



EDITORIAL

A DUCK IN THUNDER.

By DANIEL DE LEON

SENATOR [James Z. George](#) of Mississippi is greatly exercised over the low price of cotton. He has been “investigating” the matter, as he says, “with much care”, and he has arrived at the “painful truth” that “we are never, at least in this generation, to have generally the high prices for cotton we once had, and that it will never, but in exceptional cases and for short periods, be high enough for the producer to rely upon it as the means of purchasing supplies which can not be raised at home.” Puzzled by this, to him, unexplainable phenomenon, he addresses the cotton farmers and recommends them to “reduce the acreage.”

The phenomenon that startles and pains Senator George is, however, neither startling nor painful if understood.

In the last analysis, the prices of goods are determined by their value, and their value depends upon the quantity of human labor socially necessary for their production. To stick to cotton, so long as the labor necessary for its production is great, its value, and, accordingly, its price is proportional; in proportion, however, as the labor necessary for its production goes down, its price will go down too. Now, then, cotton, like all other staples, is making this very experience. From year to year the world’s markets have been supplied with an ever larger quantity, because from year to year the labor necessary for its production has been declining; and, consequently, its value, and with its value, its price has steadily gone down.



JAMES Z. GEORGE (1826-1897)

Why this decline in the price of cotton should be painful, involves the question, What class of people does it affect painfully? To answer this question correctly, one must look to the cause that lies back of and at the bottom of this whole evolution. Only then can one arrive at intelligent conclusions and perceive the real way out of the trouble.

Until the other day, it took 700,000 hands to pick the cotton of the South; now the Cotton Harvester will pick the whole cotton crop of the land with only 40,000 hands. The Harvester is not yet in full operation, but is covering larger and larger areas. By almost as much as it reduces the hands requisite for, does it reduce the cost of picking. When in full operation, it will have reduced the cost of production by almost the full quantity of wages which the displaced 660,000 hands would have consumed.

Nor is this all. Steam has brought within easy reach of the markets of the world cotton fields that were formerly difficult, if at all, accessible; and this process is going on steadily.

Taking but these two causes together, and they are quite sufficient, it is evident that perfected instruments of production have been, and are, reducing stupendously the labor necessary to produce cotton—from its planting and harvesting down to its offer for sale at the market, and thereby are reducing its value, consequently, its price, whence flow the following important conclusions:

1—The same quantity of cotton cannot—with the increased production that always accompanies perfected methods of production—fetch the same, but a much lower and ever declining price;

2—The small cotton producer must find it “painfully” harder and harder to purchase with the proceeds of his staple the “supplies which can not be raised at home”; and

3—Only by increased sales, i.e., by larger and larger, i.e., capitalist, production can the individual planter hold his own.

This, in a nutshell, is the rock on which Socialist philosophy is built, and upon which its programme is planted. So understanding it, the experience of the small cotton planters is not “startling” but natural, inevitable; and it need not be “painful” to them, unless they persist in the reactionary endeavor of keeping things down to the low level of production from which mankind has been happily emancipated. So understanding it, their safety lies, not in the silly, reactionary palliative, proposed by Senator George, of

“reducing the acreage”, but in recognizing the economic fact that their own machinery of production cannot compete with that of the large capitalist producers; that large machinery of production is utterly inaccessible to them individually; that unless they can themselves utilize the modern machinery of production, they will be more and more ground down; and that there is no way out of the trouble for them except they place in the hands of the people collectively, for their use, the nation’s whole machinery of production. In other words, their salvation does not lie in a “reduction of acreage” but in the opposite direction—in its broad extension. Nor is this possible but by the popular ownership of the land used for production, together with the machinery necessary to produce.

The attitude of Senator George before the present economic phenomenon is that of a duck in thunder. He knows not what is up. His dilemma and his “recommendation” are but further proofs of the total intellectual bankruptcy of the capitalist class.

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