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EDITORIAL

THE CHRISTIAN FELLOWSHIP AGAIN.

By DANIEL DE LEON

THIS office is in receipt of an answer by the Rev. Alexander Kent, forwarded by the Rev. John D. Long, to the editorial "The Christian Fellowship", published in the *Daily People* of June 12 (*Weekly People*, June 20). For the convenience of all interested the Rev. Kent's answer is hereby preceded by the editorial which he assails.

The People's editorial was this:

The Christian Fellowship.

With such statements as "Jesus proclaimed Socialism," or "We should be Socialists because Socialism is in accord with the Golden Rule," no Socialist can sympathize. These and many similar statements, heard long ago and quite frequent just now, proceed either from Utopian visions, or they denote a fly-paper inclination to "catch friends," or "catch votes," as the case may be. In either case the statements are harmful.

To say that Jesus proclaimed Socialism is to convey false notions regarding what may be called the architecture of Socialism. The failure of all attempts at Socialist colonies, from the first Christian communistic endeavors down to the latest ones recorded, has sufficiently brought out the fact that there is in man a certain "scattering" quality. This quality causes him, despite the parallel quality of a "social" being, to love to "fly off" at the slightest provocation. Founders of communistic colonies, clear-headed enough to be aware of this human defect, ever sought to counteract it by establishing the artificial hoop of religious bigotry around their communities. Whether Shakers or Rappites, or what-nots, it was religious bigotry that counteracted the "scattering" tendency of the members, and forcibly held them together. Such an artificial bond could not last, and did not. The hoop to forcibly hold men together so as to compel them to co-operate, and thereby strip themselves of the fetters of their individualism, had to be a natural, physical growth. That hoop is furnished by modern machinery, which compels co-operation in the operation of the machine itself, and which, by introducing an extensive subdivision of labor, establishes co-operation as a racial and compulsory institution. Such a hoop did not and could not exist in the days of Jesus.

Again, to seek to justify Socialism by the Golden Rule is to place the cart before the horse in social development. Man's ideals are dependent upon his

material possibilities. There is deep philosophy in the homely adage that warns man to "cut his coat according to his cloth." The Golden Rule is an ideal, but the ideal depends upon the possibility to carry it out. Not before the mechanical arts, coupled with social development, brought forth the modern methods of co-operative production, was the ideal of the Golden Rule realizable. It is not Socialism that must justify its establishment with the Golden Rule, but the Golden Rule that must justify its application with the material possibilities implied in Socialism.

Accordingly, to set up Jesus as a Socialist, or the Golden Rule as the reason for Socialism, tends to disqualify the militant in his labors against capitalist iniquity. On the other hand, to be clear upon the reason why Jesus could not be a Socialist is a material aid in understanding the reason why Socialism is possible to-day and the continued rejection of the Golden Rule no longer an "unfortunate necessity" but an "unpardonable crime."

The opposite is, on the whole, the doctrine preached by the "Christian Socialist," so called. Is, therefore, the rise in these recent days of the "Christian Fellowship" organization of "Christian Socialists" an unqualified evil? Not at all.

As every rose has its thorn, so has every thistle its flower. The thistle of the Christian Fellowship is no exception to the rule.

As a symptom of the ripening of the Socialist fruit, the Christian Fellowship is to be hailed. As an evidence of the breakdown of one of the most powerful buttresses of the ruling class, the Christian Fellowship is to be cheered. As a breath of fresh air that is disinfecting the hitherto inaccessible minds that clerical slander of Socialism had hitherto polluted, the Christian Fellowship is to be applauded. Finally, being in the nature of a petard of class rule with which capitalist chicanery is now itself being hoisted, the Christian Fellowship deserves to be encouraged in the performance of its special hoisting work.

The Rev. Kent answers as follows:

26th St., N.W., Washington, D.C.,

June 15, 1908.

The *Daily People*:

I see from the heading of your article "The Christian Fellowship," as well as from the article itself, that, in your thought, the words "Christian" and "Socialist" do not belong together. It is your right, of course, to use words in any sense that, to your mind, the facts seem to require, and to criticise any use of them that to you seems improper. But your reasoning should support your contention. To my thinking, it fails to do this, in the present instance. To limit the word Socialism to its merely economic aspects, and to your individual conception of these aspects, is, in my judgment, neither practicable nor rational. Considered merely as an economic system, Socialism has its ethical bearings, and in these lies its chief significance. It is these ethical bearings that are chiefly in mind when we contrast Socialism with Individualism. Because Socialism, as an economic system, meets the requirements of justice and brotherhood, as no other system does, it has

