

The People.

VOL. IV, NO. 40.

NEW YORK, SUNDAY, DECEMBER 30, 1894.

PRICE 3 CENTS.

DIALOGUE

UNCLE SAM & BROTHER JONATHAN. {96}

By DANIEL DE LEON

BROTHER JONATHAN—Damn this Socialist Labor party! I am a Socialist, but I believe in American methods.

UNCLE SAM—“American methods?”

B.J.—Yes.

U.S.—And what may they be?

B.J.—Hem—er—haw—

U.S.—Define the thing.

B.J.—Haw—er—

U.S.—(poking Brother Jonathan facetiously in the ribs)—Hem—er; your windbag seems to yield readily to the first pricking.

B.J. (bracing up)—No, sir; there is no windbag to be pricked in the case. American methods are—hem—er—haw—

U.S.—Let me give you a lift, old boy. I know you are in a pickle.

B.J. (impatient)—No pickle, sir! American methods are—hem—

U.S.—Things and doings peculiarly American?

B.J. (brightening up and with a decided feeling of relief)—That’s it; that’s it, exactly. Things and doings peculiarly American.

U.S. (keeping tally with the index of his right hand on the fingers of his left)—The first thing that occurs to me as “peculiarly” American, i.e., not thought of anywhere else, is the wondrous industry of wooden nutmegs—

B.J. (with a good-natured smile and a twinkle in his eye)—Nonsense; I don’t mean that—



UNCLE SAM & BROTHER JONATHAN

U.S.—The second that occurs to me was quite recently graphically described in a New York daily paper; it is the “Kangaroo Court,” a doing by which cliques of irresponsible people in the West get up some midnight conspiracy against some one or other for whom they bear malice; then, kangaroo-like, throw themselves back on their haunches, call themselves a “court,” pronounce judgment off-hand, and, kangaroo-like, leap off again—

B.J.—Why, you know I can’t mean such things—

U.S.—They fit exactly the definition you accepted: “Things and doings PECULIARLY American.” Keep your peace; I am not yet through. The third such “peculiar thing and doing” that now occurs to me is best described by our Western humorist, Sutt Lovingdood: It is the manufacture and “sale” of “rare, ripe seed;” such seed was warranted to produce fruit in one-tenth the usual time—

B.J.—Quit your bantering. I don’t mean anything of that sort; I mean things connected with our economic and political life—

U.S.—Our revolution for independence, for instance?

B.J. (again visibly relieved)—Yes!

U.S.—Don’t you know that that was considered utterly utter and unspeakably “un-American” by all our Tory fellow colonists? They said the Colonies were not founded upon any principle that excluded the rights of, or included treason to, the British crown; they said such a notion as “independence” was unheard of and that to vote against, let alone fight, the crown, was unhallowedly un-American. And right they were; it was a spick and span new-fangled procedure to send King George to the right-about. Would you denounce our Revolutionary Fathers as “un-American” for casting away the past, together with all that until then was “peculiar” to Americanism?

B.J. (beginning to look disconcerted)—Certainly not; that was all right. But that was an exception. I mean “things and doings, customs and ways peculiar to us when we became an independent nation.”

U.S.—I’ll follow you up. We now have universal suffrage—

B.J. (proudly)—Yes; and a glorious thing that is.

U.S.—Don’t you know that when we became independent we did not establish universal suffrage, but required a property qualification for voters?

B.J. (aghast)—No!

U.S.—There you have it; you are just like all these people who pretend to be perambulating compounds of “American” knowledge, while, in fact, they are perambulating compounds of just the reverse.

B.J. (a sick look on him)—We—we—we did not start with universal, manhood suffrage?

U.S.—We didn’t; we started with a system of property—landed property—qualification. That lasted over twenty years; in some of the States it lasted a good deal longer. When manhood suffrage was demanded, regardless of property, the Society of the Cincinnatus—it was the intellectual descendant of our old Tories and the progenitor of our modern A.P.A.’s—raised a howl—

B.J.—Yes, yes; it now comes back to me.

U.S.—The opponents of manhood suffrage pronounced the thing to be concentrated “un-Americanism.” They said the United States was not founded upon any principle that excluded a property qualification for voters; they pronounced the thing unheard of and a wide departure from “American ways.” And right they were; the scheme was an innovation. Would you denounce the progressive element that carried this innovation over the heads of the mossbacks? Would you spurn their conduct as “un-American” for casting away the past and until then “peculiar” American suffrage system?

B.J. (with a still sicker look on his face)—My head begins to swim; I feel quite warm and uncomfortable; don’t you?

U.S.—Not I; I feel cool as a cucumber and happy as a clam at high tide. But that is not to the point. Would you denounce as “un-American” the universal suffragist?

