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EDITORIAL

OPEN LETTER NO. 4.

By DANIEL DE LEON

TO Chas. H. Chase,
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Comrade:—

After declaring, in closing whatever consideration you gave to the Marxian Law of Value, that you “regard these technical discussions in the *Daily People* as practically a vice because unproductive of genuine agitation or organization,” you express the hope that the effect of your May 4 article “will be on the side of ‘work to be done’ rather than on the side of ‘abstract doctrine.’”

There is between “doing work” and “abstract doctrine” a relation closely parallel to the relation between “revolution” and “evolution.” There be people who pronounce themselves “evolutionists” but bristle up against “revolution”; whosoever knows what “evolution” imports knows also that the “evolution” which does not evolve to the crisis of “revolution” is but an egg that has addled; on the other hand, folks there be who make “revolution” their specialty, and will have none of “evolution”: again, whosoever grasps the sense of “revolution” knows that the “revolution” which is not preceded by and born of “evolution” is a flash in the pan—noise, signifying nothing.

What “evolution” is to “revolution,” “abstract doctrine” is to “work to be done”; what “revolution” is to “evolution,” “work to be done” is to “abstract doctrine.”

Of course, there is such a thing as abstract reasoning, or theorizing, to the diseased point of woolgathering,—identically as, from the opposite side, there is such a thing as carrying the doing of work to the extreme of flying off the handle.

Repeating the opinion expressed in the first of these Open Letters, we take you

for too serious a man, too free from levity, to bother with freak manifestations; and we hold you for too clean a man to substitute an inconsequential issue for the real and important one—the issue of what some freak mind may love to revel in, for the issue of whether the S.L.P. is woolgathering.

“Rather,” says Auguste Comte, “a wrong theory, than no theory at all.” A theory, be its “abstract doctrine” never so defective, still is instinct with the virtue of imparting direction to the “work done,” and practical experience may then react upon the propelling “abstract doctrine” itself, and correct its possible defects; on the contrary, “work done” undirected by any “abstract doctrine” whatever will fruitlessly expend its energies in the wilderness. To quote, not another individual French philosopher, but the collective Keltic philosophy of France on the subject, “Tout comprendre est tout excuser,” to see good in everything is to tolerate all villainy—the total shipwreck of all ethical standard. Combining the two maxims into one, the maxim is safe—No “abstract doctrine,” no “work done.”

The Marxian Law of Value is an “abstract doctrine.” Before going further let it here be entered in the record that the expression the “Marxian Law of Value” does not imply an “individual opinion of Marx.” The expression the “Marxian Law of Value” is used in the sense and with the identical propriety that the expressions, the “Newtonian Law of Gravitation,” and the “Copernican Law of the Planetary System” are used, that is, in the sense that the only Law of Value that will stand the test of science, hence, is constructive, is the Law of Value that was formulated by Marx.

We know that physicists there are who have gone crazy poring over Newton’s Law; we know that astronomers there are who lost their wits over Copernicus’s Law. It may be granted without further question that there are people who have become insane splitters of hair over Marx’s Law. All the same, as with the Newtonian Law of Gravitation, without which no real progress could be made in mechanics, as with the Copernican Law, without which no progress could be made in astronomy,—as with these, no practical progress and results are obtainable in the social sciences without the Marxian Law of Value:—it is the demonstration of the necessarily declining share of the wage-earning Class in the fruit of its toil; it is the dem-

onstration of the fated downfall of small production, and the consequent concentration of despotic economic powers in the Trust; it is the demonstration of the irrepressibility of the conflict between the Capitalist and the Working Class; it involves the economic foundation for the Industrial Republic as the substitute and legitimate successor of the Republic of Capital.

That the S.L.P. carries the theorizing on the Marxian Law of Value to a diseased extreme is an opinion in support of which there is no evidence adducible. That much of the space in the *Daily People* is taken up with the Marxian Law of Value and its corollaries is true—and wise and proper 'tis 'tis so. Even if reason did not prompt the policy, instinct would. The blood rushes to the spot that is struck, there to coagulate and protect and heal: in battle larger forces are massed to the defence of the objective of hostile attack. It is not always the best policy to attack an enemy's weakest spot. Good strategy often directs the attack upon the strongest. The strongest spot in the fortress of Socialism is the Marxian Law of Value. It is at once the keystone of Socialism, and the hearth from which the refutation of all bourgeois schemes radiates. Against that spot the bourgeois artillery is directed most numerous, and correct is the judgement or instinct of the bourgeois in their strategy. If the Marxian Law of Value could only be battered down, bourgeois society is vindicated. In many instances the attack is open, in most instances it is masked behind an insidious affectation of ignoring Marx. The books on "political economy" perpetrated by the Columbia Professors Seligman and Seager are humorous instances of the latter strategy. The long and short of the story is that, directed by both instinct and reason, the forces of bourgeois attack center upon the Marxian Law of Value; reason and instinct, in turn, marshal the S.L.P. to answer with the only strategy which the circumstances dictate—to mass its forces there where the attack is strongest—to silence by refuting the open batteries, to unmask the concealed ones.

