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EDITORIAL

A STEP-BROTHER PLAYING WITH FIRE.

By DANIEL DE LEON

AMONG the impassioned speeches that are being delivered in Congress “against privilege” the speech of Bourke Cockran on the Indian Appropriation bill easily ranks as the most impassioned. “What avails it a citizen,” exclaimed this enthusiastic “brother of the workingman” as a climax to a perfervid onslaught upon privilege, “what avails it a citizen that legally, constitutionally, theoretically he can sell his labor for what he pleases when the value of the wages he may earn is fixed absolutely by a few men in whose selection he has no voice, whose course he can not control or even influence!” Superficially looked at the exclamation has the right ring; more closely examined it is found to be not the cry of a brother in behalf of his brother, but the hypocritical attempt of a step-brother to aid in the disinheritance of him for whom he affects brotherly love. Bourke Cockran’s cry is against prices—it is against those who can manipulate prices in such a way that the cost of living goes up—it is not a cry against those who regulate the money wage of the workers.

In the days of Adam Smith, that is, over a century ago, the share of the American wage earner in the product of his labor was double that of the British worker. To-day it is 93 per cent. higher outside of New York, and it has sunk to 79 per cent. higher in New York.

In 1894 the American wage earner produced on an average \$1,300 a year, and he received on an average \$445, or 34 per cent. of his product. In 1900 the American wage earner produced on an average \$2,450, and he received on an average \$438, or only 18 per cent. of his product.

Absolutely and relatively the American wage earner has declined in well-being. When the American wage earner objects to this treatment, the stereotyped answer that has come from step-brother Bourke Cockran has been that “the American wage

earner is a free man; he can go where he pleases, work when he pleases for whom he pleases and for what he pleases; if one employer does not suit him he can select another; his wages are the result of his own efforts in the exercise of his freedom.” The reply to this from the wage earner was: “Legally, constitutionally, theoretically I have that right, but what does the right avail me when formidable powers which the Constitution never contemplated and which government does not control, force my earnings down whichever way I turn, presenting me only with a Hobson’s choice of rotten apples?” The rejoinder of step-brother Bourke Cockran always was: “Criminal! Anarchist! Law-breaker! Disrupter of Society, the State, the family and religion! Socialist, Avaunt!” Has a new soul entered the breast of the workers’ step-brother that he now uses their own system of reasoning? No! ’Tis the same old step-brother soul, the STEP-brotherliness of which appears in the circumstance that the system of reasoning is misapplied.

The reasoning that Labor uses against the falsehood of “freedom to choose better wages,” step-brother Cockran applies against the falsehood of “freedom to choose cheaper prices.” The latter freedom applies practically only to the step-brother class—those capitalists whom the Trusts have left out in the cold. Labor is the sole producer of all wealth. If its wages equaled the product, there could be no Trust to raise prices. The infliction of higher prices upon Labor is a result of the power of capitalism to plunder the worker in production. Consequently, the exclamation of step-brother Cockran, and his cribbing against the falsehood of “freedom to choose cheaper PRICES,” the correct stand of Labor against the falsehood of “freedom to choose better wages,” is an exclamation that can only come from a hypocrite’s breast.

Step-brother Bourke Cockran is playing with fire. A wrongdoer who is himself worsted by his pals, can not use against these the solid reasoning used by the victims of Wrong against Wrong, without burning his own fingers. The capitalist advocate’s admission that conditions have so changed as to practically repeal the legal, constitutional and theoretical rights of the citizen in choosing prices, is the act of a blunderer who plays with fire, and is bound to be scorched. If even the step-brother class of the Bourke Cockrans, with all the wealth at their command, find themselves helpless before their more successful pals, the Trust magnates, how

utterly helpless must not be the Working Class, which is wholly stripped of all capital in the enforcement of its “legal, constitutional and theoretical” rights to choose better wages.

The changed conditions demand new constitutional, new legal, new theoretical rights, in short—the Social Revolution, which only the politically and economically united and class-consciously organized Working Class can effect.

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