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EDITORIAL

“CORPORATIONS,” AND “CAPITALISTS.”

By DANIEL DE LEON

AS the best testimony against a person is what he utters against himself, this recent statement of a mining company constituent of the capitalist class may be taken as fairly representative of the situation:

“Nine-tenths of the corporations of the United States,” said this one of them, and it ought to know, “simply exist as subterfuges to shield somebody from the consequences of ownership in the event of disaster.”

That the corporate body is a “legal fiction” is well known. That a corporation enjoys in matters of law all the advantages that a disembodied spirit would have in evading barbwire fences, is a matter of common observation. A corporation can do as it pleases. If caught, a little juggling of stock-holdings, a holding company organized, wheels-within-wheels fashion—and there you are. Your corporation’s as bland and invulnerable as an oyster in its shell. And if worst comes to worst, all that can happen is a fine upon the corporation. The individuals who compose it go scot free, unfinable, unimpeachable, ready to do it all over again. In this way it may well be true that nine-tenths of the corporations of the country have no reason for existence other than lifting someone above the law.

It was not always so. The corporation in its origin had a legitimate, a valid basis for being. It was a progressward combination of previously competing concerns; it introduced harmony for industrial antagonism; economy for productive waste. This purpose it still partakes of to-day; but another, an extraneous purpose—the dodging of the consequences of its own illegalities—has grown up and overlaid its original cause to such an extent that even in its own camp the charge is made that nine-tenths are merely law-evading devices.

So it is with the capitalist. Taking his rise—albeit with crime and violence—in the necessity for systematized and economic production, he at first filled a useful

place as a captain of industry. Correlative with this function came the minor one of keeping down the forces that would have overthrown him. To-day, however, the palm of captainship of industry having passed from the capitalist—he having himself handed it over to his skilled managers and superintendents—he retains, in the overwhelming majority of cases, merely his function of coercion, of repressing all society into acquiescence in his plunder of it. As with the corporations, it is perfectly safe to say that with nine-tenths of the capitalists their only reason for living is not their legitimate one of assisting, but their wholly illegitimate one of victimizing and laming the arm of, society.

“Corporations” and “capitalists,” both throw light on each other. Both are ripe for the Change.

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