

400th Anniversary — the First Black Slaves in Virginia

A speech given by Mike Curtis at Arden Delaware in 2019 commemorating the 180th anniversary of the birth of Henry George.

This is the 400th anniversary of the first black slaves in the Virginia colony. By 1860 slaves made up the vast majority of what was considered capital in the southern states.

Britain had abolished slavery at home more than 30 years before the United States—but, by 1830 the wages of the English agricultural workers were not much more than the food, clothing, and shelter paid to American slaves.

In 1860 the United States had, by far, the highest wages in the world. It is no wonder the slaves were so valuable, or that their owners were willing to go to war over the possibility of losing their assets.

Remember, the United States acquired a million square miles with the conquest of Mexico in 1848, and it would be another 25 years after the civil war, and after the Oklahoma Land Rush, before the free land was gone and wages began that long slow slide down—tending toward the minimum of food, clothing, and shelter paid to slaves.

It may have taken a decade or so, but, once the southern plantation owners got back their land, and even before the Federal troops were gone, they employed terrorists to transform the landless freed-men into serfs and wage slaves. They paid them little more than the food, clothing, and shelter they had paid them as slaves, and after that, no one had a vested interest in keeping them healthy.

Well, here we are, 150 years after the Civil war and the end of chattel slavery. Wages of the least skilled and educated workers, white, black, red, and yellow, tend to an amount below which they would get weak and produce less wealth. The wages of superior workers, no matter how much they produce, tend to an amount below which they would lose their incentive to acquire the greater skills and knowledge.

We have intervened with the legal Minimum Wage, the eight-hour day, OSHA, Unemployment insurance, Workman's Compensation, Social Security, and Medicare. That's a whole lot better than the Alabama Slave Code of 1852. It mandated only that the owner provide their slaves of working age a sufficiency of healthy food, clothing, attention during illness, and necessities in old age. None-the-less, one person produces,

and another person consumes, which is the motivation and the essence of slavery.

You don't need a degree in economics or physics to know you can't make something out of nothing—that land is the requisite to human existence. It is on the land that we live, and from it we produce our food, clothing, and shelter. To say that some people have a greater right to land, because they have inherited or purchased it, is just as clearly to say they have a greater right to life, because they have inherited or purchased land.

Through the machinations of land speculators, it's not only our universities but our legislators that have exorcised the bounty of nature from the science of political economy. Our laws make no distinction between the gifts of nature and the buildings and machinery that are produced by labor to give it a greater efficiency. It is all categorized as capital and called property, as though it were produced by the first people who were assigned it.

I don't say our government is totally corrupt, every elected official isn't syphoning public funds for themselves and their family, but the foundation of our economic system has been corrupted by the notion that land is property. Yes, we have made private property out of the natural opportunities, and in the process, we have caused a shortage of jobs, driven wages to a minimum, made the cost of housing exorbitant, eliminated the return on savings, and caused depressions and recessions. And, we have created personal fortunes larger than most of us can even imagine.

While the scholars and politicians have covertly combined land with the products of labor, it is not by their ownership of buildings and machines that the 1% and the point 1% of the population are able to capture the lion's share of what the vast majority produce.

The 1% and the point 1% may very well own the majority of the factories and machines in this country, but their power to take what other people produce, to amass gigantic fortunes, comes from their ownership of the land underneath. Whether it is the two billion acres of agricultural land, or the mineral lands with oil and gas, or the ground under the central business districts, or the land under all of the rental housing, or the air waves used by TV and Cell Phones, or the right-of-way's that deliver utilities—it is the title to the gifts of nature that gives them the power to take what other people produce, and to become the sole beneficiaries of material progress.

To be sure, land is not the only government granted monopoly that gives a license to steal. Perhaps the banks and the drug companies are getting as much as a trillion dollars a year. But, it is obvious—if we could end their larceny, the owners of land would inherit

the spoils.

Today, we are all nominally free, but every landless person is dependent, directly or indirectly, upon a landowner for a job and a place to live. You can choose your landlord, if he agrees, but, the landless are, none-the-less, wage slaves. And no particular landowner has any monetary interest in their health and wellbeing.

There are still more than a dozen Democratic candidates competing for their party's nomination to the presidency. Every one of them is talking about legislation to enhance the lives of the American worker—especially the middle class—which includes everyone earning more than the Minimum Wage, and is not yet a multi-millionaire.

Universal healthcare may be at the top of the list, and while it would certainly be a godsend to the workers—it will also be the cheapest way to keep the labor pool in good working condition. Next is a better educated workforce. That is the first thing that landowners must have if they are going to compete with the rest of the world.

Raising the legal Minimum Wage would certainly enhance the lives and happiness of our wage slaves—as long as the landlords can be prevented from taking in increased housing rents what the workers got in a pay raise. It is probably the best way to prevent the return of conditions that plagued America's cities at the turn of the 20th century, when Pneumonia and tuberculosis pervaded the population, ruined families, and grossly reduced the production of wealth. An increase in the Minimum Wage might very well pay for itself with a higher degree of public health and social harmony. But, it doesn't diminish land speculation, so it can't create jobs, which is the normal way that wages rise.

With nearly a million Green Card immigrants coming into the country every year, these already skilled and educated workers increase the supply and reduce the wages of superior workers who are already here. What is good for the landlords is good for the economy, is good for the country. Native born workers: "There just aren't enough of you with the right skills and education to fill all the jobs." The fact that only 1.6% of the 12 million illegal immigrant workers were deported each year before the recession, tells me: What is good for the landlords is good for the economy is good for the country. Of course, we could stop land speculation (non-use and under-use of valuable land), if we chose to. And if we did, we could assimilate the entire population of Mexico, and Britain would still be three and a half times more densely populated than the United States.

Over sixty percent of Americans now own or are buying a partial freedom. They own a house with a plot of land—or they're buying one. Once you get that fixed rate 30-year

mortgage, no one can ever raise your rent again—no matter how much the land increases in value. And every percent of inflation reduces the interest and the principle owed on your mortgage. Why else would we go to such extremes to qualify for a mortgage and buy an overpriced house. If it weren't for this, a lot more Americans would be living in poverty. None-the-less, the recession pushed 5% of recent homeowner-mortgagees back into renters.

We can tax the rich directly or we can tax the workers, but just about all taxes come out of what would otherwise go to owners of land. Take-home-wages and welfare can only go so low before the resulting crime and disorder create the social conditions that diminish the income from land and drag us down to a second or third world despotism.

Put a hundred people on an island from which there is no escape—and whether you make one the owner of the island or the other 99 makes no difference to him or to them. They are his slaves. Whether it is chattel slavery or wage slavery, Whether the slaves get both Saturdays and Sundays off, or, whether it provides meritorious wages that allows some people to buy land, and with it their freedom, slavery is wrong and I stand here and now against it.

Yet, we need not abolish land titles and go back to hunting and gathering. The Single Tax on the rental value of land would harness the rent of land, and convert it from the insidious mechanism that enslaves the masses, into a benevolent instrument that measures the benefits received. It would generate a true equality of opportunity for all, and share the socially created values as a true commonwealth. The Single Tax would deliver freedom and justice in the production and distribution of wealth.

Madam Chairman.