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SECOND EDITORIAL

Nothing to Arbitrate

By DANIEL DE LEON

The utopianism of “arbitration” between Capital and Labor has received a recent striking illustration.

A conflict arose several months ago between the lithographers and their trustified bosses about wages. After much discussion both sides submitted the issue to the arbitral fiat of Bishop Potter, and some ten days ago the Bishop decided in favor of the workers.

Did that end the trouble? No! The defeated bosses now hold this language:

“Of course we shall submit. Having agreed to Bishop Potter as arbitrator, decency compels us to abide by his decision. He has decided in favor of a minimum wage of \$18 a week, we shall not pay below that. But the Bishop’s decision does not go further than that on that point. Now it happens that in all our shops there are men who work at filling in and at small work. They have been paid about \$12 a week. We cannot pay them \$18 and draw the profits we want. There are probably as many of these men as there are artists who are worth \$18 a week and more, and we shall have to dispense with their labor, so as to obey the arbitral award.”

No party against whom a decision is rendered ever likes it. That is human nature. Experience teaches that decisions are not worth the paper on which they are written, unless they can be enforced. Hence the enforcement of law is, theoretically at least, placed in the hands of those who are not parties to the dispute. To imagine a court decision depending for its enforcement upon the party against whom it is rendered is to imagine a thing that every one would promptly pronounce ludicrous. And yet, that is just what all arbitral decision against Capital must be, the one in question not excepted.

A capitalist concern means a concern controlling at will and for the private benefit of its owners the machinery of production without which no labor can be performed in a trade. Such mastery of the means of a livelihood necessarily must place the workers, i.e., those who do not own these requisites of production, substantially at the mercy of capitalists. Such essentially was the relation of the striking lithographers towards their employers, and as there is no tribunal to enforce the decision rendered in their favor, it must be left for enforcement to the men against whom it is rendered!

We shall not underrate the moral force of our century. Already the employers in question have bowed to this force: they have recognized that it would be indecent to repudiate the decision. But they can render only external conformance. As indicated above, they can evade and will evade the consequences by the discharge of their \$12 men, or of enough of them to knock the bottom out of the decision; perchance to drive their victorious workmen themselves to request that the decision be laid aside, rather than see a large number of their fellow workers thrown upon the street.

Arbitration means compromise. There is no compromise possible between two interests, the one of which makes for slavery, the other for freedom. The interest of the capitalist class is to subjugate the worker; the interest of Labor is to emancipate itself. Long did the ante-war generation "compromise" upon slavery. But the compromises were of short duration. The irresistible conflict strained the bonds of compromise, snapped them, and brought home to the Utopians the truth of what the "extremists" had all been maintaining. So with the irresistible conflict now on.

Arbitration between the exploiter and his victim is not only Utopian, is not only silly, is not only absurd, it is positively cruel. There are few things more cruel than to prolong ignorance regarding the inevitable. Suffering is thereby prolonged.

There is nothing to arbitrate between Capitalism and Labor. The one or the other must bite the dust.

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