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EDITORIAL

## ONCE MORE, THE REFERENDUM.

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**T**HERE is sometimes danger that the recurrence of a fact, so far from teaching, has the effect of habituating the mind to the thing, until it acquires the force of "inevitable," and its lesson is lost. The returns of the suffrage on propositions submitted to a popular vote are of this kind. There is a danger that the lesson they teach and the light they throw upon the reformers' cry for the referendum will be lost. All the more urgent is the emphasizing of the lesson.

On the 16th instant, the city of Philadelphia was to pass upon a loan proposal involving \$16,000,000. Rarely was a vote so slight as on this occasion. Indifference marked the election. Here in New York, we have had referendum votes on canals, even on the constitution of the State. Not at all wonderful to say, on neither question was there any evidence of deep interest. Just the reverse. The vote on these propositions lagged far behind the totals for candidates. And so everywhere else. And it is natural; but natural tho' it be, the important lesson the fact teaches seems to be wholly lost upon the reformer.

The referendum is a weapon or tool of civilized society. Capitalist conditions are uncivilized. The structure of capitalist society is built along the plummet of strife; it is reared on the cornerstone of conflict; it is inspired by the breath of hostility between man and man and woman and child. The legislation that springs from such sources is and must be essentially complicated. No law can be enacted, and none repealed, but dovetails into every nook and corner of legislation and of social interests. Such conditions are to-day irrational; they are uncivilized; so long as they last they exclude the essence of the principle on which the referendum rests, to wit, brotherly, harmonious social relations.

The ballot is a tool and not a magic wand. It can do no more than those who wield it have intelligence to wield it with. It is an honest acknowledgment on the

part of the masses that they can not pass judgment on these referendums, when we see the masses leaving them alone. And how could the masses be fit to judge in such matters, when lawyers, who have nothing else to do but study the law, are themselves so much at sea that wrangle is the law of their existence? Existing conditions necessarily remove legislation from the masses, and compel a reduction of the ballot to the minimum, that is, instead of passing upon legislation, it feels fitter to pass upon the legislator. As well try to sew a sail with a silk needle, or a silk cloth with a bodkin as seek to wield the bodkin of the referendum on the tangled, flimsy web of capitalist society.

To-day, the simple ballot for candidates is the only tool applicable and wieldable. Once expert in its handling, the people can oust therewith the representatives of capitalism from their political fastnesses; sweep aside the crazy-quilt of capitalist legislation and interests; and establish a rational social system. Then the referendum will be applicable, and then, not before, will it be available.

Until then, the reformer—the honest ones—is putting the cart before the horse; like his sociologic twin the Greenbacker, who aims at Socialist money—a consequence of Socialist production—before Socialist production is in vogue, the referendumist is aiming at the Socialist ballot, before Socialist society is established.

Transcribed and edited by Robert Bills for the official Web site of the Socialist Labor Party of America.

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