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DIALOGUE

UNCLE SAM & BROTHER JONATHAN. {135}

By DANIEL DE LEON

BROTHER JONATHAN—Your Socialist theory sounds very pretty, but it won't work. Under a Socialist system no one would care to do dirty work, street cleaning, for instance.

UNCLE SAM—Under a Socialist system there would be no dirty work to do.

B.J. (with a sneer)—Your streets will be clean by magic, I suppose.

U.S.—No; by human labor.

B.J.—Then there will be dirty work to do.

U.S.—Ten to one you have no idea of what it is that constitutes “dirty” work.

B.J.—I am a plain, simple man. I have no fine-spun theories, I follow common sense. “Dirty” is dirty. Dirty work is degrading; no one cares to do it; yet it must be done; under your highfalutin Socialism it would remain undone.

U.S.—Is an ulcer a clean and neat thing?

B.J. (with disgust)—Humph!

U.S.—Pretty dirty and disgusting?

B.J.—I should stutter!

U.S.—Is it degrading to a physician to handle it?

B.J. (after a long pause)—No!

U.S.—Does he attend to it with disgust?

B.J. (pauses again)—No; physicians seem to go at it with much pleasure.

U.S.—It follows that work is not degrading nor is it eschewed simply because it



UNCLE SAM & BROTHER JONATHAN

is “dirty”; if “dirty” work is ever degrading and is eschewed, it must be for some other reason. How will you get out of that, smarty?

B.J.—To be frank, I don’t see how I can get out of it.

U.S.—The secret of what constitutes “dirty” work lies not in the work itself, but in the conditions under which the work is done.

B.J.—Well?

U.S.—If a certain work is poorly paid it will be degrading, and all the more degrading in proportion to the poorness of the pay. But work is always noble. “To work is to pray,” so runs the old, old saw. When work is considered ignoble it must be through the contortion of the social vision.

B.J.—What of it?

U.S.—There is this to it: He who cleans the streets does valuable work, and therefore honorable work for the community. Under the Socialist system “Labor” and not “Idleness” being the badge of nobility, the fines we see placed to-day on work by paying it poorly, working it long and otherwise treating it with contumely would be transferred to the head of idleness.

B.J.—I begin to see.

U.S.—Relieved of the oppression that now weighs it down, do you imagine that street-cleaning would be more disreputable than ulcer-cleaning?

B.J. scratches his head.

U.S.—Nor could you claim that ulcer-cleaning was scientific, while street-cleaning is unskilled labor—

B.J.—I was just going to claim that.

U.S.—In the first place, whatever labor, skilled or unskilled, is needed to accomplish a desired result is worthy of decent respect. In the second place, just in proportion as a certain work is skilled and scientific it is all the more fascinating and the doors to it should be opened instead of shut. Plain or unskilled labor is needed by society. If it is made onerous, then those who perform it can never enjoy the pleasures of scientific labor; if it is made easy affording it the pay and leisure that will enable it to develop intellectually, then it also will enable those who perform it to work upon higher planes. Socialism, being built upon actual common-sense, treats all labor as noble, and leaves the door wide open for the workers to move into higher spheres after they have satisfied their lower and material needs.

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

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slpns@slp.org