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EDITORIAL

OPEN LETTER NO. 2.

By DANIEL DE LEON

TO Charles H. Chase,
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Comrade:—

Another statement, or, rather, series of statements that appear in your article of the Sunday *People*, May 4, and that it is profitable to test appears in this lengthy paragraph:

“As to Marx’s economic theories, though I by no means hold that Marx said the last word on economics, I merely took them up in order to make a comparison with some theories of capitalist economists to show that the Socialists need not be so shy and fearful as many of them are in many of these matters of economic doctrine. I have noticed a tendency to something like this in Socialists’ arguments. They seem to take the attitude: ‘If you admit this, then I’ve got you. But I must not admit that or you will have got me.’ The point of my consideration of economics that night in Laurel Garden was that if you find a man who has been trained in another school of economics than the Marxian—if his system of economics represents the capitalist system at all, why you can make the very knowledge he has the basis of your argument for Socialism. If a capitalist economist’s economics is designed to teach a capitalist to make millions of dollars while his workers work for \$2 a day, why that will furnish a perfectly adequate basis for your argument with the \$2 a day worker against the capitalist system and in favor of industrial democracy. I specifically stated that the Marxian economics brings into the foreground the exploitation of labor, whereas the economics of the capitalist economists emphasizes something else. But what I pleaded for was a realization that the Socialist stands upon no precarious ground, and that any system of economics which represents the capitalist industrial system can be made the basis of our argument for Socialism. But can there be more than one ‘true’ system of economics? I consider it wholly unimportant, in one aspect, to discuss such a matter here. But there is more than one system of mathematics.”

The paragraph is unintelligible.

What are the teachings of capitalist economists that the Socialist Labor Party is shy and fearful of?

Surely it cannot be the teachings to the capitalist “to make millions of dollars while his workers work for \$2 a day.”

The *Daily People*, for one, among the literature of the S.L.P., teems with instances of the S.L.P.’s being quick to seize the “admissions against their own interest” made by capitalist agencies, and to turn the admission into a “basis” for “argument with the \$2 a day worker against the capitalist system and in favor of industrial democracy.” No Socialist would, in sight of such teachings by capitalist economists, take the attitude of “I must not admit that or you will have got me.” The Socialist will be only too glad to “admit” the fact that millions of dollars for the capitalist, with \$2 a day for the workers is the aim and beau ideal of capitalist economists’ economics. Obviously the illustration is irrelevant to whatever the theory that underlies and runs through the paragraph.

The passage about millions for capitalists and \$2 a day for workers being eliminated as irrelevant, the rest of the paragraph becomes intelligible.

The expression matters of “economic doctrine” then clarifies the word “basis,” of frequent recurrence in the paragraph, as meaning, not a starting point of fact, but a mutually accepted principle. Forthwith, the passage, that the Socialists “seem to take the attitude, ‘If you admit this, then I’ve got you. But I must not admit that or you will have got me,’” becomes intelligible; likewise intelligible becomes that other passage “the Marxian economics brings into the foreground the exploitation of labor, whereas the economics of the capitalist economists emphasize something else”; also the passage that “any system of economics which represents the capitalist industrial and commercial system can be made the basis of our argument for Socialism”; and, finally, also the closing passage: “But can there be more than one ‘true’ system of economics? . . . There is more than one system of mathematics”;—all the four passages then become intelligible, and, as fast as they do, expose themselves as fallacious, or implying a fallacy. At the same time, another passage, that occurs in a previous paragraph and is evidently connected with the paragraph under consideration—“some of the Christian churches that condemned evolution, when it was new

and when it was inspiring man to larger hopes and aspirations, are now beginning to say that evolution is true—yes, that it is the very law of the Christian God, the law made by him for the government of man”—becomes transparently inapplicable to the thesis or theory that the paragraph under consideration sets up. Indeed, the fact embodied in the last-quoted passage is found to illustrate the exact opposite of that thesis, or theory, the theory or thesis that systems are numerous and, tho’ seemingly opposed, may have a common basis; that, however opposite the principle, or starting point of Socialist and of capitalist economics may seem, a common basis for argument is always available in behalf of Socialism; that there is nothing fatal to Socialism in Socialist admission of capitalist premises, as illustrated by the acceptance of Evolution on the part of bodies that at first condemned it.