claims upon us that no other system has. No Christian Socialist ever thinks of claiming that Jesus “proclaimed socialism” as an economic system. It is not at all probable that he had any conception of economics as we now use the word. But he did stand, unquestionably, for justice and brotherhood, and every socialist, Christian or non-Christian, contends that Socialism will realize these as nothing else will. When Christian Socialists declare that Jesus proclaimed Socialism, they simply mean that he stood for a purpose and spirit of life that contemplate Socialism; that can find expression and embodiment in no other system. And this, I contend, is a perfectly proper and legitimate use of the word. Justice in human relations means Socialism, and all efforts to secure this justice, along the lines of natural law, carry us directly toward Socialism, while even our blunders and our greed carry us indirectly toward the same goal. The intense individualism of our great captains of industry has led them along the lines of economic law toward an organization of industry that is preparing the way for collective action. In seeking their individual pecuniary advantage, they have aided the cause they hoped to hinder.

When you say that no Socialist can sympathize with the statement that “We should be Socialists because Socialism is in accord with the Golden Rule” (that is, in accord with justice) you virtually say that no Socialist cares, or should care, whether Socialism makes for justice or not. But the main strength of the argument—the economic argument—for Socialism, lies in the very fact that it does make for justice. What is the most serious count in the indictment against the present system? Is it not its hideous injustice? Is it not that it permits and invites the few to exploit and impoverish the many? You cannot separate economics from ethics. To say that the present system is uneconomic is to say that it is wasteful of wealth and life, and so destructive of just and happy human relations. And Ethics is simply the science of human relations. The uneconomic or wasteful character of a system has no significance apart from its bearing on these relations.

But, you say that the man who seeks “to justify Socialism by the Golden Rule places the cart before the horse.” I think not. The conception of justice expressed in the Golden Rule was evolved long before the conception of Socialism. Besides, it was the conception of justice, seeking embodiment and expression in social and industrial life, that led to Socialism. Socialism is simply a theory of industrial organization in the interest of justice. It is as directly related to this end as are the various mechanical inventions to the ends for which they were devised. It is a discovery and invention to meet a social need, and its value as a system will be measured by the degree in which it serves this end. Without the steadying and directing power of this sentiment of justice in the human heart, Socialism as a theory would never have been evolved. The note of justice is the dominant note in all Socialist classics. Though the argument is economic, the end sought is ethical. The facts that move the writers are the facts of unjust social conditions, and the aim of the writer is to show how all this injustice and misery may be done away with. Socialism is the means, justice and happiness the end. If men had cared nothing for the end they never would have discovered the means. What is the meaning of all your talk about capitalistic iniquity, but a protest against the

injustice of the present system? This protest is thousands of years older than economic Socialism, and the feeling that underlies it has given birth to every ameliorative effort that has ever been made. All that the socialist economic theory has to commend it is the proof it has to offer that, if reduced to practice, it would abolish injustice from the world of industry, and make for just and happy relations in every department of human life.

Any "architecture" of Socialism that ignores this fact is all in the air. It has no ethical foundations, and it can have no other in a Universe that makes for Justice. If this is a Universe that makes for justice, then its economics must make for justice, and the best evidence of its soundness any economic theory can offer is the fact that it contemplates justice, and is fitted to secure justice. If the Universe does not make for justice, then its "material possibilities" cannot have any desirable relation to our deeper human needs, nor can we reasonably hope that any possible knowledge of these can carry us toward any desirable goal. The views you criticise assume that the Universe is on the side of justice, and those who hold them approve of Socialism because they feel that its economics demands justice and makes for justice.

The trouble with what you call Socialist colonies has been twofold. (1) These have been largely composed of men individualistic in purpose and spirit. Even when held by the bond of a common belief, most of them were in it for personal advantage and disposed to throw the hard and disagreeable work upon others. Communities composed at all largely of such material, afford little advantage to any, and naturally tend to disintegrate. (2) They had an unfriendly environment. As a friend of mine put it, and he had large experience, "Running a co-operative colony, in a competitive environment, is like running an ice-box in hell." The material of which these colonies were made was not of a sort to withstand the dissolving influence of their surroundings.

