

Daniel De Leon

Editorial: Judge Hilton's Mission

A party calling himself Judge Hilton is in town to boom Oklahoma. He proposes to give lectures upon the subject; last Sunday he appeared before the Central Labor Union to ask its co-operation, and, among other things, he stated that "300,000 unemployed workers in congested cities could find in that territory opportunity to start as 'small fry' farmers". We do not wish to be uncharitable toward, or harsh upon, Judge Hilton; but leaving him, his motives and his objects, whatever they may be, out of the question, we are bound to warn our people against yielding to such deceptive allurements as he will hold out.

If people, poor people, could, simply through access to land, "start" in Oklahoma, there would be no necessity for them to go there in search of a start; they would not be "unemployed" here; they would be able to get along here as well as they might there. If this were not a fact, then we would be to-day standing where our early colonists and the people of this country stood even as late as 40 years ago; in other words, there would not be pending over us the Social Question that is pending over the whole civilized world. But the times have changed, and only Rip Van Winkles will deny that.

The social economic evolution, the revolution in production, has rendered mere land, or "natural opportunities", inaccessible or useless to civilized man, unless he is equipped, and properly equipped, with capital. Of this scientific and historic fact, the farmers' movement in the West and last year's experience on the Arapahoe Reservation furnish striking proofs.

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Though possessed of land, though rubbing their noses against, and wallowing in, “natural opportunities”, and last not least, though trained in agriculture, the farmer is unable to hold his head above water; the smaller his concern the harder his lot; producing upon a small scale and unequipped with sufficient capital, he cannot produce as cheaply as those who cultivate large areas aided by the steam plow and other machinery of production; he cannot compete with them, and he is driven to want. And as to last year’s experience on the Arapahoe lands, innumerable are the instances of those, who, ignoring our changed economic conditions, and imagining we still moved in the times of auld lang syne, believed, if they could only set their feet upon a piece of land of their own, their poverty would vanish. These people flocked by the thousands to the Arapahoe Reservation; waited with bated breath for it to open; soon as opened they rushed to make their claims; and—then the scales suddenly fell from their eyes and they discovered their fatal error: no living, not as the smallest of small fry farmers, was there to be made. They rushed back to the congested centers whence they had come, and where poverty is always more bearable than in the fields; settlements like Taloga, which the day after the opening numbered 2,500 people melted away within 7 weeks to only 18 inhabitants. These people had paid dearly for this simple lesson in political economy and in the country’s history. Nobody made anything by the transaction but the railroad companies, who gobbled up the savings of these would-be settlers, and who had been the only real and vicious boomers of the place.

If disappointment awaited the Arapahoe settlers, will success await those whom Judge Hilton would now allure to Oklahoma? Upon what grounds could people from the city hope to “start” as small fry farmers, if the fellow who is a small fry farmer now, and who, moreover, knows his trade, is going to the devil as fast as he knows how? To these questions no satisfactory answer can be given.

All these boomings of distant land proceed from capitalist,

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especially railroad, schemes to fleece those who have a few savings. The genuinely poor and unemployed, the fellow who has not wherewith to pay his passage on a railroad is not “in it”. Nor are they even the victims. The genuine victims, of which we know more than one instance in this very neighborhood, are those who have some little property; who find it hard to get along; who, in the fever of competition, lose their heads by florid descriptions of Oklahoma and such like places; and who then become a prey to the schemes and the agents of railroad companies, sink a good portion of their savings in an outward and the rest of their savings in a homeward bound ticket, and land back in the congested centers like plucked chickens or fleeced sheep.

There is only one way of “starting” the unemployed—by establishing the Co-operative Commonwealth where the nation’s machinery of production—land and capital—is owned and operated by and for the people.

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