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DIALOGUE

UNCLE SAM & BROTHER JONATHAN. {180}

By DANIEL DE LEON

BROTHER JONATHAN—I listened the other day to a Socialist speaker, and I chuckled.

UNCLE SAM—Did you get convinced?

B.J.—Nay, nay! I chuckled at the way the man contradicted himself; and he did not even seem to know it.

U.S.—How? What? in what way?

B.J.—It was worth listening to him, he confirmed me in the belief that Socialists talk through their hats.

U.S.—Ho-ho!

B.J. (with a cocksure wink).—Yes Siree. Here is what he said: “The solution of the Social or Labor Problem is the ownership by Labor of the land on and the tools with which to work. Once master of the two, Labor will be master of all the wealth it produces.

U.S.—That’s pretty sound doctrine, and it will take more than any such pot-bellied wise-acre, like you, to confute.

B.J. (with increased cocksureness)—Pot-bellied or not, I’ll refute it with his own words.

U.S.—Let her rip!

B.J.—In the course of his address, before and after making the statement I just quoted, he referred to the farmers—

U.S.—The small farmers—

B.J.—Small or big, matters not.



UNCLE SAM & BROTHER JONATHAN

U.S.—Eh?

B.J.—And he showed very accurately that the farmer was being driven to the wall, and was growing poorer and poorer despite his industry.

U.S.—And that is perfectly true of the small farmer.

B.J.—You drive me out of all patience by talking “small farmer,” “small farmer.” What’s the odds?

U.S.—All the odds in the world.

B.J.—Then you, too, contradict yourself.

U.S.—You will have to be more explicit.

B.J.—I shall. The farmer, small or big, owns his land and his tools of production. Now, then, if the ownership of these assures to a man the property in the products of his labor, then must the farmer, whether small, or large, be well off. We know he is not. That is the contradiction in your theory, and there it goes. (B.J. sinks his hands deep into his trousers’ pockets, and puts on a “now-you-get-out-of-that-if-you-can” look.)

U.S.—Was that it?

B.J.—That was it.

U.S.—Now, Jonathan, the trouble lay with you, and not with the Socialist speaker. You went to that meeting as you go to your prayer meeting: to take a snooze and you heard only one part of what he said.

B.J.—Which part did I not hear?

U.S.—You did not hear his explanation of the word “Capital”—the modern tool of production.

B.J.—Are not all tools capital? Is not an old-style plow capital as well as a steam plow?

U.S.—No, sir. The value of corn depends upon the labor necessary to produce it, the same as all other goods—

B.J.—Very well.

U.S.—If you and I produce corn with an old-style plow, we must both put forth the same amount of labor into every bushel of corn that we produce.

B.J.—Very well.

U.S.—Then you can’t undersell me and I can’t undersell you.

B.J.—That's so.

U.S.—But now suppose that some farmer starts to work with the steam plow and such other large means of production. How are we affected?

B.J.—How?

U.S.—Yes. With the steam plow and steam harvester, work can be done more quickly; larger tracts of land are necessary to deploy the machine in. Without the machine you and I can't cover large acres. With the machine, thousands of acres can be covered with less labor than without it. The production of corn becomes more plentiful, the amount of the labor that then is put into each bushel is less. You admit that the value of the bushel depends upon the labor required in its production. Consequently, the farmer with the steam appliances can undersell us. If before, we got \$1 per bushel, we can not now get 50 cents. Ain't it?

B.J.—Hem!

U.S.—Where are we then?

B.J.'s brow puckers.

U.S.—Now go back a moment. When you and I plowed our land with old-style plows upon the little patches which we could cover with the old-style tool, didn't we have the bulge on somebody?

B.J.—Not that I know of.

U.S.—You don't? What about our farm hands, the fellows who didn't have land and plow?

B.J.—Why, we hired them.

U.S.—Yes, we "hired" them. Was their hire equal to what they produced?