Apart from these circumstances; apart from the further circumstance that the Letter-Box answers of the *Daily People*, and quite some of the editorials, to questions appertaining to the Marxian Law of Value and its corollaries, and which pour into this office from all quarters of the English-speaking world, point to widespread interest in the matter, there are concrete and vital reasons why the *Daily People's*

policy is a virtue, not a vice.

You are certainly right in the estimate that there is now ample “basis” for the Socialist or Industrial Republic. Many a time and oft has the point been made in these columns, and was underscored with the argument that, whatever further “basis” may still be wanted could be brought about more speedily and effectively by the Industrial Republic itself, and with no suffering to mankind, than were we to wait “for the slow evolutionary process of every link in the evolutionary chain.” This fact implies that the human material for the Socialist Republic is on hand. Fact and conclusion together lay serious responsibilities upon the Socialist.

Take the present “issues” that surcharge the politico-economic atmosphere—

Who is to place the proletariat on their guard against the lures of Free Trade, or Tariff Reform?—

Who is to warn the factory worker and the farm-hand from the superstitions of “protection” to “American labor”?—

Who is to enlighten the wage-slave on the plaster-on-a-wooden-leg effect upon his Class of any and all banking and currency reform?—

Who is to protect the “Labor Vote” from wasting its energies upon “Anti-Graft” legislation?—

Who is to open the workers’ eyes to the worse than fallacy, to the to them suicidal theory of anti-immigration?—

Who is to bring about any of these consummations, let alone all, if not he who has a thorough grasp of the Marxian Law of Value? He, who, on the contrary, can at all be content, or compromise, with any of the capitalist bases, from which those and many worse such Capitalist Class schemes in the interest of capitalism proceed,—NEVER.

You misconceive the issue that you have raised between the S.L.P. and yourself. The issue is not whether the basis is now complete for the Socialist or Industrial Republic or not; or whether work should be done, or not; or whether the revolutionary forces should be organized and trained, or left to themselves. Upon all that both S.L.P. and you are at one. The issue is, What methods should be adopted for doing work, HOW to organize?

The S.L.P. is well aware that its methods are sometimes sneered at, other times angrily spurned as “strait-jacket.” In our “Collection of Curiosities for Future Publication” we have the letter of an Uncasville, Conn., “Philosophic Anarchist,” who, quoting the *Daily People* as saying that $2+2=4$, indignantly wrote to us: “I have as much right to say that $2+2$ are not equal to 4, as you have to say that they are. The free-born American will never submit to the authoritarianism of Marx,”—he meant “strait-jacket.” And, as a companion piece to this, there hangs in the gallery of our Memory a story that we heard the lamented James Redpath tell at a dinner of the Twilight Club. One morning, as he was seated at his desk in the Lecture Bureau where he worked, Mark Twain burst in upon him in a great hurry, beaming and saying: “Jim, I wish you to book me for a lecture tour across the country.” “Good!” thought Redpath to himself; “there is money in a lecture tour by Mark.” “Good!” said he to Mark Twain, as he opened the book of lectures and dates, and took up his pen. “Good! What’s the subject, Mark?” With a wooden Indian face the answer came: “Astronomy.” “What!” exclaimed Redpath perplexed. “What do you know about astronomy?” The reply followed with a snapping of eyes: “Not a damn. That’s just the beauty of it. I shall be untrammelled by science.”

Masses may, perhaps, be hurraed together by an agitation which, while flying the abstract colors of Socialism, yet proceeds from, or partakes of, the basis of capitalist economics. Now, then, the very essence of capitalist “bases” is capitalistic, that is, it appeals to and attracts diverse and conflicting interests. The masses gathered by an agitation that at all proceeds from such bases may be numerous—the very diversity of the interests thus appealed to may insure numbers—but in that very fact lies the certain seed of the numbers’ resultlessness for good. They are fatedly at war within themselves. It is a contradictory thought to suppose masses organized for the Revolution, and yet the hoops that hold the said body together be timber of capitalist class economics—timber that accommodates itself and is flexible to unfocusable interests. Such a mass will be a MOB; an ORGANIZATION, not at all. The day of its victory, if it lasts that long, will be the day when it will kick itself to pieces,—if it is not previously massacred. The propaganda that gathers such bodies is untrammelled by science; it spurns the authoritarianism of Marx.

The S.L.P. builds not for Disaster. It builds for the Revolution. What is more, the S.L.P. declines to be responsible for the life of a single human being sacrificed upon the Altar of Fatuity.

Fraternally.

ED. DAILY PEOPLE.

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