

Daniel De Leon

Editorial: Asking the Wrong Man

In last week's issue of the *Journal of the Knights of Labor*, General Master Workman T.V. Powderly strikes a despondent key. The idea of a Workingmen's Congress seems impracticable to him. He seems to see little prospect of our uniting upon what we want. In proof of this he says: "What do we want? Ask Kansas, and she will say 'Freedom from the mortgage-holder.' Ask Colorado, and she will say 'Free Silver,'" etc., etc.

The trouble with our General Master Workman is that he is asking the wrong man.

He who attempts to obtain unity of purpose among the property-holding, labor employing and fleecing classes, has indeed a job before him that will set him crazy; the thing is impossible to-day, and will daily become less and less feasible.

It is the feature of the property-holding class that it is a house divided against itself; and it is the law of its evolution, that the nearer it draws to the point of its final extinction the more antagonistic are the interests of its members. The property-holding, though mortgaged small farmers, have interests opposed to the large farmers; the silver mine baron wants his own commodity declared bullion, and it is at daggers-drawn with the miners of some other more fortunate commodity than his own; and so forth. To try to fraternize all of these in a permanent way is to try to fraternize fire and water. No unity is possible there.

But why should these boss classes be at all consulted or

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“asked,” least of all by the officer of a working people’s Organization?

Let General Master Workman Powderly turn from these to the workingmen’s class. Let him turn to the farm hands whom the farmers of Kansas exploit and to the mechanics in that State; let him turn to the downtrodden miners of Colorado and the rest of the workingmen there; let him apply to that class throughout the nation; and the answers he will receive, if he puts his question clear and pointed enough, will not make him feel despondent. One of them will not ask to be freed from mortgage-holders, and another to enforce any special commodity upon the people. They are all the possessors of one, and the same, and only thing—Labor Power. For this thing they all want the same opportunities. Their interests are one. Only they can be united.

Despondency, hopelessness and apathy are the sure rewards of all those, who, striving to be “practical,” refuse to base their actions upon facts. In asking the wrong man, the boss class, and ignoring the right man, the working class, General Master Workman Powderly furnishes the explanation of the failure that has accompanied his career.

“What do we want?” We answer for the Knights of Labor and the American working class in general: “The opportunity to enjoy the returns of our labor and to become economically free; the abolition of the wage system; and the establishment of the Co-operative Commonwealth.”

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*A De Leon editorial transcribed and edited by Robert Bills for the
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