Unquestionably, Marxian economics brings into the foreground the exploitation of labor, whereas the economics of the capitalist “emphasizes something else”—something decidedly “else.” Whereas Marxian economics establishes that “labor is the source of wealth,” hence, that “the working class feeds the capitalist class,”—whereas Marxian economics establishes that, the economics of the capitalist economists sets up the droll principle that the capitalist is a benefactor, that he “gives work to labor,” that he philanthropically enables the workingman to earn a living for the beloved of his heart, and for his darling children. (See Senator Nathan Goff’s defense of the West Virginia mine-owners, *Congressional Record*, May 9–26.)

Lo, two opposite systems of “economic doctrine!” Can the capitalist’s “be made the basis of our arguments for Socialism?” Digressing lines cannot possibly meet. Their possible common “basis,” or starting point, can lead them only further and further apart.

Unquestionably, the attitude of the S.L.P. towards the capitalist economist is: “If you admit this, then I’ve you.” And right is the S.L.P. man in the attitude he takes and the reasoning that leads him to take it.—What other but that was the attitude of Columbus before the dense clerical ignorance that sought to shield their superstitions concerning the shape of the earth? Would not Columbus have “got them” if they admitted the earth was round?

Unquestionably, the attitude of the S.L.P. towards the capitalist sociologist is: “I must not admit that or you will have got me”; and right is the S.L.P. man in his

attitude. Where would he land with any other attitude but in the quagmire of philanthropic reform, and degenerate into a “barker” for bourgeois breeders of “white slaves,” and of bourgeois paddings of the yoke of wage-slavery? He would have to bid adieu to the Socialist Republic.—What other but the. S.L.P. man’s was the attitude of Columbus before prelatial astronomy? Where would Columbus have landed had he not, with the far-sight that science imparts, struck the attitude: “I must not admit your unscientific premises or you will have got me”? Surely he would not have landed at the island of Guanahani on October 12, 1492. More likely he would have sunk into the ditch of a sycophantic monk in the purlieus of Ferdinand and Isabella’s court.

Yes, indeed, is Evolution now accepted and pronounced “the law of the Christian God” by many a Christian church that at first condemned it; and mighty is the significance thereof. Did the change of mind come about by Science’s making any system, which represents Mythology, the basis for its argument for Evolution? Did the change not rather come about by unyielding, uncompromising adherence to scientific postulates?

Finally, there is “system” and “system.”

In a sense, there is more than one system of mathematics; in another sense, there is only one. Depends upon. Has one in mind methods of teaching? Then there are numerous systems of mathematics, and their possible number is numberless. Has one, however, principle in mind?—then there is but one, and only one possible system of mathematics. The writer of these lines notices that the system of mathematics which his children are taught by in school varies in many respects from the system that he was himself put through at their age. Nevertheless, the cardinal principle that $2+2=4$, or that any two lines of a triangle are longer than the third line—that system has changed not a bit; and what is more, it has remained unchanged since Euclid and before Euclid, despite the mountain-high antiquity that presses upon the “long-since-written text.”

The reasoning that uses terms indiscriminately is not conducive to an agitation, education and organization that will be fruitful in actual “Results.” The circumstance that there may safely be scores of “systems” in methods of treatment may not, with academic propriety, be stretched to cover a broader field, leastwise the

field of scientific principle—however comfortable the practice may be.

“The height charms us, the steps to it do not; with the summit in our eye we love to walk along the plain.”

Fraternally,

ED. DAILY PEOPLE.

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