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EDITORIAL

DAVID C. COATES.

By DANIEL DE LEON

THIS article is not biographic. The reason it is headed with the name of David C. Coates is simply that this gentleman typifies an element in the Labor Movement which is the subject at once of unjust condemnation and unmerited praise, unjust mistrust and unmerited confidence. It is this element, and not David C. Coates, whom it is here proposed to consider. Its bearing to the Labor Movement is of no little interest, of how much interest those may judge who have a chance to read the numerous letters that run into this office inquiring after, condemning or praising, usually condemning, a number of men whose names occur off and on in the running chronicles of the Labor Movement. The Socialist is notably a just man. He is that, not because of any exceptional benevolence of temperament, but because of his knowledge of cause and effect in society. This knowledge keeps him, for instance, from conceiving personal animosities towards the capitalist; the knowledge, most important of all, enables him to understand the Social Question itself. It is so with the element which, in response to many letters from all parts of the country, we now take up. The taking of the proper parallax of this element helps to illumine the Movement. David C. Coates is picked out by name and as a type simply because the stenographic report of last year's convention of the I.W.W. has preserved the picture of the man's mind upon a certain pivotal matter—a matter that is pivotal with the whole element that he typifies.

On pages 160–161 of the stenographic report of the Convention David C. Coates declared that he too wanted a final condition that would bring the full fruition of toil to the toilers; that he too wanted the organization based solely and wholly upon the class struggle; in short, he declared that he endorsed practically everything that had been said upon those lines as to the conditions that made the convention necessary. “But, my friends,” he proceeded to say, “we do not want to go away with

the idea that we have fixed our eyes upon a condition that will come perhaps twenty-five, or fifty or a hundred years from now . . . I do not want to tell him [the workingman] that in 2005, or some other distant date poverty will be abolished by the total enjoyment of our labor,” he wanted a practical organization that would do practical work now, instead of an organization constructed with an eye to the “final fruition of this work.” In other words, David C. Coates is as anxious as any Socialist for the establishment of the Socialist Republic, the only social system under which the workingman can have “the total enjoyment of his labor,” but that day he puts off as possible only in 2005, if not many more years hence. On a later occasion, during the convention, in the course of an altercation with a speaker, page 334, he amended his figures to 100 years. Not before that lapse of time could the emancipation of the Working Class from the yoke of wage slavery take place, according to his calculation. For all practical purposes 100 years hence is as far away as 2005. The date is beyond the reach of the present generation and, practically, of the next.

The nearness or remoteness that a man sets to the triumph of the proletarian Revolution determines that man’s posture; it determines his every act. In the measure that he considers success to be within reach, he will display intrepidity and abnegation; in the measure that he considers success to be far away he will be self-centered, his thoughts will run upon his own safety and comfort. It is with men in this matter as with armies. Kuroki dashed across the Yalu, but Oyama entrenched himself in his winter quarters before Mukden. The former, holding that the Russian positions on the right bank of the river could be captured then and there, gave no thought to comfort, but intrepidly rushed to the fray. Oyama, on the contrary, holding that the Russian position south of Mukden could not then be taken, gave no thought to aggression, his whole thought was to the defensive, and, accordingly, considered safety and comfort only. The policy of intrepidity, with its accompaniment of abnegation, and the policy of slowness, with its accompaniment of personal comfort, are not, of and by themselves, either right nor wrong. They are right or wrong according as their adoption is guided by knowledge or ignorance. “After the event,” it is light to determine whether the policy pursued was wisely or unwisely chosen. The event has shown that Oyama’s policy was as wisely chosen as

Kuroki's. The question to us is, Is the Labor Movement of America now on the left bank of the Yalu, so to speak, or is it before Mukden, so to say? The Socialist Labor Party and the I.W.W. hold that the American Labor Movement is now drawn up on the left bank of the Yalu, and, consequently, should dash forward with abnegation; the Coates element hold that it is encamped before Mukden, and, consequently, should go into winter quarters, as comfortable as possible, and secure the life {lives?} of its leaders and supporters. Seeing that in the matter of the present status of the Labor Movement, we stand "before the event," final judgment can not be given: that lies in the lap of Time. In the mean time, however, both policies lay those who pursue them open to the mistrust of each other. Those who pursue the former policy are exposed to be suspected as the agents of the enemy who would precipitate an unripe Movement into the enemy's jaws, there to be annihilated;—one need but recall the McParlands and McKenneys of to-day in order to be constrained to admit that the policy of "intrepidity and abnegation" may breed and certainly attracts the "agent provocateur." Those, on the other hand, who pursue the latter policy are exposed to be suspected of corrupt selfishness, of labor fakirism or graft, even of being labor-lieutenants of the capitalist class, bought to lead the electric spark of Labor's Revolution into the ground;—one need but recall the scores of Gomperses and Mitchells of to-day in order to be constrained to admit that the policy of "slowness and comfort," or "something now," both breeds and attracts the grafter, if not the traitor.

No specific case can be safely passed upon in any matter without calm clearness upon the underlying general principles. The underlying general principles with regard to what we term the "Coates element," and what, for the sake of a term, may be designated as "*The People* element," is set forth above. With the general principle in mind, injustice or unfairness of judgment will be protected against, whenever individual instances may be picked out from the "Coates element."

Holding, as we do, with "*The People* element," that the emancipation of the wage slave is within reach, as against the "Coates element," which postpones that day indefinitely, we are free to maintain:

First, Whatever danger may lie with "*The People* element," of attracting the "agent provocateur," that danger is infinitely slighter than the danger there is of the

development of the “grafter” and the “labor-lieutenant” of the capitalist class in the “Coates element.” On the one hand, it needs positive genius, of its sort, for the successful “agent provocateur”; geniuses of any sort whatever are rare. On the other hand, the successful “grafter” and the successful “labor-lieutenant” of capitalism needs only low cunning. This is not so rare a quality. The large number of the “grafters” and of the “labor-lieutenants” of the capitalist class prove the fact.

Second, Looking at the two elements apart from the corruption that may settle on either, and sizing them up in all their purity, the “Coates element” benumbs. By its indefinite postponement, to remote millennial days, of the day which, in the language of David C. Coates, is to secure to the Working Class “the total enjoyment of their labor,” it deprives the Revolution of its storm-step, its pulse of its own warmth. It is therefore harmful, a mockery of “practical” work, a clog to the Labor Movement. The law of all Revolution—and this is especially applicable to the Revolution that is to emancipate the Working Class from the yoke of wage slavery—is INTREPIDITY. In the language of Danton—“Audacity, more audacity, still more audacity!” Or if, due to the proverbial excitability of the Frenchman, a Danton’s language be mistrusted as unreliable, then let us take the warning of the soberer, yet inspired, Shakespeare:

Our doubts are traitors,
And make us lose the good we oft might win,
By fearing to attempt.¹

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¹ [William Shakespeare, *Measure for Measure*, Act I, Scene 4]