

Daniel De Leon

Editorial: Peers–Slaves

In the course of his great speech before the Chamber of Deputies in Paris, published in *THE PEOPLE* of last December 31st, our Comrade, the Socialist Deputy Professor Jean Jaures, said:

“It is from these (the citizen workingmen), from their sovereign will that our laws and our governments emanate. They revoke, they change their representatives, the legislators and the ministers. But yet, at the very moment when the wage worker is a sovereign in the political order, he is a serf in the industrial order. Yes! The very moment when the wage worker can hurl ministers from power, he, this sovereign, this peer, can be chased out of the shop and left helpless, without bread for the morrow.”

Of all leading countries in Europe, France is the only one in which this graphic presentation could be made of the glaring contradiction produced by capitalism—within the same person—between man as citizen and man as wage earner, between man as a political freeman and the same man as an industrial slave. This contradiction appears most strikingly in France, of all European countries, because, of all leading European countries, France alone enjoys a republican form of government, with what is known as universal suffrage; there the whole personnel of the government can, from top to bottom, be overthrown, together with its policy, at the ballot-box.

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Similarly with France is the situation here in the United States. From the President down to the village dog-catcher all the officers of the land, together with the policies of the country, lie in the hollow of the hand of the people, and, seeing that the large majority of the people consists of the toiling masses, these toiling millions are in their political capacity sovereigns. And yet what is the status of these sovereign toilers in their industrial capacity?

An “Employees’ Agreement,” such as one of this city’s Express Agencies demands from the applicants for work, has been shown us this week. In it these clauses occur:

1. The employee agrees expressly that the “rules and regulations printed in the rule book of said company, as now in force, AND AS THEY MAY BE AMENDED FROM TIME TO TIME, shall be, and they are hereby made, binding” on him.
2. The employee agrees “expressly to comply with all such rules and regulations, and to obey all such orders promptly.”
3. The employee expressly agrees that “the company may discharge” him whenever, in its opinion, the employee has failed to comply with his duties.

According to these clauses, the American political sovereign, who has it in his power to hurl a President down the steps of the White House and sweep a whole Congress out of the Federal Capitol, agrees, not only to the “rules” in existence in the Company’s establishment, but also to all those that may subsequently be instituted—all of which are, of course, so instituted without his consent or even his knowledge; and he submits to be discharged at the Company’s will, the Company alone being the court, from which there is no appeal, and even before which he will never have an opportunity to defend himself!!

Politically the American would consider it slavery to be forced to abide by laws in the making of which he had no share, or to submit to decisions of a court which he has not himself, directly or indirectly, helped to constitute; and yet this same peer of political peers, in his industrial capacity, feels

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constrained by an economic system that makes his bread dependent upon another to submit to the degrading station of an Indian pariah!

This contradiction cannot last; the equilibrium is bound to be restored, or rather established.

In the uncompromising language of Abraham Lincoln: “There will be, there can be, no peace until a crisis has been reached and passed; this country must be either all slave or all free.”

And free it shall be; and the peers at the ballot-box shall be peers in the shop—or not a wreck be left of the XIXth century civilization.

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*A De Leon editorial transcribed and edited by Robert Bills for the
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