B.J.—'Course not. The idea of giving a farm hand as much as he produces! Of what benefit would he be to us?

U.S.—Right you are. No employer hires a man unless that man will produce more than he receives. Do you imagine a man likes to produce two dollars' worth of corn and receive in payment only one dollar?

B.J. (shaking his head from right to left and pouting)—Reckon not.

U.S.—Now, what is it that induced such a man to take a position under which he was skinned? What gave us the bulge on him?

B.J. contemplates a man at the other end of the street who is whipping his horse.

U.S.—What drove him to that?

B.J.—Hunger, I guess.

U.S.—Would he hunger if he had land and plow to work with?

B.J.—Reckon not.

U.S.—The long and short of it is that the farm hand, then as now, had not and has not the necessities of production.

B.J.—But land was cheap, he could get that.

U.S.—Yes, but land alone, without the tool of production, is valueless.

B.J. (with a nod expressive of experience)—True enough.

U.S.—There is where we had the bulge on him. Now just consider this. Our old-style plows were much simpler than the steam plows. A man might, if he could keep himself alive in the meantime, make an old-style plow himself in a few months. Even in those olden days when the tool in general use was so much simpler, the man who didn't have it, had to hire himself to others and allow himself to be plucked for the sake of a living. That being the case, what chances have small fry farmers, such as you and I, to-day?

B.J. looks decidedly despondent.

U.S.—The steam plow and other such appliances reduce the amount of labor that there is in each bushel, thereby reduce the value of each bushel, and thereby reduce the amount of wealth we can get. Formerly, even when the plow and harvester, etc., were so much simpler, the man without them could not make them for himself, and had to become a wage slave and put up with smaller wages than what he produced. To-day, when the tool is the steam plow, etc., which none of us can think of producing in a lifetime, where are we?

B.J.—Busted!

U.S.—Yes. There is where the large farmer got the bulge on us. Do you now understand what “Capital” means. That steam plow, that modern machinery of production is “Capital.” The simpler plow was “Capital” in years gone by only toward the man who had no plow; now that “Capital” has grown, and the modern plow, harvester, etc., is “Capital” not only toward the man who has none, but toward, us who have the former “Capital”—the old-style plow. “Capital” is originally that machinery of

production which disables those who have none at all from working for themselves; presently “Capital,” the tool, becomes more powerful, and it not only disables more completely those who have none from working for themselves, but—

B.J. (taking sudden alarm)—By Jericho—It also disables those who have smaller tools from competing with it!

U.S.—It busts them—

B.J.—Rips them wide open—

U.S.—Throws them into bankruptcy—

B.J.—Makes wage slaves out of them—

U.S.—Yes, yes. Of what use are such tools, as we small farmers have, to us?

B.J.—They are not worth a tinker’s damn.

U.S.—Do you see the difference between the small farmer and the big one!

B.J.—Why, of course!

U.S.—And don’t you see that to talk of us as having “Capital” is empty mockery or stupidity?

B.J.—So it is!

U.S.—And that to say, as you said before, that “we have tools” is folly?

B.J.—Well, I must have been asleep.

U.S.—Indeed, you must have been. Our tools are no longer “Capital,” they are not even “property” worth the name. They are a delusion of “property.” We are sinking, together with the small industrialists, because we do not possess THE tool of production that is now Capital. Hence the little wealth we produce shrivels in our hands. If that little wealth shrivels in our hands, how much more must not the wealth shrivel in the hands of the unfortunate man who hires himself out because he has no tools whatever—the working class?

B.J.—The first time I meet that Socialist lecturer again, I am going to tender him my apologies. I see it all. He was right. Without the tool of production man is not master of the wealth he creates.

U.S.—And the tool of production needed to secure such masterhood—

B.J.—Is CAPITAL—that is, the best tool in operation; none other deserves consideration.

U.S.—You got it now. Don't let it go and impart the knowledge to others.

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

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