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DIALOGUE

UNCLE SAM & BROTHER JONATHAN. {65}

By DANIEL DE LEON

BROTHER JONATHAN—I am all knocked in a heap once more.

UNCLE SAM—Can I help you out?

B.J.—I hope you can. You know about “Matthew Marshall,” don’t you?

U.S.—I do.

B.J.—You know he writes economic articles—

U.S.—Now, hold on; my buttons have not been looked after for some time; a strong strain upon them may prove too much; if you talk of “Matthew Marshall” writing economic articles I fear me they will all fly off with one simultaneous impulse.

B.J.—Well, I’ll spare your buttons. This man has got me all mixed up, knocked in a heap, as I said before. He makes this argument:

“A labor strike is essentially nothing more than a refusal of the strikers to work for an employer whose employment is not satisfactory. Either the wages offered are too small or the hours of labor are too long, or non-union workmen are engaged, or there is something else which is regarded as a sufficient reason for not continuing work. It is precisely like a refusal of the owner of a piece of real estate or merchandise to accept the offer which a would-be buyer makes him. He thinks he can do better by holding off, and he holds off accordingly until he finds another customer who is more liberal in his views or until he modifies his own. Conversely, he expects the dissatisfied applicant to seek for a better bargain elsewhere, and to make it if he finds an opportunity. But by one of those inconsistencies we so frequently remark in human nature, most of the workmen in this country who have their labor to sell are not content when the terms offered for it do not suit them with merely refusing to sell it. They not



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only set about preventing, by persuasion or by threats of their displeasure—which is in the present state of morality allowable—other workmen from going to work for the employer with whom they differ, but if persuasion or threats fail they resort to violence. Railroad strikers, rather than let the road be operated by new men, obstruct the tracks, disable engines, uncouple cars, and wound and kill engineers and brakemen. Miners on a strike destroy pumps and engine houses, drive off other incoming miners, and by every means in their power endeavor to make a continuance of mining impossible. Striking factory hands mob and maltreat those who have taken their places, and blow up factory buildings.”

U.S.—Hem!

B.J.—It seems to me there is some false reasoning here; yet I can’t put my finger on it. The argument sounds plausible, and if correct, places the workers in a bad light.

U.S.—IF correct.

B.J.—Then it is WRONG, is it?

U.S.—Absolutely.

B.J.—Tell me how?

U.S.—The argument of this economic tomnoodle is this in a nutshell: 1. Labor is a commodity, as any other; 2. Owners of all commodities have the right to set their prices and refuse their stuff to those who refuse the price; 3. The owners of the commodity labor, however, go further than that; they not only fix their price but they want to compel and coerce acceptance.

B.J.—That’s it exactly.

U.S.—And that is false!

B.J.—I thought so!

U.S.—The 1st and the 3d point won’t hold water.

As to the 3d, it is false to say that the owners of the commodity labor are the only ones who would “coerce” acceptance of their prices. There are more errors crowded together into this one sentence than there are bedbugs in the tenement houses owned by the people who pay “Matthew Marshall” to write the “gospel according to the latter-day St. Matthew.” The owners of all other commodities, especially the owners he mentions—railroad, mine, factory owners—create by bribery, official corruption, intimidation, police, militia and other brutalities a monopoly of their goods and thus COMPEL, COERCE, the acceptance of their goods in a way that is all the more devilish

because it is sneaky. Consequently, even if the owners of the commodity labor did coerce, they would not be the only ones—

B.J.—Indeed not, the other fellows do so too—

U.S.—Aye, they do so too; but that were no excuse; the important point is that they do so FIRST, and by doing so compel the others to adopt like methods.

B.J.—Clinched! I knew the thing was false.

U.S.—Then as to the first point. It takes a latter{-}day St. Matthew to talk of labor, human labor, as a COMMODITY. It is in the atmosphere which breeds such a degrading thought that such other thoughts as the “price of learning,” the “price of virtue,” the “price of honor” are bred. Where honor, virtue, knowledge are commodities, only there is labor also a commodity; but the light of a higher morality, of purer breeding, condemns the idea. Labor is not a commodity any more than virtue. Where it is treated as a commodity the economic system is still barbarous, the same as it is in the Moslem realms where feminine virtue is treated as a commodity. Human labor is, as all that appertains to humanity, as far above the level of a commodity as science is above Matthew Marshall economic spit-balls.

B.J.—Right you are; give it to him!

U.S.—In a harem women are commodities. Capitalism is a harem, and under its system labor is degraded to the commodity level.

B.J.—Down with the capitalist harem!

U.S.—Down it shall, together with all its howling dervishes.

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

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