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DIALOGUE

UNCLE SAM & BROTHER JONATHAN. {278}

By DANIEL DE LEON

BROTHER JONATHAN—I have a great scheme in mind.

UNCLE SAM (with a twinkle in his eye)—One of your usual great schemes?

B.J.—Don't be intolerant as usual; at least hear first what it is.

U.S.—Behold in me a man out-shining "Patience on a Monument." Let's hear!

B.J.—Will you not admit that the Socialist Commonwealth can not be established for quite a while?

U.S.—I'll admit that.

B.J.—Will you not admit that, in the meantime, it were wise to mitigate suffering?

U.S.—Admitted.

B.J.—Admitting all this you will be in sympathy with my scheme. It is to set up a co-operative store in which the workmen, affiliated with it, can get goods cheap. What say you?

U.S.—Chestnut!

B.J.—"Chestnut"?

U.S.—Yes. Probably not to you. But chestnut all the same.

B.J.—Isn't it a good thing?

U.S.—If it were, it would not be chestnut. But it is a bad thing in that it is of no effect; and, worse than that, in that it plays into the hands of false bourgeois economics; and, still worse, in that, as a rule, there is a petty schemer at the bottom of it who plans



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to be the sure if not the sole beneficiary of the alleged good for all. There is an ample experience on this subject in this country.

B.J.—You surprise me. What proofs have you got?

U.S.—See here. Sound or Socialist economics prove that, under the capitalist system, the share of the wealth that labor receives depends upon the supply of and the demand for labor; this evil is a result of the private ownership of the machine. If labor receives one loaf's worth of wealth it is not because of the cheapness of the loaf, or because of any other reason but because the value of the loaf represents the value of labor under supply and demand.

B.J.—Very well.

U.S.—Now then, this principle implies the other that the cheapness of things does not determine the amount of wealth labor receives. The cheaper the loaf, the lower will be the wages. In other words the Labor Question is a question of production, not consumption. Your co-operative store takes up the question from the consumer's standpoint.

B.J.—But are not workingmen consumers?

U.S.—Surely. But their poverty starts with them as producers and not as consumers. Seeing that their poverty arises from their being a merchandise, the price of which is determined by supply and demand, it is senseless to start relief at the consumers' end; relief must be started at the producers' end. Enable them to keep all that they produce, and their consumption will take care of itself. On the other hand, make goods as cheap as you like, and consumption will not be improved so long as the working class is held in wage slavery.

B.J.—Hem—

U.S.—This puzzles you; does it not? I'm not surprised. I always knew that much as you may talk of Marx you never looked into the work beyond the title page.

B.J.—Well, that may be; but in what way would my co-operative store play into the hands of false economics?

U.S.—In this way: The middle class particularly is howling about prices. It may justly do so. If prices are low it will have so much more money. If wages are one loaf of bread, and the price of the loaf goes down 50 per cent., the working class won't be in

pocket the 50 per cent. saved, because its own value will thereby have been reduced, and, accordingly, its wages will fall proportionally. But if the price of the loaf goes down by 50 per cent. the middle class and the capitalists generally will be so much in pocket, because their share of wealth is not determined like that of the workingman. It is for this reason that the middle class folks are always after cheapness; and it is a cry so delusive that it usually takes in the workers, and thereby draws their attention away from where the shoe pinches THEM, and causes them to fight the economic battles of their exploiters. To talk “co-operative stores” is to talk “cheapness”; to talk “cheapness” is to give up the law of wages or darken it; to do that is to play into the hands of the enemy.

B.J.—And you say this sort of thing has been tried before?

U.S.—Yes. Often after disastrous strikes the broken-down skates of labor leaders have set up these “co-operative” affairs. We have seen “co-operative” mines; “co-operative” laundries; “co-operative” shirt, cigarette and other factories—and all have gone to smash, the schemer back at the bottom of them, he alone profiting, while the trepanned innocents remained plucked. Wash your hands of your “great scheme.” It is great only in its stupidity and its crookedness.

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

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