

EDITORIAL

THE SMALL FARMER AND WAGE SLAVERY.

By DANIEL DE LEON

A CHARLESTON, S.C., correspondent writes:

“Having seen your interesting answer in this week’s [August 10] Letter-Box concerning the small farmer, I thought I would ask you for enlightenment on the following. Suppose a farmer would own or rent a farm consisting of about ten acres, and cultivate it. Now, inasmuch as a farm like that would not bear a big enough crop to support him; and inasmuch as it would require only part of his labor-power to work it, he would sell the rest. What I would like to know is this: Could a farmer under these conditions be considered a capitalist, or would he be eligible for membership in an economic organization? Also state whether it makes any difference if he should own or rent his farm.—”

Below is the Letter-Box answer referred to by our correspondent:

“E.S.T., TOGO, SASK.—Your premises are correct. The small farmer, all his tribulations notwithstanding, is not a wage slave. He is not a wage slave even if he works his farm all alone; leastwise is he a wage slave if he at all employs farm hands, however few there may be, or for however limited seasons. Not belonging to the wage earning class the small farmer falls under the ‘capitalist class,’ altho’ away at the bottom of this class. However far down in the scale of capitalism, the small farmer shares the economic interests of the capitalist class, to wit, to buy cheap, which includes cheap labor power—identically as the small urban and low taxes-craving dealer. It follows that an economic organization of the small farmer cannot be of the nature of a Labor Union. The only gate through which the small farmer can enter the Socialist Movement is the political gate. And that gate—except a Pentecostal fire were to illumine the class mind of the small farmer—he will not enter as a class, but dribblingly as individuals.”

The question is not clear as to the facts with regard to the farmer in question. For instance—

Does the farmer work his reduced 10-acre plot all alone, without any employes,

and yet have time left, which surplus time, his surplus labor power, he sells to some employer?

Or does the farmer hire employes on his farm, and hire himself to some other employer for part of his time?

We shall consider each possibility; The first one first:

To be a capitalist a person must employ, which amounts to exploit, wage slaves. No wage slaves, no capitalist.

To be qualified for membership in an economic organization, meaning a Labor Union, a person must be a wage slave. A wage slave is a person who, being stripped of the necessaries for production, must sell his labor-power to an employer (capitalist), and depends for his existence upon his wages, the price of his labor power in the labor market.

What is the economic status of our farmer under the first possibility?

He is no “capitalist,” he employs, hence, exploits nobody; and yet his proprietorship (whether he be a renter or direct land-holder cuts no ice), however slender the navel-string that connects him with the property-holding class, will tend to induce him to listen to the bourgeois promptings for cheapness—low taxes, “cheap goods,” etc.—which promptings make against the class interests of the wage slave class.

He is a wage slave, being employed by someone else; and yet, not being stripped of the necessaries for production, and his existence not depending upon his wages, his wage-slavehood is only incidental.

What is that farmer’s status? What his status is he, probably, will himself proclaim by belonging to some taxpayers’ association, where he certainly does belong, and simultaneously applying for admission to some Labor Union, his application having a good color of right. In other words such a farmer’s economic status is the status of the hippopotamus in zoology—the specimen of a species, once common under material conditions that have ceased, or are ceasing to prevail, and which itself is becoming extinct.

Next, considering the second possibility:

The farmer is unquestionably a capitalist: he employs, hence, exploits wage slaves.

At the same time the farmer is a wage-slave: he is employed, hence, exploited

by someone else.

What is this farmer's status? While the hippopotamus analogy still holds, yet in this instance the scales do not tremble, as equally balanced, as in the first possibility. The fact of proprietorship coupled with and accentuated by the fact of exploiting, gives the decided preponderance to the capitalist scale. Such a man has no place in a Union.

Repeating the closing words of the Letter-Box answer which prompted our correspondent's question:

“The only gate through which the small farmer can enter the Socialist Movement is the political gate. And that gate—except a Pentecostal fire were to illumine the class mind of the small farmer—he will not enter as a class, but dribblingly as individuals.”

Transcribed and edited by Robert Bills for the official website of the Socialist Labor Party of America.
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slpns@slp.org