

DAILY PEOPLE

VOL. 10, NO. 349.

NEW YORK, TUESDAY, JUNE 14, 1910.

ONE CENT.

EDITORIAL

“FRIENDLY COMPETITION.”

By DANIEL DE LEON

“FRIENDLY competition” is reported to be the rule now in the Erie Railroad machine shops. At the Meadville, Pa., establishment a locomotive was completely overhauled and put into commission again in 36 hours. At the Susquehanna works a similar job had previously taken 47 hours. A saving of 11 hours was not enough. The Hornell shops did the work in 24 hours and 33 minutes, and thereupon, in “friendly competition,” the Susquehanna men spurred themselves into doing it in 13 hours and 34 minutes. Rules established by the company governed the “competition.”

Here the geographical location of the shops was the thing used as a line of cleavage to divide the men and induce in them the rivalry which panned out so profitably for the employer. In other cases it is nationality, the “Dutch” being played against the “Irish,” and the “native American” against both. In still others, craft lines are utilized, one set of men being caused to “hustle,” and the others being spurred to “keep up the pace.” Whatever the pretext it is disguised under—shop location, land of birth, or peculiar sub-division of labor—the result of “friendly competition” among the workers is the same: added profits for the employer, a decreased share in their own product for the employed.

It is one of the superstitions the workingman is fed on, that his wage is determined by his skill, his knowledge or his speed. He can not get over the superstition too quickly. Upon none of these things does his pay depend, but solely upon the number of men of similar attainments also seeking work. He may be in the top rank of his profession; yet if there are many like him his wages will be low. Similarly, he may be but an indifferent workman; but in the absence of many equally well equipped, his wages will be high. It is a mere question of supply and demand in the labor market.

When an employer hires a “hand” at a certain wage, it is without implication as to the amount of work the “hand” will do. The employer simply buys the “hand’s” labor power, with the tacit right to drive or squeeze the worker as much as he can. All between the sum paid to the worker and the new wealth created by him, falls to the employer as profits. The less the employer squeezes, the lower his profits. The more he can squeeze, the higher his profits.

Whence the reason of “friendly competition.”

Transcribed and edited by Robert Bills for the official website of the Socialist Labor Party of America.
Uploaded June 2011

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