim Davenport*

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<sup>2</sup> Snippet from *Marmion: A Tale of Flodden Field* (1808) by **Walter Scott** (1771-1832).