The individualism of the socialist is the greatest obstacle in the way of Socialism to-day. Socialists in theory, they are still largely individualists in spirit. And no "hoop" "furnished by modern machinery" will ever avail to make a just, harmonious, and happy society out of such material. Socialism will come when real socialists are in control, not before. And real Socialists are men and women who are at least as anxious to serve as they are to be served. Men will never be held permanently together by "hoops" of any kind. The bonds which hold them must be internal, not external. All that we want of the environment is that it be friendly and favorable. We do not want it to be compulsory. The manhood that we need cannot be forced. No community can be harmonious and happy where duty is not done freely. Under a system that appeals to the best that is in us, and opens the way to the best, to each and all, compulsion will not be needed. We may safely assume that under a system that appeals to the sense of fairness and justice, and that is equally careful of the individual and the common interest, the new set of motives it calls into play will soon develop a purpose and spirit of service that will be more effective than any form of compulsion. To establish co-operation as a "compulsory institution" would be to inaugurate only a different form of slavery. That we surely do not want.

ALEX KENT.

The frequent recurrence—they occur nearly two score times—of the words “justice” and “just”, together with their antitheses “injustice” and “unjust,” besides the correlated words “ethics”, and “ethical”, in the Rev. Kent’s letter is *The People’s* justification, before entering upon the gentleman’s argument, for reproducing here the letter with which this office was favored by the Rev. Kent’s associate, the Rev. Long, à propos of certain reportorial articles that had previously appeared in these columns. The said letter was published in the correspondence column of the *Daily People*, May 8 (*Weekly*, May 16) under the caption: “A ‘Christian’ on Exhibition”:

The Editor of *The Daily People*, New York City.

Dear Sir:—I have seen in recent issues of your sheet frequent indulgence in slighting reference to the Christian Socialist movement in this country.

Full well do you know that the old political parties are most careful not to antagonize the Christian sentiment of the country.

In consequence I am at a loss to know your object, unless it is to keep down the Socialist vote.

I cannot see why you should wish to keep the Socialist vote small unless you are subsidized for this purpose.

Too often has the laboring man like Jesus of Nazareth been betrayed by his pretended friend for thirty pieces of silver.

The betrayal of labor by its venal leaders who could not resist the opportunity to sell themselves, and sell out the cause for a few dollars has been the saddest thing in the long and cruel struggle that the workingman has been making for his emancipation from wage slavery.

I write this because in the attitude that you have assumed there seems to be something more than mere narrowness and bigotry.

It looks too much like the sinister marks of blood money.

I shall continue to watch your columns to see whether you persist in your efforts to drive votes from the Socialist Party.

Very sincerely,
JOHN D. LONG.

Parkside Manse, 42 Lenox Road, Brooklyn, N.Y., May 6.

Such a letter is all that the intelligent follower of the Movement should need to place him on his guard towards such words as “justice”, etc.; and warn him that the words may have different practical applications in different mouths. The “architecture” of the Socialist Labor Party not being in air, its organ, *The People*, will be the first to shield the Rev. Long from the charge of intentional wrong. The gentleman is “just”—according to the material conditions that, unhappily for him, determine his angle of vision. This point being clear, and, unwilling to burden the

Rev. Kent with the load of the Rev. Long's sense of "justice", "ethics", "Christianity", etc., *The People* shall assume that the Rev. Kent's sense of "justice" to be identical with ours, and proceed to examine his criticism of the Socialist Labor Party position in the matter of "Christian Socialism."

If *The People* had no higher object than a dialectical bout with a genial acquaintance of old, such as the Rev. Kent, *The People* would limit its argument to just one passage in the Rev. Kent's letter, and by his own words, dismiss the term "Christian Socialism" as irrational. The Rev. Kent correctly says "every Socialist, Christian and non-Christian", contends that Socialism will realize justice and brotherhood. If "Christians" and Non-"Christians", alike, are found agreeing on Socialism, then the conclusion can not be escaped that Socialism is nothing peculiar to "Christianity", any more than it is to "non-Christianity". The conclusion can not be escaped that there is no more reason to dub Socialism "Christian", than there would be to dub it "non-Christian". The conclusion is all the less escapable, seeing that the majority of people, who call, and believe themselves to be, "Christian", reject Socialism, and that the majority of people, who call themselves "non-Christian", still share, in this respect, the identically benighted views of their "Christian" fellow-beings. In fine, the conclusion is unescapable that the term "Christian Socialism" is false, not only in point of elemental logic, but in point of elemental etymology also. What the Rev. Kent believes in is, not a Socialism that is Christian, but a Christianity that is Socialist.

Much more could be said along this line. But the hard conditions of the times demand something more than dialectics.

Boiled down to its essence, the theory, misnamed "Christian Socialism" is one of the numerous manifestations of the Sunday School biology according to which man is born in sin and iniquity. The Rev. Kent speaks of Socialism as a "discovery and invention", which never would have been made "without the steadying and directing power of this sentiment of justice in the human heart". If socialism is a "discovery and invention", why was not the invention or discovery made before? The only answer possible from the "discovery and invention" premises is the slander of man's congenital sinfulness. The theory is false. Socialism teaches that Socialism is neither invention nor discovery, but that wider horizon made possible by the higher

material elevation on which man stands to-day.

