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DIALOGUE

UNCLE SAM & BROTHER JONATHAN. {114}

By DANIEL DE LEON

BROTHER JONATHAN—Hurrah for the initiative and referendum!

UNCLE SAM—Hurrah for fiddlesticks!

B.J.—Why, Switzerland has the initiative and referendum, and see how happy she is.

U.S.—That statement is exactly of a piece with the one made by Weaver about France having a large per capita of circulating medium and being happy.

B.J.—Was that false?

U.S.—Certainly. France has a large per capita, that's true; but it is false that she is happy. Despite her large per capita the majority of her people, the working class is poor and in misery. And so in the matter of the referendum and initiative in Switzerland. These are two lies set afloat by one-ideaed cranks.

B.J.—Well, they did fool me. I did believe Switzerland had the initiative and referendum.

U.S.—Why, man, she does. But the same as France, despite her per capita, is in misery, so likewise Switzerland, despite its initiative and referendum is everything but happy.

B.J.—Were you ever there?

U.S.—Yes; and let me tell you that there are tenement houses in the large Swiss towns just as here; and that if you poke your nose into any of them your nostrils will be assailed, referendum and initiative notwithstanding, by the unmistakable stench of a United States tenement house. That settles the case of "happiness."



UNCLE SAM & BROTHER JONATHAN

B.J.—It may for Switzerland. It won't for America. I'd like to see the American people armed with the referendum and initiative and not {?} wipe out all tenement nuisances together with all the misery that produces them!

U.S.—A touch of jingoism, eh?

B.J.—Call me a jingo if you like, but you won't, you can't, deny that if we Americans had the initiative and referendum we would free ourselves.

U.S.—I certainly do deny any such jingo-engendered stupidity.

B.J.—Do you mean to say that we would toy with and not use such a weapon for our liberation?

U.S.—So long as we don't know any more than we do now what it is that we need, we shall certainly “toy with such a weapon;” and what is more, that is just what we are doing now.

B.J.—We have no referendum!

U.S.—Yes we do!

B.J.—You might as well tell me that I have feathers on my body.

U.S.—Perhaps you have. See here. Did you ever stop to consider what elections mean?

B.J.—I can't say I have.

U.S.—Guess not, neither you nor any other referendum shouter. Now, then, at elections you elect lawgivers, we shall say. Even if your ears were a good deal smaller than they actually are, you could hear distinctly the question put on election day at the hustings. The genius of American institutions shouts there as loud as is possible, and louder than Gabriel with his trumpet:

“American people, the laws of the country are hereby referendumed to you. If you are satisfied with them, then return to power the same class that has inflicted them upon you. If, however, you are not satisfied with those laws, then kick the class that passed them out, and elect the working class.”

This, to all intents and purposes, is essentially the much-vaunted referendum. Our people thus do now wield that potent weapon. But do they wield it for their emancipation or do they toy with it? Answer me.

B.J. (dumbfounded)—I must be honest. They do toy with it!

U.S.—Exactly. Year in year out, on election day, when they have the power to use the referendum which they enjoy, and thereby annul all bad laws and initiate good ones, they—

B.J.—Hang it all! They indorse the bad laws by indorsing the bad lawgivers.

U.S.—Year in year out they re-elect the identical capitalist class of exploiters.

B.J.—The asses; there is no hope in them!

U.S.—Now, don't fly again off the handle. They are not asses. The asses are those who presume to lead them without knowing what they are talking about.

B.J.—I accept the amendment.

U.S.—The gist of the question is this, and I'll illustrate it with a story:

An Eastern grandee of much vigor of bone had a sword with which at one blow he could cut off a bull's head. News of this reached the neighboring Pasha, a weak, worn-out libertine. He forthwith ordered the grandee to send him the sword, and, soon as he got it, tried to perform the same feat. He failed ignominiously. Enraged thereat, he summoned the grandee before him to show cause why he should not be strangled for deceiving his Pasha in sending him a false sword. The grandee appeared and defended himself, saying: "I sent you my sword, but I did not send you my arm along."

Do you catch on?

B.J.—Think I do.

U.S.—Now, then, without the arm the sword was useless. So likewise without intelligence back of the ballot, and the referendum is a ballot, the ballot is of no use to him who wields it. Let us devote our energies, not in forging or sharpening the sword we have, but in strengthening the arm; let us turn the voters into Socialists, then referendum or no referendum, ballot or no ballot, the ox will be felled, the capitalist system will be smashed!

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

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