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Prison Labor

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The prison labor problem brings up in another way the same fundamental question which lies at the bottom of the tariff controversy. Through the failure to make the necessary appropriation for continuing work a great part of the convicts in the New York state prisons are already locked up in idleness, and unless some legislative action is taken there will be in a few weeks no work for any of them. The legislature has been called together by Governor Hill, but the same difficulty which prevented the making of appropriations at the regular session confronts it - the idea that the employment of convicts in remunerative work lessens the amount of work that free laborers can get. This is the same idea which gives its popular strength to protection. At the bottom both of the restrictions on the importation of foreign products and of the opposition to prison labor lies the notion that work is a fixed quantity - that the doing of productive work by one people or by one individual prevents the doing of it by another people or another individual; that instead of being a means to an end - the production of wealth - work is in itself a precious thing that we ought to save for ourselves, by preventing other people from doing it. The demand that convicts shall be supported at public expense without doing anything to support themselves, or that they shall be put to unremunerative labor, seems irrational enough, but the idea from which it springs have been industriously fomented by one part of the press and negatively indorsed by the other. It is but one of the paradoxes that spring from our denial to labor of access to the natural opportunities of labor. The monopolization of land that we

encourage produces an artificial scarcity of the element on which and from which labor can alone be exerted, that shows itself in an artificial scarcity of employment - in a seeming superabundance of labor. The legislature may patch as it will at the prison problem. It is but one of the many pressing and threatening social questions that can only be settled by going to the root of all labor questions, and opening to labor the natural opportunities for employment.

Signed: Henry George,

July 21, 1888.