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EDITORIAL

“THE PURSUIT OF LUXURIES.”

By DANIEL DE LEON

FOR undue exaggeration and the confounding of fact with fiction the average newspaper editorial is to be commended. More harmful and misleading assertions can be found in a paragraph of such an editorial than a statistician can undo in an elaborate article. Written with a view of establishing an un-sound position, the average newspaper editorial is characterized by a display of recklessness and a lack of caution and circumspection that make it utterly unworthy of confidence or belief.

A recent issue of the *Wall Street Journal* furnishes a case in point. In an editorial entitled “The Pursuit of Luxuries,” dealing with the well-known and perfectly legitimate desire of American communities for other than the bare necessities of life, the *Journal* sweepingly declares:

“The pursuit of luxuries, rather than of necessities, of life is one of the leading characteristics of the age and the land in which we live. The competition of existence for the bare necessities is not so keen as in other ages. The competition for luxuries has been carried to a point of nerve tension unparalleled in the history of the country. Bountiful harvests, year after year, protect us from famine. We have as a people enough and to spare of food to eat and clothes to wear, and this without undue exertion.”

The recklessness of these assertions is apparent when it is recollected that millions of workers in this country are struggling along on an average wage of \$1.50 a day, census figures. The contempt for “the bare necessities,” and “the pursuit of the luxuries” of life which this munificent wage permits, is more easily imagined than described. These men, further, consume their life-tissue in sweatshop, in mill, in mine, and on the railroads, under such stress as to increase the mortality among them. The census figures for 1890 show the death rate for males in occupations to

have been 13.8 per cent. as compared to 15.3 per cent. for 1900. And it is among those occupations contributing directly to the production of "the bare necessities" that the increase is highest, the flour milling industry, for instance, showing an increase in mortality from 17.3 per cent. in 1890 to 26.6 per cent. in 1900. This surely does not reflect a condition in which the essentials of life, much less its luxuries, are produced in superabundance "without undue exertion."

Further evidence of the recklessness of these statements is furnished in still another manner. The *Wall Street Journal*, in support of the paragraph above quoted, says:

"In the annual report of the department of labor the results of a careful investigation of the cost of living are given. Upon a basis of 2,567 families, with an average of 5.31 persons per family, the average income per family being \$827.19, the average expenditure was \$768.54, of which \$326.90 was for food. We are not told definitely for what articles of food or clothing or furniture the family income was expended, but it is clear that the necessities of life do not constitute the chief burden upon the family purse."

That this is pure assertion made for the purpose of bolstering up an untenable position a little further consideration of the report mentioned will make clear. The report shows that 42.54 per cent. of the family income is spent for food. Payments on account of principal and interest on mortgages, taxes, property (things almost as scarce as hens' teeth among \$800 families), and life insurance, labor and other organization fees, religion, charity, books and newspapers, amusements and vacations, intoxicating liquors, sickness and death, absorb 14.51 per cent. Rent 12.95 per cent.; clothing, 14.04 per cent.; fuel and lighting, 5.25 per cent.; furniture and utensils, 3.42 per cent.; tobacco, 1.42 per cent., and miscellaneous purposes, 5.87 per cent. From all of which one can see that rent, fuel and lighting, clothing, furniture and utensils, and the expenditures for life insurance, sickness and death, labor and other organizations, all necessities under modern capitalism, consume, together with food, the vast bulk of the total income of these EXCEPTIONAL families selected for the statistical purposes of the department of labor. In fewer words the report quoted by the *Wall Street Journal* does not bear out the conclusion arrived at by it, viz., "it is clear that the necessities of life do not constitute the chief

burden upon the family purse.”

The average newspaper has an object in publishing such assertions, and the object of the *Wall Street Journal* is to furnish reasons for wholesale wage reductions, for it argues that the depression now on will emancipate the country from the slavery to luxury which is afflicting it. With the working class rolling in luxuries wage reductions become not only necessary, but beneficial, according to this line of argument; so why should not the wage workers submit to them? This view will find its way into the capitalist press commonly read by the working class, and will be employed against the latter by gullible workingmen.

Workingmen out on such editorials and such a press! Support your own, the Socialist Labor Party press!

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