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DIALOGUE

UNCLE SAM & BROTHER JONATHAN. {143}

By DANIEL DE LEON

BROTHER JONATHAN—I feel happy; I feel happy enough to jump, despite my three hundred pounds avoir-du-pois.

UNCLE SAM—Whence may all this jumpfulness proceed?

B.J. (winking confidentially)—I'll tell ye. I have been reading a lot of Socialist books; and I must tell you they opened up my eyes, and for a while they made me feel quite skeery.

U.S.—And whence that skeeryfulness?

B.J.—I worked in the factory, you know—

U.S.—I do.

B.J.—And I never realized how much on the slope we were until I read those books. I had seen my wages go down; then up a little; then down, lower than before; then up again, but not as high as originally; down once more; but I always imagined things would straighten up again. I had seen my workdays grow more and more irregular; some times whole weeks of idleness; then again a brisk time; then idleness once more, and more prolonged than before; but still I thought somehow things would better, and that all this decline was only a temporary—

U.S.—“Temporary!”

B.J.—Just wait, that's what I then imagined—a temporary affair, a temporary depression. I then came across a lot of Socialist publications. By Jericho! The more of them I read the stiffer my hair stood on end. What I had taken to be only a temporary depression, I now found out was a permanent—



UNCLE SAM & BROTHER JONATHAN

U.S.—“Permanent!”

B.J.—Hold on; I know what you mean. I found out that it was permanent, not in the sense of remaining the same, but in the sense that it never would improve. I found out that my condition was bound to become worse and worse. I saw what I had never seen before, that ever more perfect machinery and ever bigger concerns of capitalists rendered ever larger numbers of workers superfluous; that as a result of that our time of work grew less, our weeks of idleness grew more numerous, and our income during the year had to grow slimmer. I saw it all clearly as in a map; and I tell ye, my hair stood on end at the discovery. I already imagined myself and my family on the street, tramping the roads, and the dogs that the farmers train to bite tramps fastening their teeth into my calves.

U.S.—That’s a logical imagining.

B.J.—But after I had looked into the subject quite long and carefully, I began to see light—

U.S.—And you became a Socialist, eh?

B.J. (disdainfully)—Not much! No Socialism in me, if you please. I’m a practical man, I am.

U.S.—And what did Sir Practical do?

B.J.—I’ll tell ye how I reasoned.

U.S.—It must be a high old “reasoning” you went through, if you saw light outside of Socialism.

B.J.—That’s just what I did. Worked myself out of darkness into light in a practical way without losing myself in the clouds of the vagaries of Socialism.

U.S.—Hasten to tell me all about it, because, if you are practical, then am I away off in the clouds.

B.J.—That’s just why I wanted to talk to you on the subject.

U.S.—Out with it! Let her rip, old Boy!

B.J.—Here goes. I reasoned this way: Machinery is knocking spots out of labor. To be safe, consequently, labor must get out of the reach or out of the way of machinery.

U.S.—You took a big contract on your hands when you tried to get out of the way of machinery.

B.J.—Not so big. You Socialists are not practical. If I only could get a job where machinery never could work then I would be safe.

U.S.—Oho!

B.J.—I found such a job or trade.

U.S.—Which?

B.J.—Barber. I have become a barber. Now I am safe. I can snap my fingers at all the machinery in the world, past, present and to come. That's why I feel so happy. Instead of a gloomy future I have a happy, because safe, future before me.

U.S.—Poor deluded visionary! Sir Practical, you are a mutton-head. No, excuse me, you are a mutton chop, fat and juicy for the capitalist to breakfast on.

B.J.—Can you imagine a shaving machine?

U.S.—Not very well.

B.J.—Then I am no mutton chop for any one to breakfast on.

U.S.—You say you read Socialist works?

B.J.—Carefully.

U.S.—Suppose in a shop where 500 men worked, machinery is introduced or perfected—

B.J.—That throws men out of work.

U.S.—How many shall we say?

B.J.—Say fifty.

U.S.—Do you imagine that each of these fifty will have to read Socialist works—

B.J.—To know what struck them?

U.S.—No; I don't mean that; to know what it is that struck them they must have some Socialist knowledge. But do you imagine that, unless they have acquired some Socialist knowledge, they will sit down and starve, and not look for some other trade?

B.J.—Guess not.

U.S.—They will look for some other trade, but if they were spinners their spinning knowledge will be worthless to them in any other trade.

B.J.—Entirely.

U.S.—So they will have to take some unskilled job in a factory.

B.J.—Suppose they do; just as soon as {a} new machine comes in, whatever little

skill they needed is done away with and—

U.S.—They are thrown out again?

B.J.—Yes; or if the bosses in that trade combine, they need less hands, and off go these fifty with a lot more.

U.S.—Will they sit down and starve then?

B.J.—No!

U.S.—These hands that are thrown out in larger and larger numbers will all hustle for jobs, and the jobs they will hustle for are the easily acquired ones. Barbering is among these.

B.J.—Thunder!

U.S.—Just look along our thoroughfares. You will find barber shops sprouting up like mushrooms over night. Did you ever stop to account for that?

B.J. begins to look pale around his gills.

U.S.—So long as machinery was not displacing many people, an unskilled, easily learned trade like that of barbering, and one withal in which the tool could not be subject to the machine development, could give a living, safe and comfortable, to him who plied it; competitors were few—

B.J.—Darn that competition; I had quite overlooked it!

U.S.—But just as soon as the machine reached its present stage of supplanting workers by the hundreds, these unskilled and “individualistic” trades became overcrowded. See?

B.J. (thoughtfully)—Guess I do!

U.S.—According to the last census, it is safe to say that the people engaged in all such trades increased fully fifty per cent. during the decade of 1880–1890, while in the other trades the increase cannot have reached thirty per cent., despite our increased population.

B.J. wriggles about uncomfortably.

U.S.—Your barber trade will consequently not put you out of the reach of the effects of machinery unless you, Sir Practical, fly off above the clouds and go in for shaving the angels. Here on earth you will find your competitors setting up their barber shops on the other side of the street, just above, just below, all around you. Every turn of the capitalist

screw will give birth to more competitors in your and in all other such trades—newsboys, shyster lawyers, clerks, quack doctors, insurance agents, parsons, teachers, theatrical people, janitors, boot-blacks, menials, collectors, brokers, corner grocers, etc., etc.—and barbers.

B.J. looks up to U.S. with an I-am-done-up look.

U.S.—Sir Practical, if you don't want your imagination of having farmers' dogs biting into your calves become a reality, if you would have a better future for your sons, and if you would like to feel that your daughters' honor was safe, just drop your stupid "practical" conceit and become, like me, a "visionary" Socialist. There is no help for us but in the public ownership of the land on which and the machine with which to work. Nor is there a more practical way of getting that than by rallying around the Uplifted Arm and Hammer of the Socialist Labor party. Fall in line and stop monkeying.

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