

EDITORIAL

IS IT PROGRESS?

By DANIEL DE LEON

THE question that heads this article applies to a circular, printed elsewhere in this issue, sent out by the striking shoeworkers of Philadelphia and Baltimore, and entitled “Philadelphia, Pa., and Baltimore, Md., Strikes.”¹

Two passages in the circular are peculiarly puzzling—

One sets forth that the men on strike “are only asking for a fair and just wage and conditions that other Unions have already attained.”

The other passage sets forth that “surely the time has arrived when we, as workingmen, should arise in our might, for might we have, if we are only men enough to exercise it by the ‘Ballot Box,’ send men to the Halls of Congress who will give us legislation that will protect our homes from the onslaughts of unjust and unfair combinations of capital.”

Is there such a thing as a “fair and just wage”? Is not “wage” a badge of wage slavery? What does “wage” mean but the price that labor-power fetches in the labor market? In other words, does not “wage” indicate a status for the workingman that is the same as the status of other articles of merchandise—cattle on the hoof, bales of cotton, barrels of pork, etc.,—each of which has a market in which it is sold and bought? Can there, accordingly, be such a thing as a “fair and just wage”?

The idea of rising “in our might” at the “ballot box” is good—but. Could the lasters on strike in Philadelphia and Baltimore alone muster up “might” enough to elect? Surely not. And, seeing they say that all they are asking for is already enjoyed by other Unions, have they any reason to expect these other Unions to come to their aid? There is no reason to expect people, who think they have “a fair and just wage” to rise in any might except that of voting cattle for their masters.

¹ [To be appended—R.B.]

Moreover, of what earthly use is the rising “in our might at the ballot box” unless the workers are economically so organized that they can make good the fiat of their ballot? The economic organization that speaks of a “fair and just wage” is hardly the structure that can back up the Labor vote for the overthrow of the Wage System of Slavery.

Finally, what does the expression “unfair combination of capital” mean but that there are, or can be, fair combinations of capital? Capital stands for the means of production owned privately and operated by means of the exploitation of the workers. “Fair combinations of capital” is like “fair combinations of highway robbers.” All capital is unfair to the worker.

These considerations point to a mental state that has not moved a step forward since the cave dwellers’ age of the Labor Movement. Nevertheless, when members of a class that is the revolutionary class in a society place themselves at all in a position of revolt, then, it often happens that, however limited their original program, they develop rapidly, learn rapidly, and rapidly move up abreast of the main line.

For these reasons we ask, Is the circular of the Philadelphia and Baltimore strikers a sign of progress?—and we express the hope that it may be.

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