



DIALOGUE

UNCLE SAM & BROTHER JONATHAN. {79}

By DANIEL DE LEON

BROTHER JONATHAN—I hear nowadays a good deal against the “wage system.” It does seem to me as if some people can’t distinguish between a good thing and its abuse.

UNCLE SAM—Where is the good thing?

B.J.—Why, the wage system is a good thing enough, only it may be abused. The abuses ought to be changed, not the thing itself.

U.S.—Do you remember how offensive an odor there was near your neck some weeks ago?

B.J.—Yes, indeed, I had a big boil there; it festered and, of course, the odor wasn’t good.

U.S.—Would you call that odor simply the “abuse” of a good thing, the boil?

B.J. (angry)—You are guying me.

U.S.—Would you, now?

B.J.—No, indeed.

U.S.—Well, what you call the “abuses” of the wage system are to the wage system what that bad odor was to the boil.

B.J.—But the boil was inherently a bad thing, without one redeeming feature.

U.S.—So is the wage system, exactly.

B.J. (very impatient)—Come, now, what are you giving me?

U.S.—I am giving it to you straight.

B.J.—Have you ever heard of a “good boil?”

U.S.—Not from the lips of any sensible man.



UNCLE SAM & BROTHER JONATHAN

B.J.—Now I got you! Haven't you, though, heard of "good wages?"

U.S.—Not from people who knew what they were talking about. He who has to depend on wages is like him who is attacked by a boil.

B.J.—Well, I would rather have good wages than bad wages.

U.S.—And so would I rather have a slight boil than a bad one. What you call bad wages is the case of a pretty bad boil; what you call good wages is the case of a slight boil—a boil that might have been worse, but fortunately is not.

B.J.—I guess you and I don't mean the same thing.

U.S.—We mean the identical thing; only you don't understand the thing and I do.

B.J.—Well, explain it.

U.S.—If you can employ yourself, would you ask some one else for a job?

B.J.—Not I!

U.S.—If you do ask some one else for a job, are you your own master?

B.J.—I would remain my own master, or very near it, if I could change my employer at will.

U.S.—By "changing," you mean to change for the better?

B.J.—Certainly.

U.S.—If you could only change for the worse or for no better, what then?

B.J.—Then I would be in hell's own hole.

U.S.—There is where the wage-workers are. See here, if you had no machinery to work with or land on which to work, could you get along?

B.J.—Not much.

U.S.—What would you do then?

B.J.—Hire myself out.

U.S.—To one who does own those things?

B.J.—Yes.

U.S.—Do you imagine that the employer does not know your fix?

B.J.—Guess he does.

U.S.—Do you imagine he won't take advantage of your fix?

B.J. begins to look sheepish.

U.S.—Especially when he knows that there are millions out of work?

B.J.—Certainly he will take advantage of that.

U.S.—Will he pay you for all that you produce?

B.J.—No!

U.S.—He will keep a goodly portion to himself?

B.J.—Guess he will.

U.S.—Stick a pin there. Do you think chattel slavery consisted in whipping your nigger?

B.J. hesitates.

U.S.—No; it consisted in the power to compel a man to give you all he produced, less that which he needed to live on.

B.J.—Granted.

U.S.—And the wage system does that and even worse. When sick or in old age the nigger was cared for; but if the wage worker is sick he will have to see to himself, and when he is old he is free to commit suicide.

B.J.—That's a pretty bad case.

U.S.—It is like any boil. The wage system consists in the private ownership of the things needed to produce the necessities of life. He who owns them holds the life and liberty of those who don't; i.e., of his wage earners, in his hands. They are virtually his slaves.

B.J.—But I thought that was the capitalist system.

U.S.—So it is. It is all one. When you look at the modern system of production and distribution from the point of view of the tenure of property, it is called the capitalist system; when you look at it from the point of view of the actual producers, it is the wage system, or system of wage slavery.

B.J.—Down with both!

U.S.—Down they shall!

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

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