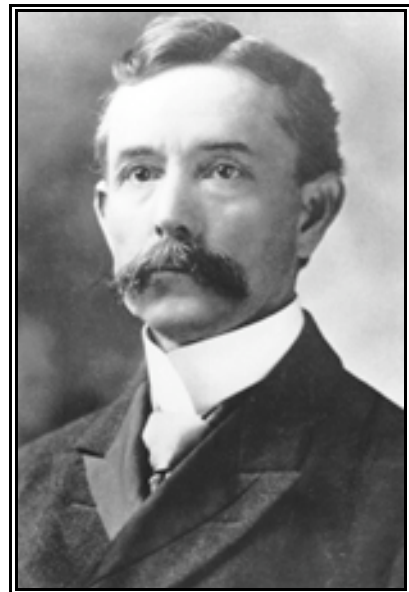


EDITORIAL

WHY ONE, AND NOT ALL THE BURTONS?

By DANIEL DE LEON

JOSEPH R. BURTON, United States Senator from Kansas, has been sentenced to nine months' imprisonment, to pay a fine of \$2,500, and is deprived of the right to hereafter hold office under the Government. The offence for which Burton is thus triply scourged—scourged physically, scourged financially and scourged morally—is the violation of the United States statute, which prohibits members of Congress from receiving compensation for services rendered before any of the Government departments in any matter in which the Government may be interested. Burton took a fee of \$500 per month for five months from the Rialto Grain and Securities Company of St. Louis for services rendered the Company in an effort to prevent the issuance of an order by the Post Office Department prohibiting the use of the mails by the company. This is an offence. It implies moral turpitude, in that the act partakes of the nature of a breach of trust. But if Burton is punished, why are the Burtons left at large? or is he but a scapegoat for the sins of Israel, who thereby earns all the greater freedom to sin?



JOSEPH RALPH BURTON
(1852–1923)

The Burtons are legion. They are found in and out of political office. Out of political office their generic name is Shiff, ex-trustee of the Equitable Life. As from Sinai the statutes thunder down anathema against their conduct, the essence of which is speculation by virtue of a trust imposed upon them,—political, as in {the} case of the Burtons, financial as in Shiff's case. And yet only one Burton has been kicked out, while the subgenus Shiff goes wholly unscourged of the law.

Few if any are the Congressmen, State Legislators, Governors and others who do not offend against the moral principle that Burton transgressed. They are stockholders in mines, in railroads, in manufacturing corporations. The laws they enact are “services rendered” to a private concern “before a Government department”, and the subject matter is one in which the “Government is interested”, somehow or other, directly or indirectly. The benefits of the law are “compensation received” by these worthies for such work. Burton is guilty, no doubt about that. Can the Burtons be guiltless?

A wit, who once heard the complaint, “Little thieves are caught, big ones escape”, turned upon the complainant and asked with mock-indignation: “Would you have ALL the thieves escape?” The wit’s morality is faulty. If the punishment of the little thieves would work some relief, he might be right. The punishment, however, of the little thieves and the simultaneous glorification of the big ones can have the effect only of an endorsement of thievery—nor could practical capitalism do otherwise: it is the glorification of highway robbery.

Transcribed and edited by Robert Bills for the official Web site of the Socialist Labor Party of America.
Uploaded March 2009

slpns@slp.org