

The Robber Who Takes All

It's a good story. I'll tell it again, with acknowledgements to Henry George.

A traveler is wending his way homeward. His path is beset with highwaymen. One stops him, takes a part of his valuables and sends him on. Another repeats the process. So does a third, a fourth, and still others on to the last. This last takes all that is left, little or much.

In the same way these robbers treat all travelers who pass that way.

Query: How can the travelers protect themselves? By abolishing the first robber, the second, the third, or all of these?

You answer, By no means. So long as the robber who takes all that is left is permitted to do business, so long the traveler will reach home as poor as though all the robbers were left unmolested.

There you have the difference between "bourgeois public ownership" or "state capitalism," and socialism.

"Bourgeois public ownership" would leave some of the robbers in full swing. It would take over, for example, city gas, water, and, perhaps, some other "public utilities," but would leave city land in private hands. Real estate men would then advertise the superior advantages of this city over others; population would pour in and—up would go rents. What you saved from your public service monopolists you would lose to your land monopolists. What would be gained?

What is true in the city is true in the nation. To take over some public utilities and leave others in private hands would be saving at one bungle while wasting at another perhaps all you saved at first. So long as a single necessity of life is left in private hands so long "the robber who takes all that is left" can get in his work, and your public ownership will prove apples of Sodom turning to ashes on your lips.

What, then, is necessary to stop the stealing?

The plundered classes, i. e., the producers, must conquer the powers of government. They then must take over ALL the public utilities, ALL the necessities of life, and operate them collectively in the interest of the entire people. Nothing short of this can possibly do the work.

Is this what socialism stands for? It certainly is.

But after the producers have conquered the "powers of government," downed the robbers, big and little, turned the rascals out and begun running things in the interest of the producing classes, what then? Will it be necessary that all private industrial activity shall be done away, that the "government" shall run ALL the farms, ALL the shops, ALL the stores, ALL the theatres, ALL the schools, and ALL the newspapers, and establish such a system of universal "governmental bureaucracies" as Herbert Spencer conceived, and described as the "Coming Slavery," the bondage of the individual to the crowd?

Not a bit of it. In jumping out of the frying pan we don't want to land in the fire. It's exactly because individualistic radicals, as much opposed to exploitation and tyranny as any socialist can be, think that socialism stands for this, that they fight socialism as a gilded cage and a grave of freedom.

They hate the tyranny of the capitalist and landlord, but they dread the tyranny of the majority. To escape the bossism of the plutocrats they do not propose to substitute the bossism of the bureaucrats.

Well, what are you talking about now? You want to abolish the robber who takes all that is left? Undoubtedly.

And this requires public collective ownership, and democratic operation and control of every necessity of life? Exactly.

And yet, you don't want the public to own and run all industry and compel the capable workers to join the civil service or go to jail? Emphatically not. One of these evils would probably be as bad as the other.

Then where do you draw the line?

Nothing is easier, if we will look at the subject calmly. Read the last half of the socialist national platform to start with, then remember that while some means of production are necessities of life, others are not. Take, e. g., the things Simons speaks on "the brushes of the artist, the pen of the author, and the studios in which they work" (American Farmer, pp. 203-204). Are they means of production? Of course. If left in private hands will their owners become "the robbers who take all that is left"? No. How were such a thing possible?

But if such a thing should happen all we need to do is to treat these

productive means as we are now proposing to treat the railroads, oil trust, and coal trust.

The point to grasp is that public, collective ownership and operation is demanded not as an end, but as a means to an end; namely, "increasing the product and stopping exploitation." (Simons.) The robber industries must go; wealth must be multiplied; collective ownership and operation by the producing classes must accomplish this. This done, the individual who is hurting none, may employ his time as he likes.

And how about the little shops and stores and peanut stands? Are they public necessities? If left in private hands will they reduce us to beggary?

Well, hardly, so long as the people possess the ability, the will and the intelligence to establish public department stores and sell the same things at cost.

But what will then become of the little shops and stores?

They will probably be run out and their owners absorbed in the public industries. But, if they can survive, as many of them now do survive beside the great competitive department stores, well and good. The fact of their survival will prove their fitness; and the customer can patronize the public of private store at will, just as now he patronizes, at will, the public school, college or university for education, and the postoffice or express company for money orders.

And what of the farms?

Exactly the same principle applies here. The public enjoys the right to engage in whatever agricultural activities it sees fit, and the private individual ditto. The big bonanza farms, the Scullies, Dalrymples and absentee landlords will probably be handled in exactly the same way as the trust. Their property will be taken over by the public, "with or without compensation" as the majority, by referendum vote, may decide. The operations of agricultural colleges, experiment stations and the United States department of agriculture will doubtless be widely extended and products will, as now, be furnished to the people at cost or gratuitously.

Does this mean that all the little 80's and 160's will be confiscated as soon as the socialists carry the country?

Too silly a question to ask, you say? Yet it is the failure of the socialists to answer just such questions that is keeping thousands of farmers out of the socialist movement.

I answer these little farmers: We are not proposing to confiscate one of your farms. Whatever is done with the land will be done by your consent through referendum vote.

Valuable lands, as long as in private hands, should be subjected to the ground rent tax. Lands of slight value should be exempt from all taxation as in New Zealand.

Were I to advise the little farmers I should say: Take over the Scully lands, railroad lands, and alien-owned lands quick. On getting hold of state and national governments, supply the state and nation with ample funds, and urge them to do their best in agricultural lines.

While the "government" is getting its hand in, I advise such of you as can, especially your young men with agricultural training, to get into the public agricultural service; and I advise the rest of you to stay on your farms and see how the thing works out.

Meanwhile, I advise you to make the amplest use of the vast powers of government to improve your condition where you are, and to make life on the farm worth living.

Then, as soon as it is wise to do so, I advise the bulk of you to turn your farms over to the "government" when, instead of having to work fourteen or sixteen hours a day for a poor living, you can, on perhaps five or six hours a day, enjoy a good living.

Some of you however, will want to stay out of the public service just as some now want to stay out. So long as by staying out you are injuring no one, you have a perfect right to stay out as long as you please.

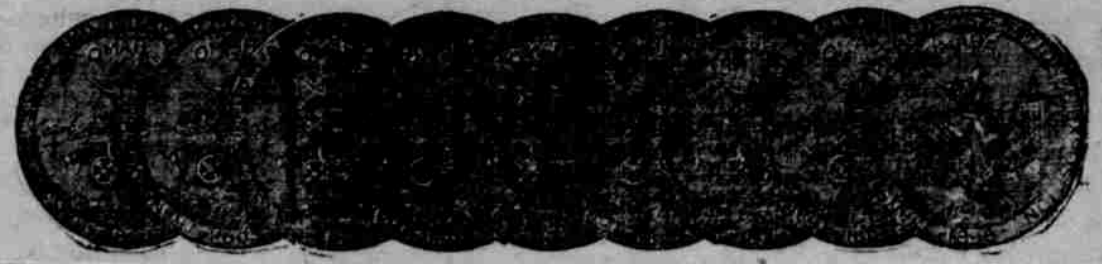
But what we want now is to stop the stealing. This done, there will be plenty of time to decide whether or not we shall all join the civil service. Of one thing rest assured, we shall not force ourselves to join it nor permit anyone else to force us to do so.

THOMAS ELMER WILL.

President American Socialist College, Wichita, Kas., and Secretary-Treasurer Socialist Party of Kansas.

James Armstrong, Forman, Mich., a not now taking any populist paper and requests that samples be sent him for examination. He is getting interested in the revival of populism.

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