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EDITORIAL

AN OPEN LETTER TO MR. J. PEASE NORTON.

By DANIEL DE LEON

Mr. J. Pease Norton,
Chairman Committee of Newspaper Publicity,
New Haven, Conn.

DEAR SIR:—I duly received your letter of last October 25, inviting me, as the Editor of this paper, to a seat in the Press Council of the Committee of One Hundred of your organization—the American Association for the Advancement of Science on Federal Regulation of Public Health; and have since received your favor of the 6th instant urging a favorable answer.

While sincerely grateful for the honor that you propose, I am constrained to decline with thanks.

The human heart has, as a general thing, been good. Experience, however, teaches that, unless the intellect, that is, the knowledge of “How,” is abreast of the heart, that is “Sentiment,” all good intentions go for naught. Experience has taught even more. It has taught that the better the heart, or sentiment, the greater the mischief done where Knowledge is lacking. Of the benevolent aspirations of your organization I make no doubt; but neither is there any doubt in my mind that its Sentiment for good is unequipped with the Knowledge requisite to combat the crying evil of declining popular health. I gather my conviction from the accurate information I have on the popular health-destroying economic principles of most of your Executive Officers, Vice-Presidents and members of your Committee of One Hundred. I shall mention three of these, whom I select because of the several directions in which their defective intellectual activity tends to drag down the public health of the land.

President Charles W. Eliot of Harvard is notably a praise-singer of the “Scab,”

whom he calls a “hero.” We all know what a scab is. However different the degrees of intelligence with which different men may approach the subject, there will be no difficulty in agreeing upon a definition of the being as “a wretched man.” The definition is obviously correct. The “Scab” takes the place of a workingman on strike. No workingman strikes against good conditions. The fact that a workingman is on strike is in itself proof his job is not one that affords the opportunity for a worthy existence. It is such a job that the “Scab” takes. The process recalls the majestic lines of the Spanish dramatist—there always is someone more wretched than the wretch who lives on the herbs he plucks along the road, someone behind him who picks up the dry leaves which he casts away. Such is the status of the “Scab”—even more wretched than the striker he replaces. Obviously, the promotion of scabbery is the promotion of wretchedness. Poverty is a breeder of disease. The Pindar of capitalism who exalts the heroism of the “Scab” is a plentiful promoter of public ill-health.

Mr. John Mitchell, at the investigation of the great coal miners’ strike of 1902, stoutly resented being considered opposed to child labor. On the contrary, he went on record as favoring the system. “Child Labor” is a term big with meaning, and the meaning is ominous to public health. When the child is taken to the factory or mine he (there are she’s also) is taken from the playground and from school. He is crippled physically, he is dwarfed mentally. The report, made this year to the Federal Senate, contains a pregnant bit of information concerning the large percentage of working children who “graduate from the shop into the penitentiary.” Nor is this all. The presence of the child in the factory or mine is the symptom of parental poverty; it is a result of parental poverty. This result, as most results, reacts back upon its cause, and intensifies it. Leaving aside the immorality of shutting one’s eyes to an original iniquity and then justifying its result as a “necessity”: leaving aside the immorality of extenuating child-labor upon the score of its alleviating its cause, the parental poverty of the adult wealth-producers in the mines;—leaving that aside, child-labor intensifies the parental poverty that makes the thing compulsory. Thus an endless chain is established poverty-ward. Capitalism impoverishes the parent wage-slave, the poverty of the parent wage-slave drives the child into the mill and mine; the low wages of the working child depress the already scanty earnings of the parent, and so on, “life without end,” to the greater glory of—what? Surely not of “Public Health”! The “sturdy patriot,” as

Mr. Mitchell has been called by the class that profits by child-labor, who “firmly sets his face against the Socialist rant” respecting child-labor, is a practical cultivator of public ill-health.

Mr. Andrew Carnegie is the head possessor of a chain of establishments in the valley of the Allegheny and Monongahela rivers that may be justly termed hot-beds of disease. The thousands upon thousands of men there employed are crowded into workshops where, even if their occupation did not militate against health, would be too narrow for health-promoting conditions. As it is, the dust and heat in which the men are forced to earn a living undermine their constitution, sap their vitality and breed diseases too numerous to mention. The discanter {sic} on the “Triumphant Democracy,” whereby such “institutions” are made a cult of, to be worshipped as monuments of civilization, is a mighty floodder of the land with public ill-health.

I could in this way go down the list of your officers and, without exception, point a moral, or adorn a tale, with their names on the sort of “Public Health” that their lack of Knowledge practically promotes, whatever else their heart may sentimentally pant after. For every death by typhoid fever, tuberculosis, the bubonic plague, or any of the other diseases that the organization, captained by the Eliots, Mitchells and Carnegies is up in arms against, may perchance prevent, the Eliot-Mitchell-Carnegie lack of knowledge promotes, incites and spreads a score of other deaths, to say nothing of scores of other diseases that shorten life, or make its duration an almost continuous wail.

While in full sympathy with the ultimate purpose of your organization—the promotion of Public Health—its methods are too utterly at variance with scientific methods of social hygiene for me to join in. With this knowledge, whatever time I were to devote to your organization could only contribute towards defeating its heart-born aims—indirectly, by contributing to draw the public mind away from the real source of public ill-health; directly, by contributing to turn away efforts now directed towards the root of the evil, the capitalist system of society.

Very sincerely yours,

DANIEL DE LEON.

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

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