

THE PEOPLE

VOL. II., NO. 11.

NEW YORK, SUNDAY, JUNE 12, 1892.

PRICE 3 CENTS.

THE PROFESSIONAL WORKINGMAN

By Daniel De Leon

The field of the Labor Movement produces a little insect—a sort of sheep-louse—whose workings it is interesting to watch.

The thing has a summer and winter season all of its own, and they are not strictly astronomic. The weather is chilly and unfavorable to its development when no political campaign is on, but promotes its growth and activity by the approach of a boodle political conflict. Between campaign and campaign, this insect burrows underground; it is then weak as a soft-shell crab, and, like the soft-shell crab, it then avoids coming in collision, or even contact, with hard substances. Just as soon, however, as a campaign begins to throw out its rays, our insect begins to show signs of life, and even to become fresh. It does it in this wise.

It preserves, namely, carefully a footing in some trade organization, although, as a rule, by a pure fiction. As a rule, it does not work “at its trade”; yea, not infrequently, it is itself an employer and direct skinner of labor. This notwithstanding, it manages, by hook or by crook, to keep its place in the ranks of labor, which, as the scheming insect that it is, it uses simply as it would a heap of manure to keep itself warm during cold, and from which to start operations in warm weather. As warm weather, i.e., a campaign approaches, it begins to talk big; it grows then loud and conspicuous in its declamation against independent political action by the workingmen; it gets itself appointed on committees innumerable, however insignificant these be; it keeps its name before the public, and advertises itself generally like a regular patent medicine. By the time the preliminaries of a campaign are well started, it is “in condition”; it has caught the alert eye of the politicians; it has acquired with them a reputation as a “Labor Leader”; and it gets from them its “expenses” paid to go on the stump in behalf of one of the two labor-skinning parties, or it receives a “promise,” or occasionally it is actually appointed “alternate” to some convention of capitalist politicians.

What is the food this insect feeds upon? Does it draw the wages, which

the politician gives it, from its own intellect? Surely not! Intellectually, and in every other respect, it is inferior to any of the veteran lackeys of capital who regularly do the spouting during a campaign. Neither its eloquence nor knowledge, character nor capacity is worth mentioning; these are of the lowest order. What it gets paid for, in the shape of “expenses” or “alternateships,” is something entirely different—*it gets paid for the flesh and blood of its fellow-workmen, which it is supposed to be able to deliver.*

And right here occurs one of the oddest features in the live and work of the insect under examination. The working class has the majority of votes; it could do and undo, just as it pleased; he who could actually deliver it or a large portion of it to this purchaser or that should surely be able to get a better price for his merchandise than simple promises, or even “expenses,” most assuredly something more tangible than the mock honor of “alternateships.” How, then, does it happen that the above is all our insect gets? There are two reasons for it. In the first place, receivers of stolen goods never pay good prices for the stuff delivered to them; but, furthermore, the receiver of stolen goods in this case—the politician, namely—shrewdly guesses that our insect is not as big a purloiner of workmen’s votes as he represents himself. In this guess the politician is profoundly correct. Our insect cannot control votes enough to man a sinking oyster-smack; its very existence among the working-class is of the most precarious; and it is, in fact, an object of widespread and deep reaching suspicion. Nevertheless, “rather a friend than an enemy,” thinks the politician; and as he anyhow does not expect much from the insect, he throws only a sop at the thing, say a ridiculous “alternateship,” and the insect greedily snatches at that like a scurvy and hungry dog.

There is much more to be said upon this queer product; the above, however, are its salient features—the features of the “Professional Workingman.”

[Transcribed by Robert Bills for the official Web site of the Socialist Labor Party of America.
Uploaded April 2002]