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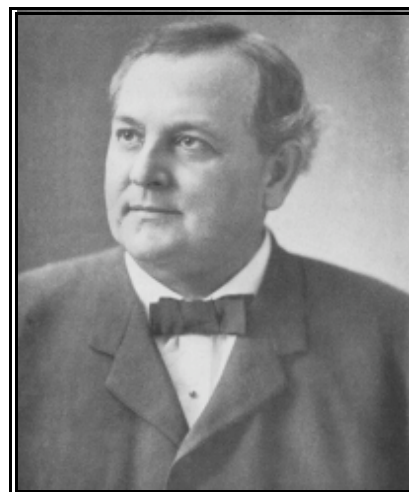
EDITORIAL

TOM L. JOHNSON.

By DANIEL DE LEON

THE passing of Tom Johnson behind the veil removes from the public stage of this country a figure and mentality which, so far as our observation goes, had no second in the land.

The appearance of a successful soap manufacturer, of several manufacturers of watches, or agents for the same, of even prominent land speculators and many other such others as active “workers” in the Single Tax camp puzzled nobody. Our people’s alert powers of penetration saw through the phenomenon. These personalities merely sought to advertise their wares. The Single Tax movement offered them an opportunity, the price of which they were willing to pay for, and often did pay for in fat, round sums as donations. The bigger the “donation,” all the more noise it made, hence, all the better the investment as adv. No one ever insulted Tom Johnson by suspecting him of ranking with this set.



THOMAS LOFTIN JOHNSON
(1854–1911)

Notably above the category of men who hitch on to a Movement for the purpose of turning it into a bill-posting fence for their wares, Tom Johnson was a puzzle to many. A successful street railroad operator, owner of successful foundries and other upper capitalist plants, Tom Johnson’s interests were taken to be bound up too closely with conservative interests for him to busy himself with the Single Tax. The puzzle that Tom Johnson was to many, while it did justice to his character, revealed the shallowness of the puzzled.

Tom Johnson was a clean and charming relic of the bourgeois, when the bourgeois began to “feel his oats” in history: At that early stage, the bourgeois, the

carrier of a necessary revolution, the revolution that was to overthrow feudalism, felt in his veins the pulsations that ever accompany the impulse for a higher order of things. Nothing that the bourgeois did, the instant he found himself “in the saddle,” may be justly discounted from the loftiness of his early aspirations and utterances. He was in motion “in the right direction”; freedom for himself being his aim, he naturally took himself for the carrier of Freedom for all the underdogs of feudal society. That, under these circumstances, the early bourgeois should hold his own class interests supreme and the all-sufficient guarantee of emancipation was in the order of things. The tax was a badge of servitude—to tax was a privilege of sovereignty. Land, feudal property, was free from taxation; wares, moveables, bourgeois property, bore the burden of taxation. Accordingly, the early bourgeois’ war cry—the war cry of the class that aimed at the overthrow of the then sovereign class, and at the seizure of sovereignty for itself—was the abolition of all taxes except a tax single upon land. Thus sprang up the Single Tax as an economic theory nearly a hundred and fifty years ago.

Though abandoned, along with all his aspirations after freedom for all, soon as the bourgeois had triumphed, that is, soon as himself became an exploiter, the Single Tax was the material song to which the cradle of the great bourgeois revolution was rocked. That cradle song still echoed in the ear of Tom Johnson.

Tom Johnson was a lone survival of a species long since swept away by the logic of social evolution. As a surviving type of the early bourgeois, there was nothing puzzling in the posture of a successful capitalist advocating the Single Tax, and in his doing so with clean hands and a clean mind, in the honest, however erroneous, conviction that in that sign economic freedom and human emancipation would triumph.

Transcribed and edited by Robert Bills for the official website of the Socialist Labor Party of America.
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slpns@slp.org