At this point the “Christian Socialist” may ask: “Why accentuate the point? Why emphasize the difference? Seeing the element that calls itself ‘Christian Socialist’ in America, differently from the European article which stands for theocracy, aims at the identical aim of the Socialist—the Cooperative Commonwealth—the Socialist Republic—why bother with scientific formulas? If from a camp, unacquainted with medical science and which has long objected to vaccination as ‘un-Christian’, an element comes forward approving of vaccination and offering their services, should they be objected to if they were to call themselves ‘Christian Vaccinators?’”

This is the rub; and if the Rev. Kent will scrutinize himself, he will discover that that is the question that really agitates him.

It is a practical question, not a theoretical one that divides him and *The People*—both of whom aim at the overthrow {of} the capitalist system of iniquity, and neither of whom, assuredly, could be dogmatic enough to reject an ally in the common struggle on the mere ground of a theoretical difference.

“Christian Socialists” have not been able to emancipate themselves from the false methods of thought of their pulpit training: They have not learned the lesson of history that, however lofty the aspirations of mankind, these aspirations have had to await the material possibilities for their realization.

It is with the Golden Rule as with all other desirable things. Man ever aspired after a faster locomotion than that which he is born with—transportation with steam, then electricity, and presently through the air, could not be before the material fact of the mechanical arts made such faster locomotion possible.

Man has ever aspired after health—not before a knowledge of natural sciences was acquired could health be really promoted.

Likewise with the Golden Rule. The moral principle which it uttered, and had been uttered long before, was an aspiration that had to abide its time for realization. Its realization depended upon the progress of the mechanical arts which compelled man to co-operate, and thereby encompass the greater productivity of co-operative labor, whereby man emancipates himself from the trammels of his individualism and develops the capabilities of his species—in other words, whereby

the brotherhood of man becomes an actual possibility and ceases to be an impracticable vision.

For these many centuries the pulpit has preached the Golden Rule. Its only effect has been to fill the churches with hypocrites. An ideal life was held up without there being the physical power to live it. In sight of such preachings the practical sense of the human race looked at the preacher as a freak, where it held him sincere, or as a fraud—in either case with evil results.

Now, then, for the same reason that he who would preach faster locomotion, without first proving the existence of the physical power to do so, would be materially wasting his time; for the same reason that he who would preach improved health, without first laying the physical foundation for his aims, would be justly regarded as a crank or faddist; for that same reason he who preaches social justice, without first demonstrating the solid material basis for social justice, is regarded as a hypocrite or a visionary, and his work is ineffective.

It is not improved locomotion that justifies itself to the demand for rapid motion: it is the demand for rapid motion that must justify its application by the material power to carry it out. Is the material power there? Then the demand is justified. Is the material power absent? Then the demand is frivolous because unpracticable.

For the identical reason it is not the Golden Rule that justifies Socialism, but, on the contrary, the demand for the Golden Rule that must justify itself by the material power to exercise it. Is the material power absent? Then the demand is freakish. No intelligent man will claim that it is the preaching of the Golden Rule that caused the Duchess of Sutherland and the other iniquity-doers, that history tells of and whom Marx summarizes, to drive the peasants from their soil, thus to furnish a human raw material to the bourgeois, and spur these to exploit the proletariat mercilessly by ever improved and co-operation-compelling devices. Is, however, the material power present, then the preaching of the Golden Rule is justified; then its preachers will be neither freaks nor promoters of hypocrisy; then the Golden Rule will be an agency for good.

It would add inches to the Rev. Kent, it would add power to his tongue and effectiveness to his pen if he abandoned the cart-before-the-horse method reasoning

of his profession. The foundation for good acts is the physical power to do them. The human heart is golden, what needs improvement is the human intellect. Let the Rev. Kent devote more time to clarify the intellect of his hearers, to demonstrate to them the present physical capacity for the realization of the Golden Rule, let him do that, instead of carrying the coals of justice to the New Castle of the human heart—and then progress will be fast.

As indicated in *The People's* editorial, the present poise of “Christian Socialism” is to be hailed—but merely as a disarmer of opposition. As such the very irrationality of its name may be useful as a petard of class rule get-up with which class rule is itself hoisted. But, as such, “Christian Socialism” is merely destructive.

On the contrary, if “Christian Socialism” would put the horse before the cart, then, despite its name, it could be a mighty ally to the constructive forces of the Socialist Movement of the land.

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