B.J.—No; no—no!

U.S.—We have no chattel slavery—

B.J. (triumphantly)—Indeed not, we wiped out that blot upon our escutcheon—

U.S.—Glad to see you so happy about it, yet you surely know that slavery was expressly recognized at the foundation of our Government, and you can’t have forgotten how the movement for abolition was decried as treason to “an institution hallowed by our fathers, and distinctly recognized by them as an essential basis to our glorious American Republic?” You didn’t forget that, did you?

B.J. (looking as if he would like to find some pretext to get away)—No; the scoundrel Bourbon slave holders. I well remember how they took the cloak of “Americanism” to justify their inhumanity.

U.S.—And surely you don’t entertain any the less admiration for the abolitionists because what they caused to be wiped out had been imbedded in the organic structure of America?

B.J.—No! This thing looks different from the way I thought—

U.S.—It is, nevertheless, quite plain, and thereby hangs a valuable bit of history and its philosophy. There is only one people that can, with approximate justice, claim to have preserved its pristine “purity;” that is the Chinese; they have justly become a byword of reproach for moss-backism. All other, especially the civilized nations, are distinguished for marching forward upon the ruins of former “things and doings peculiar” to themselves; they march over the ruins of their own past. It is only by thus casting off things that a nation had, but has outgrown, that it can at all make any progress. The question at all times is not, “Is this thing peculiar to us?” The question is—

B.J.—“Is this thing good or bad?”

U.S.—Bravo! You got it now! It was American at one time to be dependent on England, and that went; it then was American to restrict the suffrage, and we wisely threw that off; it was American at one time to protect slavery, and that bit of “Americanism” also was amputated. What we practice to-day as “American” may tomorrow prove itself bad; it then should go. No enlightened people will ever allow itself to be trammelled by tradition. We are no Chinese. It is our American-Chinese alone who are throwing up the cry of “un-American” across the path of Socialism.

B.J.—I grant all this; I am glad you have so clearly exposed our Chinese, that is just what our American Jingos are. But I mean something else. I am not hampered by any Chinese-American crotchets. I am just as ready as you to throw overboard anything in our Americanism that we find to be bad. For that reason I am to-day a Socialist, although Socialism was never before a part of our system. But I have reference to the methods to bring on desired results. Now, then, the Socialist methods are “un-American.”

U.S.—The Chinese-American fever has not yet quite left you, if you talk that way.

B.J.—Do you approve of their methods?

U.S.—What fault do you find with them?

B.J.—They are un-Amer—

U.S.—Hold! I can't allow you to relapse quite so quickly into Chinese practices. You have granted above that to be "un-American" is not necessarily a bad thing, and may even be a very good one, provided what is "American" is bad and should be replaced with a better. You have admitted before that the path of progress, for America, as for all other nations, lies via the abandoning of antiquated things. You have admitted that "un-American" is a Chinese, not an American, objection.

B.J. (looking penitently)—The reprimand is deserved. I won't use the term "un-American." I object to the methods of the Socialist Labor party because they won't lead to results.

U.S.—What methods would you counsel?

B.J.—The Socialists won't make any compromise—it must be straight-out Socialism or nothing. That won't do.

U.S.—Why?

B.J.—The Democratic and Republican parties have been making compromises, and see how they have alternately of late got into power?

U.S.—Well, you have relapsed again. It is one of our present Jingo or Chinese-American ways, to talk as though this country's history dates from the war; all their habits of thought are derived from this period of our political—not life—but our political stagnation. At all the critical periods of our history we had compromises, but we also had relentless non-compromisers, just as the Socialist Labor party is to-day. Since the war there have been no issues in the country. The political contests are for pelf, not on principle. The methods that come into vogue at such periods are applicable only to such periods. The movement that brings an issue with it, also brings along a political centre of condensation that never compromises. It is only such centres that have ever triumphed in this or any other country; all others go to pieces. The Socialist Labor party stands upon a great issue; it represents that issue. That party will triumph only if it yields to no compromise. It means to, it will triumph; hence its course is "American" in the highest sense when it upholds its colors unflinchingly. Don't damn it; join it; add

your strength to it, and let contact with such a vigorous movement add riches to your physical and moral manhood.

B.J.—I certainly was off. I'll take your advice. I'll try to cleanse myself from that moral leprosy that history will know some day as the "Chinese" method of political reasoning.

U.S. (taking Brother Jonathan heartily by the hand)—Shake hands, old boy! Whatever your faults, you are not a squirmer. You will squarely meet an issue, and, if floored, you don't turn skunk on those who showed themselves to be right; you make progress. I am proud of your friendship!

U.S. and B.J. walk away arm in arm waving their hats.

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

Uploaded October 2007

slpns@slp.org