

Daniel De Leon

Editorial: Small Property-Holders and the Propertiless

An honored correspondent from Geneva, Ill., asks: “I think I understand the nature of the line THE PEOPLE draws between property-holders and proletarians; but when the farmer cannot lift his mortgage by selling everything—land, horse, cook stove, etc.—is he not propertiless, even though the records might show him to be a property-holder? If his tendency is still individualistic, is it not because he knows no better?”

In our issue of the 1st of last month we showed, under the head-lines “Downfall of the Small Producer”,¹ that the little property of the small farmer is the only thing that distinguishes him from the proletarian, the man who already has been stripped of all property; that this distinction generally operates rather against than in favor of the farmer; that while, with the propertiless workman, his wages are, as a general thing, controlled by his needs, with the small farmer there is no limit downwards, seeing that it frequently happens that interest on mortgages will absorb the whole product of the labor of the small holder, in which case he has worked for nothing and paid his own expenses to boot, thanks to his ownership of a little property; that the effect of small holdings has wholly changed character; before the days of large production, these small holdings were a bulwark of freedom, to-

¹ A chapter from *The Erfurt Programme* by Karl Kautsky, which De Leon had “adapted to American conditions” and was serializing in *The People* at the time.

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day they are means of intensified slavery; and that is the wretched condition of the small farmers' class to-day.

Viewed from this standpoint, the standpoint of misery and suffering, the small farmer and the proletarian stand upon identical planes. Yet there is a profound difference between the two, a difference that is inherent in the economic class to which they respectively belong, and from which important results flow every time each class expresses itself.

The system of private ownership in the machinery of production has dug its own grave; it has developed into large production, and this does not tolerate small production at its side; it centers all wealth in the hands of a few and pauperizes the masses; unless civilization is to be allowed to suffer shipwreck, the machinery of production—land and capital—must be owned by the people collectively, and operated for use and not for sale or private profit. Nevertheless, private ownership in the means of production has its roots in small production. It was born of this system, and there it has, and necessarily must have, its strongest hold. As a result of this scientific fact, whatever the tribulations of the struggling small producers may be to-day, the economics of their psychology, and the psychology of their economics cause them to cling to the shreds of private property in the implements of production that are still sticking to their fingers, and whenever they stir themselves to improve their condition they have always been found to move in the direction of strengthening their grip upon that fleeing private property; in other words, in a reactionary direction that leads into a blind alley. On the other hand, the wage-working proletariat, especially those engaged in large industrial production, having no property in the tools they use, are not pulled in the reactionary direction of trying to save any private property in these; freed from this distracting influence, they have a clearer insight into the requirements for their emancipation; and, consequently whenever they stir themselves, whether they act knowingly or instinctively, they move as a rule, progressively: the direction their efforts take is

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towards regaining possession of their instruments of production; and, seeing the magnitude these have assumed, there is no choice but to own and operate them collectively.

Hence arises the all important difference there still is between the bulk of the propertiless and the bulk of the small property-holding classes, however slight and mythical the property of the latter may be; and this is a difference, which, to overlook, is perilous. Information may wipe out this difference, but it will not be wiped out of itself. Only one of two things can do the work: either the further evolution, that will finally throw the small farmer wholly and actually into the class of the proletariat; or his enlightenment upon his condition, and the fate that awaits him, unless he moves in the right direction, saves himself all further agonies, and strives for the establishment of the Co-operative Commonwealth. This, however, is not the attitude of the small farmers, just the reverse. True enough, it is not their fault, but their misfortune. At the same time it is sufficient cause for the Socialist Movement to avoid entangling itself with the Populist, while all along doing the best in its power to carry the Evangel to the drowning class of small property-holders, the same as it does to that that already is propertiless.

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