



DIALOGUE

UNCLE SAM & BROTHER JONATHAN. {187}

By DANIEL DE LEON

UNCLE SAM—Jonathan, what have you been up to? What mean those black rings around your eyes? What means that sad, dejected face you have on?

BROTHER JONATHAN—It means a pile. Ever since the last talk I had with you I have felt unspeakably distressed. The more I have thought upon what you said, the deeper have I sunk into the dumps.

U.S.—What I said?

B.J.—Yes. Don't you remember you explained to me the Law of Wages?

U.S.—I do. Does that throw you into the dumps? It should, on the contrary, give you hope and inspiration.

B.J.—“Hope and inspiration” be hanged! I conclude from that Law of Wages that there is no salvation for all the working men. That the best can be done is to save some. And that the only way of saving these is to drown the others, as you do superfluous puppies.

U.S.—Why, no, man. You are off. Cheer up!

B.J.—Did you not say that labor was a merchandise like any other?

U.S.—Yes; 'tis that under the capitalistic system.

B.J.—Did you not say that the price of merchandise is determined by the supply of the demand for it; the larger the supply and the lower the demand, the lower was the price?



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U.S.—So I did.

B.J.—And that the supply of the merchandise labor was outstripping the demand for it by reason of labor-displacing machines and the concentration of capital?

U.S.—Exactly.

B.J.—And that the price of the merchandise labor, to wit, the wages of the workingman, was getting and of necessity had to get lower and lower?

U.S.—Just so.

B.J.—“Just so?” And yet you snickersnack about “hope and inspiration”! If, as I cannot deny, the supply of labor in the market is growing more and more in excess of the demand, those for whom there is still a demand won’t be able to keep up their wages unless the superfluous ones are killed off, killed off as fast as they become superfluous.

U.S.—I see, I see.

B.J.—Ain’t I right?

U.S.—No, me boy. My presentation of the Law of Wages last week was correct as far as it went, tho’ it was not complete.

B.J.—Complete it quickly, if there is “hope and inspiration” in it!

U.S.—The expression “supply and demand determines prices” is correct enough, but it is a superficial statement. Look here. If ten years ago you could turn out 20 pairs of shoes in one week, and to-day you can turn out with the machine 40 pairs, has not the supply increased?

B.J.—It has so.

U.S.—And is there not in these 40 pairs as much labor as in the 20 pairs of ten years ago?

B.J.—Yes; they are both produced in equal time.

U.S.—Does it not then follow that the value of 40 pairs is now equal to that of 20 pairs before?

B.J.—Yes.

U.S.—And consequently 1 pair, to-day, is equal to half the value of 1 pair before?

B.J.—Yes.

U.S.—To condense all these in short sentences, we have this law:

The value of merchandise depends upon the amount of labor that, at a given time,

society needs to produce it;

The larger the quantity of an article, the less is the labor needed to produce it;

Consequently, when the supply is large it is an evidence that the labor needed to produce the article is comparatively small;

Improved machinery renders work more fruitful; the more improved machinery becomes, the larger is production, and the smaller is the quantity of labor in each article;

Consequently, machinery lowers the value of merchandises;

The price of a merchandise is the cash it fetches in the market; a number of causes may affect the price, sending it up above or down below its value; but in the long run “price” and “value” will equalize; and both tend downwards by reason of the decreased quantity of labor that improved methods of production require in each article;—

B.J.—I {I’ll?} be hanged if I can see where you are driving to.

U.S.—Postpone the hanging; there is always time for that. In the meantime, if you want to learn the important Law of Wages, you will have to pay close attention. It requires closer attention than the reading of how Corbett landed a “roaster” on Fitzsimmons’ “smeller”; and withal it is of infinitely greater value that you do learn it; it may save your neck. Did you understand me as far as I went?

B.J.—Yes.

U.S.—What did I say?

B.J.—The substance and gist of it was that the value and price of goods went down because their value depends upon the amount of labor required to produce them, and improved machinery steadily lowered that amount of labor, because such machinery increased the quantity of goods that can be produced in a given time.

