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SECOND EDITORIAL

Points Thick as Blackberries

By DANIEL DE LEON

A New York daily published last Sunday a dialogue between a carpenter and a lawyer of which the following are the leading passages:

“An industrious carpenter, equipped with plane, adze, and saw, was fixing up a door that had got out of gear in the house of a lawyer, who sat watching him at work.

“ ‘Tell me just what it is,’ said the lawyer to the carpenter, who had taken up his adze, ‘that the discontented workingmen want.’

“ ‘I speak only for my own trade when I say that every man in it wants to get out of it, and that is about the thing for every trade, so far as I know, but I think that, more than anything else, the men in most trades want to get out of them and look for some other chance. I can speak for the carpenters, any how, because I am the Secretary for a branch of the Brotherhood and have talked all my life with men at our meetings. I would like to run a store of my own, or to be a contractor, or to have a potato patch in the country, or to be a traveling agent, or anything else by which I could leave the carpenter’s trade. And I believe that nine men out of ten in every trade feel just as I do. ’”

“The lawyer then told the carpenter that carpenters seemed to be just like lawyers, as more than half of the lawyers whom he knew would like to get out of practice if they could find any better way of making a living. He also expressed the opinion that thus it had been from the beginning all around, and so it would be to the end, unless human nature is changed.”

The points in this lie thick as blackberries. Let us pick out two, and leave the others for future reference as occasion may serve.

There is no pursuit, whether manual or “intellectual” but is overcrowded. In no trade and no profession is there elbow room. The crowds that crowd upon all the avenues for a living resemble in their magnitude a veritable flood. Whence this flood? The uncritical frequently imputes it to immigration. Yet it can be mathematically proved that for every one human being thrown upon the manual or the professional labor market by an ocean steamer from abroad, at least five are dumped by new and by improved machinery, together with concentrated capitalist forces. The experience of the carpenter and the lawyer in the above dialogue, together with that of all others similarly circumstanced, is much like that of the man ashore, who perceives the tide rushing in out of season, and who, having no barometer, is ignorant of the fact that the phenomenon he sees is but the harbinger of a cyclone, still distant, but approaching like fate, and destined to break over his head if he does not get away from under.

This first point leads to the second. How frequently does not one hear the claim advanced that the workingman is too ignorant to emancipate himself and that he must look to the “cultured” for help. If by “culture” positive knowledge were meant, it were undeniable that “culture” is needed for successful work; but by “culture” positive knowledge is not generally meant; what is generally meant is “education” in the general acceptance of the word. Now, the views expressed by our lawyer demonstrate how impotent and barren such “culture” or “education” is. It demonstrates that the “cultured” professional does not stand one inch higher than the “uncultured” mechanic, as far as an understanding of the Social Question is concerned.

Not only does our lawyer stand before the phenomon that confronts him just as blind as his ignorant workman, but he reveals still greater depths of ignorance. Not to be able to see into the future may be the result of inability to co-ordinate thought; but to be unaware of facts that lie behind us reveals unpardonable ignorance on the part of the “cultured,” and throws valuable light upon their tribe.

Our lawyer expresses the view that this overcrowding and its resultant eagerness to change occupations “has always been, and always will be.” Now, this is not true; the reverse is the truth. In the days of small production and of artisan life, and the further back we go the truer is the statement, not only were the occupations not crowded, but people clung with affection and even doggedness to the pursuit they once adopted, and which not infrequently was even hereditary in the family. It is a feature of the system that immediately preceded capitalism, and with which capitalism has played such sad havoc, that it tended to breed the caste, professional guilds, family and tribal occupations, around which family and ancestral traditions clung and from which nothing but social convulsions could tear the people.

The “culture” of our “cultured” classes is trash. Their unfitness to do the thinking and

the leading in the oncoming Social Revolution is revealed every time they are imprudent enough to open their mouths.

A De Leon editorial transcribed and edited by Robert Bills for the Official Web site of the Socialist Labor Party of America.

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