

EDITORIAL

AN OPEN LETTER TO NISSIM BEHAR.

By DANIEL DE LEON

TO Nissim Behar,
Managing Director of National Liberal Immigration League,
New York City.

Dear Mr. Behar—

Yes, we are very busy. Nevertheless, we read with much attention your favor of the 12th of August urging us to promote the passage of H.R. Bill 14,102 which purports to “encourage the American merchant marine and American commerce”; and we carefully considered the bill itself, a copy of which accompanied your letter.

The Bill, in a nutshell, reduces by 5 per cent. the duty on goods imported upon American bottoms; it lays a duty of 2 per cent. on non-dutiable goods if imported upon bottoms that are not American; finally, the bill exempts American bottoms from the \$4 tax levied for every alien entering the United States. These provisions, the Bill claims, will restore our merchant marine to the seas.

An examination of the provisions of the Bill satisfies us that it is not responsive to the desire of “restoring our merchant marine.” An examination of the Bill by the light of the history of the protective tariff, together with the laws of political economy, satisfies us that the Bill should be named “A Bill to put more money into the pockets of the capitalist ship-owners.”

There is no essential difference between the “tariff” clauses of this Bill and the tariff clauses in the regular tariff bills. But, odd to say, this Bill simultaneously partakes of the free trade features of free trade under capitalism.

Tariff bills, it is well known, are advocated as means whereby to equalize the higher cost of production in this country, and thereby to “protect the American workingman against the pauper labor abroad.” Elemental arithmetic, hand-in-hand with elemental common sense, directs that, from such premises, the “protective

duty” be paid directly to the wage earners. It is well known that this is not done. The “protective” duty, supposed to be for the protection of the workers, is paid, not to them, but to the employer. The duty is paid to him in the higher prices that it enables him to charge for his goods, while he steadily reduces wages relatively and often, if not generally, absolutely.

There is not a clause, a sentence, or a word, in the Bill from which to conclude that the 2 per cent. duty, which the Bill imposes upon goods imported on non-American bottoms, will travel a route different from the route traveled by all duties, to wit, the route that leads into the pockets of the employer. The Bill, so far as the duty that it imposes is concerned, leaves the exploited wage earner where he was before, in the cold, while it provides, as all other duties do, warmer and more comfortable shelter for the exploiter.

Furthermore, as stated above, the Bill has the unique distinction of simultaneously exhibiting the capitalist feature of free trade as well as those of protection in the present social order.

Free trade pretends to benefit the wage earner in that it lowers the cost of living. It is by this time also well known that the claim is deceptive, being a half-truth. True enough, free trade, or a lower tariff, tends to lower the price of goods; but the statement suppresses the other half of the truth, to wit, that the price of labor-power, or wages, declines with the decline of the price of necessaries. The two halves of the truth make clear that if the price of necessaries declines, the difference between the higher and the lower price will not remain in the pocket of the wage earner, but will drop plump into the capacious pockets of the employer.

There is not a clause, a sentence, or a word, in the Bill from which to conclude that the 5 per cent. reduction of duties, or any other exemption which the Bill provides for American bottoms, will operate differently from all other tariff reductions and exemptions, to wit, swell the pockets of the employer more than now they are swollen, and leave the pockets of the wage earners at least as lean as before.

We agree with you that “the leading thinkers of both parties”—of course you mean Republican, Democratic and Progressive—approve of the bill. No doubt they do—and wise they are to do so. But the Socialist Labor Party is utterly indifferent to all such propositions. It is indifferent to them because these are not the days of

“Washington, Adams, Jefferson, Hamilton and Madison,” whom you cite. These are not the days of incipient capitalism. These are the days of capitalism grown into a despot, and presenting just one issue to the workers—the issue of its overthrow.

Respectfully yours,

EDITOR DAILY PEOPLE.

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