U.S. (slapping B.J. heartily on the shoulder)—You are an apt scholar; I don’t think you will need to hang or drown. Now listen further:

Under capitalism, labor is a merchandise;

The fate of all merchandise is the fate of the merchandise labor;

Machinery lowers the value of all other goods;

The reason that it does so is that it requires less labor to produce the goods;

Labor, that is to say, the power to work, needs goods to keep it up; it needs food, clothing, etc.; to use a broad expression, goods, wares and merchandise are needed to

produce labor-power;

The cheaper the value of these goods, wares and merchandise becomes, the cheaper must also become the value of the labor-power which they produce;

Consequently, the merchandise labor-power is bound to decline in value step by step with the decline of the value of all other goods;—

B.J.—You are getting me mixed up; first you talked “labor,” now you have switched off to “labor-power.”

U.S. (chucking B.J. under the chin)—Keep up the character I gave you for an apt scholar, and don’t shoot off your mouth. I was coming to your question; listen carefully:

The capitalist is the holder and seller of all merchandise but one;

The exception is the merchandise “labor-power”; he does not sell that{,} he only buys it;

The holder of the merchandise “labor-power,” the power to work and produce, is the workingman;

But this merchandise differs from all other merchandises in many particulars;

One particular is this: All other merchandise is OUTSIDE of the body of the holder, the capitalist; the merchandise “labor-power” is INSIDE of the body of its holder, the workingman;

Accordingly, the merchandise “labor-power” is part and parcel of its holder and seller, the workingman, while no other merchandise is part and parcel of its holder, the capitalist;

B.J.’s eyes begin to swim.

The merchandise held by a capitalist may burn down and the capitalist need not burn with it; but if the merchandise held by the workingman, his “labor-power,” is consumed, he perishes along with it;

And conversely, a capitalist may die of overfeeding, and yet his goods, wares and merchandise remain free from the affliction, they may fetch big prices and fulfill their mission undisturbed; but if a workingman dies of starvation or is prostrated by overwork or otherwise, his merchandise “labor-power” becomes useless, unavailable, unable to fulfill its functions;

For all practical and economic purposes labor and “labor-power” are one, the

workingman and his special merchandise are inseparable.

The fate of the owner of the merchandise “labor-power” is the fate of the merchandise itself: As the merchandise “labor-power” is bound to decline in value step by step with the decline of the value of all other goods, so is the price, or wage, for which a workingman has to sell himself to the capitalist, along with his “labor-power,” bound to go down;

And now get ready for the final summing up:

IT FOLLOWS FROM ALL THIS THAT EVEN IF THERE ARE NO SUPERFLUOUS WORKINGMEN IN THE MARKET, THE PRICE OF “LABOR-POWER,” THAT IS TO SAY, THE WAGES OF THE EMPLOYED WORKERS, WILL GO DOWN. The presence of an excess of labor in the market over and above the demand simply aggravates the evil; an oversupply of labor will and does push wages below even their declining value. But the oversupply is not the original cause of the decline of wages; the original cause is the merchandise quality of labor. If you drown all the superfluous workers, and as fast as they are displaced by machinery, you simply would be removing an aggravating incident; the original cause would continue, and with it the steady decline in the earnings of the worker, which is equivalent to the steady increase of his misery and dependence.

B.J. (shaking his fist at U.S.)—The devil take you! You call that giving “hope and inspiration”? As I understood this hellish Law of Wages, there was some hope for SOME OF US, for the happy ones who got work; but as the case now stands there is no hope for ANY OF US; we might as well all go down to the rivers and the seashore and drown ourselves. There is no hope, none for the working class. (He glares furiously at U.S.) Speak! speak! Do you hold this maxim?

U.S.—Yes; I’ll accept the maxim provided you accept an amendment by adding the words “under the capitalist system,” so that the maxim reads: “There is no hope for the working class under the capitalist system.”

B.J.—What’s the difference?

U.S.—This is the difference: The workers won’t drown themselves to please the capitalists. So long as they imagine they can patch up some sort of living arrangement with the capitalist class, they will uphold the capitalist system and continue slaves; but

just as soon as the truth shall have sunk through their skulls that there is no choice but between dying or killing off the capitalist system, you will see them stand up as men; they will refuse to continue to be a merchandise; they will overthrow the system that makes them such; they will nationalize the instruments of production and the land, and they will establish the Socialist or Co-operative Commonwealth. That is the “hope and the inspiration” that we Socialist workingmen gather from the Law of Wages.

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