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DIALOGUE

UNCLE SAM & BROTHER JONATHAN. {256}

By DANIEL DE LEON

BROTHER JONATHAN—Whatever much you may think of your Socialism, I don't think much of it.

UNCLE SAM—That certainly is a great misfortune.

B.J.—Socialism is not humane enough for me.

U.S.—What is humaner?

B.J.—Communism.

U.S.—How do you make that out?

B.J.—Isn't the motto of Socialism "To each according to his deeds"?

U.S.—Say it is.

B.J.—Well, Communism's motto is "To each according to his needs." I call that infinitely more humane.

U.S.—Apart from the relative humaneness of the two mottoes, I would say that you are wasting your love on phrases of no practical importance.

B.J.—Isn't it practical whether the movement one associates with is a harsh or a kind one.

U.S.—True enough. But all that has no application to the case. It is not a question of willingness or unwillingness to be kind; the question is one of power to be kind.

Now see here. If you have 5 children, all equally strong, healthy, intelligent; and the smallest amount a human being can get well along with is one dollar a day; and all that you make, all that you can make, is two dollars a day;—could you, with these two dollars a day income furnish one dollar a day a piece to your five children?



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B.J.—No.

U.S.—You would be short three dollars a day, even if you could get along with nothing.

B.J.—Couldn't do it.

U.S.—Could you justly be said to be harsh, inhumane and all that because you do not provide for your children “to each according to his needs”?

B.J.—Why no; if I can't, I can't.

U.S.—Just so. Now, suppose again you have five children. Four of them healthy, strong, intelligent, one dollar a piece is needed by them; and a fifth child that is a cripple and sickly, and he, to be kept at all comfortably would need five dollars a day. Your income is seven dollars a day. What would you do then?

B.J.—It still won't go round.

U.S.—Could you afford the crippled child five a day?

B.J.—That would leave only two for the other four, not counting myself. No, I hardly could.

U.S.—You would let the well ones have less than one dollar, so as to afford the cripple a little more, but yet he would not be treated “according to his needs,” eh?

B.J.—No; but that would not be my fault; I could not do better.

U.S.—Now, let us suppose a third case: You have five children, all five healthy, robust, intelligent; three dollars a day is needed to keep them up; your income is one hundred dollars a day—

B.J.—How much?!

U.S.—One hundred a day.

B.J.—I wish it were fifty; I wish it were twenty-five; I wish—

U.S.—Never mind what you wish; it is only an illustration. With that amount of revenue, would you keep your children down to an expenditure that is “according to their needs”?

B.J.—No; I'd let them have more.

U.S.—Just so; and why?

B.J.—Because I can afford it.

U.S.—Now, that's all that there is in these mottoes. It is not a case of humaneness in

the one nor of harshness in the other. The one, which you call “humane,” proceeds from and towards an aspiration, regardless of the material power to carry it out; the other, which you call “harsh,” proceeds from the material power and accommodates its aspirations to the capacity to reach them. Do you understand?

B.J.—I—I—think I do.

U.S.—Now then, whether in society each shall have according to his deeds or according to his needs is a question that depends wholly upon the capacity of production of that society, and that again depends wholly upon its mechanical development and social arrangement.

When, at the time these mottoes sprang up there was some justification for them. The one of “to each according to his needs” was an aspiration that swung to the other extreme of the wrong it saw: it saw excessive wealth enjoyed by those who needed it not, while others in need pined; as a revulsion of feeling, it demanded for each “according to his need”; but this was a case of feeling only; it did not stop to consider that even if excess were lopped off at one end there might not be wealth enough for ALL “according to their needs”; while the “harsh” motto, keeping this fact in mind, insisted on its method.

To-day, one may well say that the issue between the two mottoes is a volcano burnt out. It has no more real importance. It is known that the wealth produceable to-day is so large that each can have enormously more than his needs. The mechanical development of production has thus removed the basic difference of the two mottoes. In so far as the one represented “Communism” and the other “Socialism,” the two are one to-day. Your objection is back-numberish.

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

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