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EDITORIAL

THE BLUFF CALLED.

By DANIEL DE LEON

LAST Monday, March 28, in Part I of the City Court before Judge Conlan, the case of “Isaac Hourwich against Daniel De Leon” for libel was called up and thrown out of court.

The history of this case was as follows:

On November 12, 1897, the Editor of *The People* delivered an address in Boston at Wells Memorial Hall under the auspices of the then reorganized Jewish Section of the Socialist Labor Party.¹ A peculiar set of Jews, the same kind of people whom the leader of the Russian Socialist Movement has had to handle in Europe, and whom he well dubbed the “Judeasters”—a set of men whose leading characteristics are insolence, corruption and ignorance, and the conceit that such Jews as they must run things, with the rest of the world “sitting at their feet,” an element wholly unfit in the Socialist ranks—that set had tried to run things in the S.L.P., in Boston among other places, and were promptly fired out of the Party, whose decent Jews forthwith re-organized themselves, in Boston as elsewhere. Such were the circumstances under which the address of Nov. 12, 1897, was delivered, and it was published in *The People* of the following December 19. The purpose of the address being to warn workingmen in general, the Jewish in particular, against the machinations of people of their own special nationalities, who use the trades unions—among the Jewish workingmen, the clothing trades in particular—as means to pluck the workers, the address contained this passage.

“We have in New York a Cloakmakers’ Union. That organization consists essentially of the Anarchist Barondess and his disreputable cronies. With the assistance of the gutter snipe capitalist reporters, the business firm—it is nothing short of a business firm—of Barondess & Co.,

¹ [*Plain Words to Boston Workingmen, Jew and Gentile.*]

keeps itself before the public. How does this 'firm' subsist? Disagreements between the cloakmakers and their bosses are frequent. At every such time the men naturally seek aid from some organization. The only one in their trade is Barondess'; the information is kept before their eyes by the gutter-snipe reporters very much like Jacob kept up peeled rods before Laban's ewes. The men go thither; to be listened to they must 'become members,' or, to put it plainer, they must pay dues. There is your revenue, until the next trouble breaks out, bringing a new windfall.

"At such times, always with the assistance of the gutter-snipe reporters, the papers are filled with the 'heroic efforts' of the Cloakmakers' Union to 'wipe out the sweating system.' This furnishes another stream of revenue to the precious firm. The stirring stories touch the hearts of credulous old and philanthropic ladies. These rush forward with various sums, that, of course, are placed in the hands of the 'Committee.' A fierce campaign is waged, in the papers, against the sweat-shops. The farce cannot be continued forever"

"The philanthropic ladies must see some results. Suddenly we are informed, again through the zeal of the gutter-snipe reporters, that 'The Sweating System is Abolished.' When the 'firm' believes that the public has forgotten all about this 'victory,' the farce is started all over anew. The sweat-shops, just abolished, are to be abolished once more; and thus the swindle is perennially repeated. (Laughter and applause.)

"More recently, kindred 'firms' have enlarged their business by adding to it a new 'department'—a Legal Department. Some unconscionable adventurer, a little cleverer than his unfortunate fellow countrymen—most of these cloakmakers are Russian Jews—settles down as an additional vampire upon these poor men and exploit their racial bonds. Birds of a feather flock together. The Labor Fakirs' 'firms' and these shyster lawyers make common cause. If a strike does not come on of its own accord, it is instigated. The sweat-shop is once more to be 'abolished.' For its 'abolition' the men are cheated into the belief that 'contracts' are necessary and binding. The shyster is introduced as a benefactor, overflowing with charity. He is engaged to draw up the 'contracts'—to the tune of \$2 apiece. (Laughter.) He philanthropically promises to 'contribute' 50 cents on each contract to the Union. Several hundred 'contracts'—not worth the paper on which they are written—are drawn up, signed and delivered. My shyster forgets all about his promise; pockets the whole fee, perhaps, probably, 'goes divvy' with his pals, the fakirs, and the sweat-shops are once more abolished (laughter) until the impecuniosity of this rascal gang instigates a new strike, and the sweat-shop is to be 'abolished' once more. Is such an organization a 'Union'? Is it not rather a compact of brigands preying on the unfortunate proletariat? (Loud applause.)"

