

The People.

VOL. VI, NO. 43.

NEW YORK, SUNDAY, JANUARY 24, 1897.

PRICE 3 CENTS.

DIALOGUE

UNCLE SAM & BROTHER JONATHAN. {186}

By DANIEL DE LEON

BROTHER JONATHAN—As things look to me, rather than running down, we are on the highway to unthinkable happiness. Just think of it, how cheap things are getting!

UNCLE SAM—You are right or wrong, according as you mean the right or wrong thing by what you say. You are right, if you mean that this general cheapening will urge on the crash that must precede the leap forward to happiness; but you are wrong if you mean that cheapness is in itself a good thing.

B.J. (taking four 25-cent pieces out of his pocket)—How unpractical you Socialists are! Here I have 4 quarters. When things were dear, I needed all 4 to buy me a hat; now I can get me a hat for only 2 of them; I am 2 quarters richer. If hats become still cheaper, I {can} get me a hat for only 1 quarter, and then I am in 3 quarters. This goes right straight along; prices go down, and I keep more and more money to myself. Isn't that prancing at the double quick towards prosperity?

U.S.—Your mathematics of political economy are all in a “pi.” (Taking the 4 quarters out of B.J.’s hands and spreading them in his left hand). I have here 4 quarters; hats are dear, they cost \$1; I buy me one; (throws the 4 quarters into his right hand) have I any left?

B.J.—No; I said so.

U.S. (puts 3 out of the 4 quarters into his left hand)—I have 3 quarters; hats are cheaper, they cost only 75 cents; I buy me one; (throws the 3 quarters back into his right



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hand) have I any left?

B.J.—No.

U.S.—I'm no better off than when hats cost \$1.

B.J.—Yes; but—

U.S.—Shut up. (Puts 1 out of the 4 quarters in his left hand) I have 1 quarter; hats are cheaper yet, cost only 25 cents; I buy me one; (throws the quarter back into his right hand) have I any left?

B.J.—No.

U.S.—I'm no better off than when hats cost \$1 or 75 cents.

B.J.—Yes; but—

U.S.—Shut up, I say. (Spreads all the 4 quarters again in his left hand) I have 4 quarters, hats are dear, they cost \$1; I buy me one; (throws the quarters into his right hand) have I any left?

B.J.—Why, no.

U.S. (puts 2 quarters in his left hand)—I have 2 quarters; hats are cheaper; they cost only 75 cents; I would like to buy one; can I buy with 50 cents a cheaper hat that costs 75 cents?

B.J.—No; but—

U.S.—No “buts.” The moral of the story is here for Whig and Tory: For the wage earner, and you are a wage earner, to judge of his chances of prosperity, it is not enough for him to consider the decline in the price of things he needs, he must also consider step by step the wages he receives to buy things with. Cheap goods and cheap wages leaves you with the nose to the grindstone; cheap goods and cheaper wages grinds your nose still worse. And thereby hangs the important law of wages.

B.J.—The “Law of Wages,” I have heard that mentioned; what is it?

U.S.—In the capitalist system labor is a merchandise, just as hats. The price of hats depends upon the supply thereof and the demand therefor. If the supply of hats is larger than the demand, the price will go down. So with labor. The larger the supply and the lower the demand, the lower also is the price of labor, or the wages of the worker. Under the capitalist system, the relative demand for labor steadily goes down. Machinery displaces the workers, and the concentration of capitalist concerns throws wage earners

out of work. Nor is this all. Middle class men, unable to compete with large capitalists, drop into the class of the proletariat and by so much increase the supply of those who seek work above the demand. Consequently, the wages of the working class steadily go down. That's the same as saying that the money they receive, and with which they must make their purchases, is steadily less. In view of this, it matters not how cheap goods become. The workers cannot profit thereby, because their wages keep pace and even outrun other goods in cheapness. Goods are becoming cheaper and cheaper because machinery produces them more and more plentifully; but hand in hand with that, labor becomes still cheaper and cheaper.

B.J. looks petrified.

U.S.—The great cheapening of goods, so far from denoting that the workers “are prancing at the double quick towards prosperity,” denotes that we are galloping at the double quick towards the social crash. Get from under!

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

Uploaded January 2008

slpns@slp.org