

EDITORIAL

AT THE BIER OF BEN HANFORD.

By DANIEL DE LEON

“**D**E mortuis nil nisi bonum”—nothing but praise is in order concerning the dead—is one of those maxims which, while laying claim to a high moral standard, actually subserve an immoral one. If death is a sanctifier, then death would be the worst scourge to afflict humanity. The evils done in life could be fought; after death they could be fought no longer: they would have become sacrosanct. Infinitely wiser was the old Egyptian policy: death rolled back the curtain: the acts of the deceased were summoned to the bar of the conscience of the living.



BENJAMIN HANFORD
(1879-1910)

While all this is, true, this other is true also—death justly chasteneth criticism. While still alive, the deceased might have defended himself: once his lips are sealed in death, once his right arm lies inert, severity might partake of cowardice. A kick at the dead lion is proverbially the vulgar-craven donkey’s act.

Obviously, duty to the living and charity for the dead dictate a course that avoids both extremes. This is all the more imperative when the duty to the living involves a great Cause in behalf of which the deceased was a struggler.

Ben Hanford was at one time a member of the Socialist Labor Party. So firmly did he adhere to the tenets which the S.L.P. considered cardinal that he resisted the shock of the night of July 10, 1899; and, when that night’s events dug sharp and deep the chasm that separated the two conflicting camps, Hanford was found and took his stand under the symbol of the Uplifted Arm and Hammer. Not many months later, when the *Sun* strike offered him a lucrative committee post, Hanford

deserted his colors, leaped back over the chasm, and, as usually happens in such cases, displayed against his former comrades and the principles he had upheld the peculiar vindictiveness that characterizes the apostate.

Those materialists, whose dry-as-dust theory justifies the charge of the visionaries that materialism is purely groveling, will find in Ben Hanford's desertion of, and subsequent unhandsome and generally undignified posture towards the S.L.P., nothing but a confirmation of materialism. They will see in his conduct nothing but one more proof that the source of bread and butter determines the tune of the singer. This would be a mistaken judgment. In so far as Hanford's conduct illustrates the close connection between the stomach and the mind; in so far as it illustrates the truth of the principle that, under class rule conditions, not Man rules Property, but Property Man—in so far as that is concerned, the life of Hanford would have contributed only cumulative evidence to a principle that needs proof no longer. But the dry-as-dust materialist errs, as dogmatists ever do. Without detracting from the material dictation to which Hanford succumbed, there was something else wholly immaterial that guided—and in his instance misguided the man.

The special contribution that Ben Hanford's life has made to the store of the Revolutionary Movement is the warning against Enthusiasm unsteadied by Knowledge. Material needs are not sufficient to account for Hanford's conduct. Hanford was an enthusiast; he was an ideologist. He aimed at the noblest—could not otherwise: he had been too long in the S.L.P. to aim at aught else; his heart felt warmly: it resented keenly the wrongs of modern society; it is conviction that speaks when we say that Hanford would have given his right arm, nay, both—we believe he would have given even his life—if the sacrifice could have lifted, the incubus of Capitalism from the chest of the Human Race. Unfortunately the man was all sails and no ballast; all heat under the pot and no meat in the pot. His enthusiasm, his abnegation, his devotion to the ideal were so little under the control of the Mind that he lost all sense between the goal and the means to reach it. Thus his good qualities turned against themselves. Wishing for success, he chased it over the bogs; anxious for Socialism he mistook mobs for bodies, clatter for reasoning, Nonsense for Sense. An untutored Columbus, he mistook the Sargasso Sea for the land that

he so eagerly pursued, stepped upon it, and went down with denunciations of the Columbuses who, better tutored, opposed his thoughtless flights.

Pity of the good qualities of Ben Hanford! The fires under the empty pot consumed themselves; the excessive canvas over the ill-loaded vessel capsized it. Well may the S.L.P., at the bier of him who once was one of its own, place a wreath at the feet of the departed, with the invocation that he may not have erred in vain. That his error may serve as a warning to others.

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Uploaded January 2010

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