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DIALOGUE

UNCLE SAM & BROTHER JONATHAN. {248}

By DANIEL DE LEON

BROTHER JONATHAN—I hear Socialists often talk about the capitalists' trying to disfranchise the workingmen. Now, I see no evidence of that. Guess those Socialists are talking through their hats.

UNCLE SAM—Not they, good man; but you.

B.J.—What evidence have you got?

U.S.—To begin with South Carolina; do you know what happened there a few years ago?

B.J.—No.

U.S.—Well, the constitution was so amended that a property qualification, or, in its stead, a literary qualification is {was?} needed to vote.

B.J.—Do you Socialists want stupidity to vote?

U.S.—No, indeed; but the capitalists do!

B.J.—Not much they don't. Don't you say yourself that the South Carolina law requires a literary qualification?

U.S.—And I added, a "property qualification" if the literary qualification failed. This means that a man without literary qualification may vote provided he has property; in other words, this means that ignorance may vote if backed by property. Now, let me tell you a story about our great Benjamin Franklin. The discussion being up on the suffrage, and several people demanding a property qualification, Franklin said:

"A man comes and offers to vote. He is asked: 'Have you any property



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worth five pounds sterling?’ ‘Yes,’ says he, ‘I have a donkey; he is worth that.’ ‘Very well,’ he is then told, ‘you can vote’; and he does.

“Next year he comes again and offers to vote. Again he is asked whether he has any property, and he answers: ‘No, my donkey has died.’ Thereupon he is told, ‘You can’t vote.’

“Now, gentlemen, who voted last year—the MAN or the DONKEY?”

What say you to this?

B.J.—Franklin caught them fast.

U.S.—Which goes to show that, to say a man may vote even if he is illiterate, provided he has property, is to say that ignorance may vote; and that is the position of the capitalists, not of the Socialists.

B.J.—But—

U.S.—I am not yet through with that point. We say that to demand a property qualification for the voter is to-day intended to disqualify the worker. It is a wrong because under the present social system, the property of the people is being confiscated in ever larger quantities, and the masses are being stripped more and more of all their property. The system that first pauperizes the workingman, may not justly punish him by disfranchisement on the ground of his being poor. A property qualification for the suffrage may be just only in a social system that guarantees equality of opportunities to work to all, and that guarantees the ownership of the property thus produced. But the capitalist system deprives the working class of the opportunity to produce property; and then the same system robs the workingman of what he produced. Such a social system is the last that should consider it punishable with disfranchisement not to have property.

B.J.—Well, I’ll grant you that. But education at least should be a condition.

U.S.—Possibly so, but then only under the social system that makes education possible, if not easy. But here again, the capitalist system breeds ignorance by breeding poverty, and then seeks to derive safety from its own wrongdoing by disfranchising the workers whom it has compelled to work from such early age and so long that they have had no chance to educate themselves. Look at it as you like{,} the property and the educational qualifications are to-day a wrong, and this wrong is done by the capitalist class to disfranchise the workers.

B.J.—Well, granted that; the attempt to disfranchise is only made in South

Carolina—

U.S.—It is?

B.J.—That's all you mentioned.

U.S.—I mentioned South Carolina to start with.

B.J.—Are there more States?

U.S.—Yes, indeed. Similar laws have been passed in Mississippi; a similar law was just adopted by the Constitutional Convention of Louisiana on the 26th of last month;—

B.J.—But those are all Southern States, and those laws aim at the negro only.

U.S.—Even if they did it would be wrong, but they aim at all the workers; white industrial labor is increasing in the South, and that labor the capitalists seek to disfranchise. But leave aside the South, how about the North?

B.J.—Here too?

U.S.—The new primary laws of California and New York are but round about ways to disfranchise the workers, and likewise is the ballot law just passed in Ohio. What is the difference between barring the workingman from the polls altogether, and depriving him from the opportunity to set up his own ticket? In the former case he can't vote at all; and in the latter case, if he wants to vote, he must vote for the parties he objects to, there being none other in the field possible. This is what the Northern laws are trying to bring about.

The Socialists don't talk through their hats when they sound the alarm that the capitalists seek to disfranchise the workers. Those talk through their hats who, like you, are asleep on what is going on.

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

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