

DAILY PEOPLE

VOL. 4, NO. 183.

NEW YORK, WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 30, 1903.

ONE CENT.

EDITORIAL

LO, AN INVENTION!

By DANIEL DE LEON

GREAT is Mr. H.T. Newcomb, the vice-president of the American Association for the Advancement of Science. At a meeting of his Association, held on December 28 at St. Louis, the gentleman delivered a speech in the course of which he launched an invention on the field of the Labor Question with a deal less modesty than Roentgen launched his discovery of the X rays on the field of physical science. Inventor Newcomb sketched the troubled waters of modern society. Analyzing several of the proposed remedies—"compulsory arbitration" and "voluntary arbitration"—he justly discarded both, the former as offensive, the latter as self-contradictory, and then he trotted forth his remedy or invention. It is this:

"Men must learn to bargain together reasonably."

This is simplicity itself. Columbus and his egg are not in it. Why and how did not this dull generation hit before upon so simple a plan?

Here is a pork chop in a butcher's stall; and there comes a would-be purchaser on a certain day. Let them "bargain together reasonably." The conceit of the chop makes it crave for as high, the greed of the would-be purchaser makes it strain for as low a price as possible. This, obviously, is not "bargaining reasonably." That would-be purchaser and the chop, unable to agree at first, are inspired by the breath of Inventor Newcomb. They agree to consult statistics and the economic law of the market. These reveal to them that the supply of chops is largely in excess of people capable of being would-be purchasers, and that a large supply of an article implies a correspondingly low rate of exchange value. The conceit of our pork chop shrinks. It reasons thus: "If I sell not, I rot." A "reasonable bargain" is then struck. The chop is sold, the would-be purchaser carries it home, and turns it to use.

A month later, another pork chop sparkles in all the glory of porkine fat and meat in the butcher's stall, and the identical would-be purchaser turns up again.

Again the chop's conceit inflates its expectations and the would-be purchaser's greed renders him skinflinty. The mood that the two come together in is not that of "bargaining reasonably." But again unable to agree, and again inspired by a breath of Inventor Newcomb, the two agree to again consult statistics and the economic law of the market. The still larger supply of chops in the pork chop market—due to perfected means of butchering, transportation, etc.,—coupled with the economic law that an increased supply implies a decreased exchange value, brings our pork chop to a reasonable frame of mind, again greatly aided thereto by the thought that, if it sell not, it rots. The reasonable bargain is again struck, and paying a still smaller price than the month before, the would-be purchaser goes home and utilizes the use value of the pork chop.

As with one article of merchandise, so with all—including, of course, labor-power, the only merchandise that the workingman has to dispose of, a merchandise, moreover, which being inseparable from his own body, means himself.

There, then, is our merchandise Labor—spread like any pork chop on the butcher's counter, hung like any quarter of beef from the butcher's hook—inviting a buyer in the Labor Market. It is an "unreasonable" merchandise; it craves the earth and the fullness thereof; and from the other side there approaches the would-be purchaser, the capitalist, who, like all purchasers, strains for low prices. A "reasonable bargaining together" is out of question while the two continue in that frame of mind. But they do not. They "reasonably bargain together." In the course of this process, the merchandise Labor undergoes the same illumination that the pork chop experienced. Statistics prove to it, like they did to its pork chop fellow merchandise, and to a dot, that its supply is greatly in excess of the demand, due to perfected and privately owned labor-displacing machinery; the economic law of the market demonstrates to the merchandise Labor, like it did to its fellow merchandise pork chop, that a large supply implies a correspondingly low rate of exchange value. Down goes the merchandise Labor's great hopes and aspirations, urged downward by the identical consideration that urged thither the expectations of the merchandise pork chop—"If I sell not I rot!" And thus the process proceeds from year to year, ever newer and more perfect and more concentrated privately owned means of production displacing ever larger swarms of Labor, and thereby raising the supply of the merchandise ever higher in the Labor market.

It is unreasonable for an article of merchandise to seek to escape the consequences of its status. Labor, made by the capitalist class and their labor-

lieutenants to vote itself into the status of merchandise, and to keep itself there, has all along “reasonably bargained together” with the capitalist purchaser—witness the wealth the latter is gorged with, witness the lowering earnings and ever more pinching poverty of Labor.

There are those who may be frivolous enough to declare that Inventor Newcomb’s invention is as stale as capitalism. Perish the thought!

Transcribed and edited by Robert Bills for the official Web site of the Socialist Labor Party of America.
Uploaded March 2007