

Daniel De Leon

Editorial: The Issue Glaring Us In the Face

There is not a strike, boycott or lockout that does not bring out the issue involved in the Social Question. In the pending PULLMAN conflict, however, the issue leaps forward with a glaringness greater than usual, and is, so to speak, heavily underscored by the extensive railroad and other strikes that have flowed from it.

PULLMAN employs 5,816 men. It is not material to the case that he is a “particularly” hard master, grinding down his workers with “particular” harshness, and by means of “particular” tricks. That is the case with all capitalist employers of labor. Every time the eye is turned to any special employer, he will be found guilty of all “particular” rascalities. To understand the situation it must be considered in all its simplicity, freed from all its aggravating circumstances, and in the best light possible in which PULLMAN himself can place his own case.

With the crisis, so runs the PULLMAN version, his business suffered like all others. Sales were fewer, orders scarcer, and prices cheaper. Nor did the trouble stop there. Prices and orders and sales tumbled down in such style that there was no work for all the 5,816 hands and that no profit was left at the old rates. The PULLMAN story branches off at this point into a very pathetic account of his “benevolence” in even “losing money” for the sake of keeping his men employed. But despite all his “benevolent” intentions, the “inexorable” law of the market compelled him finally to lay off the bulk of his men, and to reduce the wages of those he retained.

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This is the very fairest presentation of the capitalist's side of the question; and the presentation is an ample indictment of the capitalist system—of the system of private ownership in the instruments of production.

If private ownership of the things needed for production is justifiable, if PULLMAN is justly the owner of his plant, then he is the owner thereof absolutely and without qualification; he may do with it what he likes; use it or not, as he pleases and to the extent that it may please him, he may lay off men, or employ them, and he may condition the application of their labor to his property in such manner as he may choose, whether such be whimsical or not.

But the proof of the pudding lies in the eating. What are, under the present social system, the results, undenied and unquestioned by any intelligent or self-respecting man? The results are widespread want among the workers, who, by reason of the private ownership of their machinery of production, are left at the mercy of the employer! The results are starvation in sight of plenty and of all the elements to produce an abundance. The results are slavish dependence, excessive toil; premature old age, illiteracy, insanity and prostitution among the toiling masses!

Thus the issue is clear and the alternative patent.

If the machinery of the people's production is to remain private property, we must submit to the breeding of a nation of human beasts of burden; if, on the other hand, the nation shall consist of free men and women and hopeful children, its machinery of production must be their own property, held as collectively as it is used.

This is the alternative that faces us. No middle way lies open; no palliatives will meet the case. We must choose one or the other. "How will you decide?" is the query addressed to the civilized world and to the people of this country in particular by the Social Question.

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