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EDITORIAL

CRISES.

By DANIEL DE LEON

OCCASIONALLY a critic answers the doubly useful purpose of not only affording by his error the means by which to illustrate sound economics, but also of affording the means by which to correct and illustrate methods of reasoning—an important process in the Socialist Movement, where the use of accurate terms is essential to the digestion of facts.

Of this nature is the following criticism:—

“To the Editor of the *Daily People*.

“Dear Sir:—

“About four months ago there was a Letter Box reply in the *Daily People* to the effect that the capitalist class has it in its power to bring about a crisis. Superficially considered it is correct. But that is the same as to say that they can cut off their own fingers if they so choose. I admit that they can stop production for a short time, but if they do it for a lengthy time they cease to be capitalists—they will be impoverished. For they have no cash. They have all without exception debts upon their properties. There is no difference whether one owes a small amount on a small store and cannot pay it or Harriman owes millions on his railroads and cannot cover them. Please explain this to me in the Letter Box. Also what will they do with their railroads and steamships? Will they drop them or continue operating them without any income?

“H. HALPERN.

“New York, March.”

Our critic denies what *The People* has not said, and he admits what *The People* did actually say. His error in reasoning lies in the loose conception he has of the word “crisis,” hence the false reasoning he thereby slips into.

A cat belongs to the same family as the lion. Not, therefore, is a cat a lion, or a lion a cat. A “crisis” belongs to the same general politico-economic family as an indefinite and long-protracted stoppage of production. Not, therefore, is the thing

known in political economy as a crisis the same as a stoppage of production for a lengthy time, or such lengthy stoppage of production a crisis. He who, proceeding from the feline anatomy of cat and lion, would criticize the man who declared he took his cat on his lap and made her purr, basing his criticism on the undeniable fact that a lion, instead of purring, would tear out the man's entrails—such a critic would reason falsely from zoologic premises. As falsely, and for parity of reasoning, does the critic reason who, proceeding from the broad familyship of the "crisis" and a protracted breakdown in production, denies that the capitalist has it in his power, and exercises the power to his advantage, to bring about a crisis.

By financial, or industrial crises political economy does not understand a breakdown that engulfs the whole of society. The crisis is a technical term. It is a social phenomenon that makes its first appearance when capitalism comes of age. Even at that early stage the crisis is the result of the anarchic methods of production, which bring on "want through abundance." Where "want" and "abundance" are met, it is not the capitalist class that the "want" falls to. It is the "abundance." Individual capitalists may suffer, and do suffer; their class, the surviving portion, prospers. Even in the days of Marx and Engels, when concentration had not yet reached the pitch it has reached since, and when the sublimated, or top capitalist, well described as the "plutocrat," had not yet really appeared—even in those days, the fact that the crisis came from abundance caused the founders of Socialism to point to the resulting fact that epochs of crises were seasons when the upper capitalist made wholesale confiscations. His confiscations in the shop are like petty larceny, compared with his confiscations at seasons of crises. In the shop he confiscates the wealth produced by Labor. At seasons of crises he confiscates the gathered proceeds of the confiscations practiced by his fellow but inferior capitalists. A knowledge, by experience, of the opportunities offered to the capitalist by the crisis, and the knowledge being fortified by the power conferred by concentration, together with the plutocratic stage, not only enables the top capitalist to evoke a crisis when he wills, but to profit by it at the same time he so decides. To say he has no cash is to say the lion has no fangs because the cat has none. The great speech of Senator La Follette in last year's Senate is great, indeed, because of the legion of facts which he marshals to prove that the crisis of 1907 was

engineered and turned to profit by the top capitalists.

What *The People* said is correct. What our critic finds fault with *The People* did not say—the capitalist can, and, whenever he thinks the right moment has come, he does give the battle known as the “crisis,” whence he emerges all the more powerful; the capitalist has the power to smash up things and engulf society in ruin, but that however he will not exercise because that would be even worse than “to cut off his own fingers”; it would be to play the role of Old Samson, a role to which the capitalist is not yet crowded by the Labor Philistines, and which, when the Labor Philistines shall have waxed powerful enough to have shorn him of his locks and put him in bonds, they will not give him a chance to perform, even if he were so inclined.

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

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