

THE PEOPLE.

VOL. I, NO. 15.

NEW YORK, SUNDAY, JULY 12, 1891.

PRICE 3 CENTS.

LABOR AND THE MILITIA.

The Brooklyn *Eagle*, a paper by no means devoted to the interests of the working classes in general and of organized labor in particular, came out last week with a specific statement concerning the rejection of labor men by the officers of the Forty-seventh regiment. The only respect in which this statement could be considered as news was the fact of its publication by a capitalist organ, for it has long been known that—as furthermore stated in another article published by the same paper on the following day—“It is customary for the commandant of every regiment to ask applicants for membership if they are members of labor organizations, and if they will agree to make their oath of allegiance to the State superior to all other pledges.” In the 1st article, however, a report is given as follows of an interview with Colonel Austen of the Thirteenth Regiment:

It stands to reason that men who belong to labor organizations cannot become members of the national guard without canceling their oaths to the other organizations to which they belong. In nearly all unions and workingmen's associations members are required to swear that they will never raise hands against their brother members or against their organizations; that they will obey the orders of the heads of the bodies to which they belong, and that they will, under all circumstances, remain loyal to their unions. A man cannot stick to an oath like that and still be a desirable member of the national guard. When a recruit is brought to me I ask him first if he belongs to any labor organization. If he says he does I explain to him that in entering the guard he is required to take an oath enjoining him to support the constitution, to preserve the peace of the State and to faithfully discharge all the duties of a soldier in the national guard. I tell him that he may be called upon to help suppress labor riots, and point out that the requirements of such an oath must conflict with those of the oath of allegiance to his labor organization. Then I ask him, whether, understanding all this, he will make his oath to the State superior to all oaths under all circumstances. If his answer be yes, that ends it. If his answer be no, he is rejected. No man can faithfully discharge his duties as a soldier who does not regard his oath of

allegiance to the State superior to all other pledges. The national guard is an organized force for the preservation of order, and, if its members were to stick to pledges which conflicted with the requirements of the guard, what would be the use of having a guard at all? As a matter of course there are many men in my regiment, and in all the others as well, who belong to labor organizations, but it is safe to say that there is not a man in the guard who would go back on his oath to the State in case of riot or other labor trouble. If all workmen were excluded from the national guard it would be a sorry body. Some of its best members are also members of labor organizations—men who would be most available and most useful in time of trouble. Take the skilled mechanic, for instance. It might come in very handy to have a man in the ranks who is able to take a locomotive apart, or do work of a similar nature. There are many such men in the national guard and not one of them but regards his oath to the State superior to all pledges to labor organizations. Men are not rejected because they belong to labor organizations. They are rejected, however, if they will not swear to preserve order and to be loyal to the State in preference to any organized body, labor or otherwise.

“It stands to reason” that Colonel Austen’s talk is extremely foolish and his conduct absolutely treasonable. If the pledges required from their members by labor organizations are contrary to the constitution, these organizations should not and certainly would {not} be allowed to exist. But so long as they are lawful bodies, whose right to exist is not only guaranteed by the constitution but recognized by courts of justice which cannot be suspected of using their most elastic powers of constitutional interpretation and legal construction in favor of labor unions, what right has Col. Austen, in his official capacity, to ask any citizen if he is one of their members and to actually disfranchise him in case of an affirmative answer?

It is the height of absurdity to say as he does in his last sentence that “men are not rejected because they belong to labor organizations,” when his first utterance is that “men who belong to labor organizations cannot become members of the national guard without cancelling their oaths to those organizations.”

The discrimination against labor men is otherwise obvious. No such repudiation of previous oaths is demanded from members of other constitutional and lawful organizations, or even of bodies supposed to be so secret that the State could not investigate their character and purpose. A

Mason, for instance, or an Odd Fellow, or a Knight of Pythias, is asked no question as such. (Nay; it even appears that the corner-stone of the armory of the Thirteenth regiment is to be laid in October “with full Masonic honors.”) No such questioning of possible conduct under hypothetical circumstances is practiced in the case of a member of the Sacred Order of the Four Hundred, or a notorious lackey, agent or retainer of this law-despising, law-breaking, un-democratic and un-patriotic gang. Obviously, in the eyes of Colonel Austen and such-like, workingmen associated for mutual protection are opposed to the constitution, they are the natural enemies of peace, order and their own country, and the presumption is, therefore, that, being a dangerous element in society, they would prove a still more dangerous element in the militia, which, if such as Austen be correct, is established for the special purpose of keeping labor in subjection; whereas the plutocratic class can, under no circumstances, become riotous, but may always be trusted to support the law by all lawful means—such, for instance, as the employment of Pinkertons when the official powers of the State refuse the assistance of the militia, or the lynching of prisoners acquitted by the courts.

Colonel Austen may be, and probably is, a very ignorant and, therefore, prejudiced man—in the particular matter, at least, of which he has spoken so rashly. Hence the stupid falsehoods and glaring contradictions with which his short “interview” abounds. We should like, however, to get better acquainted with him and may at an early date give him an opportunity of “setting himself right” by answering, in his turn, a few questions that we propose to ask him in the name of organized labor.

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