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DIALOGUE

UNCLE SAM & BROTHER JONATHAN. {144}

By DANIEL DE LEON

BROTHER JONATHAN—The curse of humanity is greed.

UNCLE SAM—You might as well say that the cause of death is shortness of breath.

B.J.—Would we not all be happier if there were less greed in the world?

U.S.—Would we ever die if we never were short of breath?

B.J.—Guess not.

U.S.—Death results from shortness of breath; but nothing is THE cause of results that is itself a result. Shortness of breath is the result of a heavy punch in your stomach, such as I sometimes feel like giving you (B.J. jumps back) or of some disease; the punch in your stomach, or the disease is the cause of your breath's failing, and thus IT, not the failing breath, is THE cause of your death.

B.J.—That's all right.

U.S.—Likewise with "greed." It is like failing breath. It is not a cause; it is a result; it is the result of the capitalist system with its twin millstones—the upper millstone of private monopoly and the nether millstone of competition.

B.J.—I care nothing about your fine-spun scientific theories. I am a plain common-sense man. John Jones, in whose factory I am making cigars, has reduced my wages; he is not in want, yet he tries to squeeze more wealth out of me. I say he is greedy.

U.S.—Is John Jones using machinery?

B.J.—Not yet.



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U.S.—But Dick Smith’s factory got the machine.

B.J.—It has.

U.S.—Does not that enable Dick Smith to turn out cigars more cheaply?

B.J.—Guess so.

U.S.—Could John Jones produce by your hand-work as cheap cigars?

B.J.—No.

U.S.—Has he not to compete with Dick Smith?

B.J.—Yes.

U.S.—Can he compete successfully unless he lowers the price of his cigars?

B.J.—No! no!! no!!! But is that a reason why he should lower our wages?

U.S.—How else would you have him do it?

B.J.—Can’t he put up with smaller earnings? Is it necessary that he should live in a fine brownstone front house, and we in miserable tenements? Is it necessary that his wife should be rigged up in silks and ours be dressed in common fustian? Is it necessary that he should go to the sea shore and put on airs every summer, while we roast in the hot city? You talk like a capitalist!

U.S.—Keep your shirt on! Remember you said you were a man of “common sense.” Keep up the reputation you gave yourself. Keep cool and reason.

B.J.—I am cool, and I am reasoning.

U.S.—You recognize that, if John Jones must sell his stuff cheaper now than before, he must cut down either your wages or his profits.

B.J.—Certainly; and I, being a practical, common-sense man, say cut down the profits.

U.S.—You say “cut down” the profits; you don’t say “cut off” the profits?

B.J.—Of course I don’t say “cut off” the profits. I am not one of those wild-eyed Socialists. If you “cut off” the profits then the boss can’t live, and if he can’t live he can’t give us work, and if he can’t give us work, we die. That is plain common sense.

U.S.—You have stated your case very clearly. You want John Jones’ profits to be “cut down.”

B.J.—Exactly.

U.S.—And you hold that his profits may not be “cut off,” because, if you do that, he

can't give you any more work.

B.J.—Just so.

U.S.—It follows that you are of the opinion that John Jones must be kept in a condition to “give work” as you call it.

B.J.—Yes, sir.

U.S.—Now, don't you know that your John Jones is not rich enough of his own to run his factory?

B.J.—Of course, I do; but I also know that he can raise the stuff to run it with; he has credit; you seem to forget that; you “scientific” talkers always forget the main thing.

U.S.—Let that go for the present. John Jones needs more money than he has to run his factory; he has to raise that money or its equivalent in leaf tobacco, etc.; to do that he must have credit, and he has credit, eh?

B.J.—Of course, he can get any amount of credit.

U.S.—Do you imagine the dealers in leaf tobacco give him all he wants on credit, because they have taken a fancy to the cut of his gib, or to the curve of his nose?

B.J.—(meditatively) Well, no!

U.S.—Why do you think they let him have all he wants?

B.J.—Because they know he will pay them.

U.S.—Now, “Common Sense,” no fooling or fine-spun “scientific” notions! You don't mean they KNOW, you mean they BELIEVE he will pay.

B.J.—I don't see much difference; say, they “believe.”

U.S.—Do you imagine they would entertain that belief if he lived like a pauper?

B.J.—No.

U.S.—To keep up that belief in his creditors, he must live well, eh?

B.J.—Yes.

U.S.—Would he be living well if he lodged in a tenement house?

B.J.—Humph!

U.S.—Would he be living well if his wife were dressed shabbily?

B.J.—Hem!!

U.S.—Would he be living well if he stayed in the city and roasted in the summer?

B.J. remains silent.

U.S.—It follows that all these extravagances of his are necessary for his “credit.”

B.J. begins to scratch his head.

U.S.—And it further follows that, having lived at this great rate, the moment he were to move to more moderate lodgings, or perceptibly lower the standard of his family outfit, or change his habit of going out of town in the summer, the foundation on which his credit was built would collapse, eh?

B.J. looks like a duck in thunder.

U.S.—The long and the short of the story is this: John Jones’ creditors give him goods on credit because they believe he will pay them; they have that belief because they think him rich; they get that notion because he lives like a fighting cock. To live in grand style is necessary for John Jones to get credit; and no credit, no business. Ain’t it?

B.J. remains silent.

U.S. (shaking B.J. up)—Hello, there! Anybody in?

B.J.—Yes, I’m in. ’Tis so. No credit, no business.

U.S.—And no grand style, no credit, eh?

B.J. (looking weak as a dish rag)—Yes; no grand style, no credit.

U.S.—Do you see what a mutton-head sort of “common sense” you have been gabbling?

B.J.—My head swims.

U.S.—You recognize that without high living John Jones could enjoy no credit; that without credit he could do no business; and you hold that if he did no business you would starve—

B.J. (resignedly)—That’s what I said.

U.S.—And yet, you want him to reduce his high living, thereby destroy his credit, and thereby bring about his dropping out of business, so that you will have no work. You want to keep him alive, and yet, you want to kill him off. Is that “common sense?”

B.J.—By Jericho! no; it is not common sense, as far as that goes—

U.S.—It is arrant nonsense! And that is the position taken by the purely and simply industrial organizations of labor, whence they are beating their heads against a stone wall.

B.J.—Yes, as far as that goes. But if the end of it all is that he goes out of business

anyhow, on your plan as well as mine, what's the difference?

U.S.—There is this difference. Socialism shows that you don't need John Jones or his class living on false pretences to the end that the workers might work and live. If the workers owned the machine, the land and the raw materials they could produce cigars without John Jones. See? The difference is that so long as you want to keep the John Joneses in "business," so long as you object to "cutting off" their profit altogether, so long as you simply try to "cut down" their profit, you must put up with being squeezed; competition, and not greed as you imagined, will grind you down because it grinds down the bosses themselves.

B.J. has all this time been scratching all over his head till his hat tilts down one side of his face like a drunken sailor's.

U.S.—Now, Jonathan, one more point. Every time you catch a fellow running down the "scientific," the "fine-spun" Socialist theories, and especially if he brags about his "common sense," just grab him, take him to the nearest pump, and soak his head. It wouldn't hurt you if you tried the operation on yourself.

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