Upon publication of the address, one Isaac Hourwich—a gentleman whose horizon is bounded by his own imaginary importance, but who does not disdain to

seek to improve his imaginary renommée by some self, and, as in this instance, injudicious, advertising—wrote an “open letter” to the Editor of *The People*, through the columns of a notoriously disreputable Yiddish paper, the “Judeaster” *Vorwarts*. The “open letter” was in English, or alleged English; Mr. Hourwich therein pronounced himself libeled by the address, threw some bouquets at himself, and demanded to submit the issue to a “court of honor.” The open letter was of course ignored. Thereupon Mr. Hourwich brought two libel suits, one against the Board of Directors of the Volkszeitung Corporation—that then was the publisher of *The People*—and one against the paper’s Editor, who, besides having told the truth in the address, printed the same in the paper. Boiled down to its essence, Mr. Hourwich’s complaint, which was identical in the two cases, was that not a living soul in the country, not a cat, dog or rat in the East Side in general, in the land in particular, but knew him and of him, and followed in wrapt minuteness his majestic career, and that the cap could not possibly, under any imaginable circumstances, fit any but his own illustrious head.

Soon after the two suits were brought, the Kangaroo riot took place, and the S.L.P. discontinued to publish *The People* through the Volkszeitung Corporation. In very little time after that Mr. Hourwich discontinued his suit against the Corporation, and the corporation’s papers were indecent enough to announce the fact in a way that amounted to trying to stab the Editor of *The People* in the back. They pretended to give “inside information.”

Neither the bluff of the suit nor the indecency of the Volkszeitung Corporation had its desired effect. The only remaining defendant was anxious for a trial. Not so the plaintiff. Strange as it might seem, the gentleman who claimed his “honor was sullied and put under a cloud” not only showed no anxiety to dispel the cloud and restore his honor to its quondam virgin purity, he dodged the trial. On his motion the trial was postponed from term to term. Finally, however, the artful dodger was cornered. And what did he do, when he realized that he was not going to be allowed to slip away again? He proposed to discontinue the case without costs, that is to say, to call the case off and escape the payment of the cost. The answer was a prompt—NO! The defendant was not to be caught in the trap of allowing the matter to take a turn that looked like a “settlement,”—*The People* does not libel any one;

whatever it says deliberately it is ready to stand for. After Mr. Hourwich had for all these years been going about bragging that he had “clapped a libel suit upon *The People*,” and that he was going to do this and that and the other “as soon as he got the verdict,” which he was “sure to get,” etc., etc.,—after all that the gentleman was to be held with his nose to the grindstone. Moreover, it was necessary to give warning to the Hourwiches, of whom there are not a few, that they are not going to be allowed to use the courts for bluff and bluster; if they resort to the courts they must pay the piper. *The People* will not allow its decent name to be even indirectly smirched.—“NO!” was the answer, “WE ARE READY FOR YOU.” The case was called up; a last frantic effort was made for postponement; it was this time successfully resisted; and when the case was called up for actual trial, the defendant answered “Ready!” but the plaintiff was not to be seen or found. The most diligent search under chairs and tables and behind doors of the whole court-house gave no token. There was no trace of the plaintiff, the hero, who was to “settle the wrongs done by *The People* to so many innocent and worthy gentlemen”—and the case was thrown out with costs.

And thus ends the first libel suit ever attempted against the organ of the Socialist Labor Party—whose answer to all threats of libel suits, and the charges it makes are numerous and definite enough, ever has been and remains: “We shall retract not one word; we stand by what we say; sue away, we are ready for you!”

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

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