

EDITORIAL

ARKANSAS'S ALEXANDER.

By DANIEL DE LEON

WHAT to do with the convicts has long been a knotty problem at the untangling of which the fingers of many a nimble reform mind have labored. In the South, and also some Western States, the problem is complicated by the circumstance that convictship is a source of revenue to the State,—the convicts being leased out. In some of these States, Arkansas, as it would appear, among them, there arose a still further complication.

Laborers available for county farms being few in Arkansas, the demand exceeded the supply. The consequence was high prices for such labor. In order to reduce prices (wages) the supply had to be increased. How should that be done? The “Law” threw out its net; a lot of people, chiefly among the poor, were dragged in; they were brought before “Magistrates”; these Magistrates, themselves interested in raising the supply of the laborers that they wanted, convicted the prisoners in short order and sentenced them to the penitentiary. In the measure that this was done the supply of laborers for the county farms was forced up. The convicts were hired at a low price from the penitentiaries,—and they were WORKED.

The treatment these unfortunates received was iniquitous. The parties who hired them being, of course, pious and patriotic citizens, did not propose to allow the convicts to acquire idle habits. The net result was that Arkansas was dotted with Peruvian Putumayos.¹

Against the outrages that flowed from the penitentiary management Gov. George W. Donaghey has, as he now himself puts it, “time after time pleaded with the Legislature,” pleaded to abolish the “cruel penitentiary and county farm lease system,” but in vain. Finding, as the Governor expresses himself, that “the abuse of

¹ [A Columbian state along its border with Peru.—R.B.]

power shown by a few individuals acting as justices of the peace is enough to stagger into amazement,” and yet his own pleas for redress remained unheeded, he “determined to call the attention of the Legislature to those pernicious practices in a manner which will arouse the legislature and compel their attention.” In pursuit of this purpose the Governor resorted to the drastic method of emptying several camps of leased convicts working on county farms by pardoning 360 of them.

Unable to disentangle the celebrated Gordian Knot, Alexander the Great cut it through with his sword. With the sword of wholesale pardon Gov. Donaghey cut through the Arkansas kink of “Convict Labor.”

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