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EDITORIAL

JOSIAH STRONG—A HUMOROUS LAMENTER.

By DANIEL DE LEON

THE Rev. Dr. Josiah Strong, addressing the Baptist Ministers' Conference in this city on January 27, made the lamentable statement that about 500,000 workingmen were annually killed or injured in the United States. The statement is lamentable because lamentably true, though mildly put. More graphically stated, the facts are that at least half a million of the men, women and children who toil in this land are annually wholly crushed out of life, or are set afloat in a crippled state. Could a more lamentable picture be unrolled to the mind's eye than that, especially when the fact is taken into consideration that this human holocaust is gratuitous, being the result of the starved condition that the working class is held in, driving it to imperil life and limb at a stage in social development when wealth is producible in abundance for all, under the pleasantest of circumstances, and with that minimum of effort that is requisite for physical wellbeing? Indeed, the scene over which the Rev. Josiah Strong raises but a tip of the curtain is fit to call forth tears. And yet, not tears, but a joke, seems the scene to have suggested to the Rev. speaker.

Immediately upon the heels of the ghastly picture, the Rev. Josiah proceeded to point out the remedy. It was this: to check the mad rush of the workingmen for high earnings, seeing that "workingmen often oppose safety devices because they think such appliances might lessen their wages under the present system." Though grim this is a joke. Though a joke this is grim.

The capitalist system renders the workingmen abjectly subservient. Held on the ragged edge of want, the wage slave not only sinks to the level of a merchandise, he is forced to become a fawning cur. For the sake of a crust to himself, he is attuned into a willingness to yield a banquet to the employer. Such a state of body and mind render him putty in his master's hand, ready to do and think as the master wills.

And so it happens—as it recently happened in the matter of the proposed 16-hour law for railroaders, when these men showered Congress with telegrams opposing that “safety device” on the ground of its being “against the best interests” of the men,—that workmen often “oppose” safety devices. Their masters take snuff, and they sneeze. They have to sneeze. Were they to refuse, even the crumb they are now allowed to keep would be summarily knocked out of their hands, and graciously allowed to fall into the outstretched empty palms of the still hungrier unemployed. How droll would not the novel theory be that the reason why the hare rushes madly within range of the hunter’s gun is his own fault—too great an anxiety after grub—and say nothing of the hounds that start the helpless brute, and make him describe the circle back to where he is to be shot.

The Rev. Josiah, upholding the capitalist system, and yet picturing the greedy workman, so greedy after higher wages as to “oppose” safety devices, and then 500,000 of them annually paying the penalty with some limb, if not with their lives—that certainly is a Divine’s feat of humorous lamentation; or is it lamentable humor?

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