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EDITORIAL

BURNS—DEBS.

By DANIEL DE LEON

“OUR mission,” said Mr. John Burns at the great Cooper Union meeting on the 3d inst., speaking of himself and his colleague, Mr. David Holmes, “is to establish harmony; we come not to foment dissensions; we come to allay them; this embassy from England purposes to help to end the friction that exists in the American labor movement.” He referred to the “painful spectacle presented by the movement in America” of labor leaders being animated by “petty mutual jealousies” and fighting one another, and he closed with an impassioned recitation of the Marxian motto: “Workers of all countries unite!” Let us see how Mr. Burns applies his professions and the example he sets.

Of all the trade union leaders in America none is so justly popular as Eugene V. Debs. His fellow craftsmen, the railroaders, had long held themselves to be the aristocrats among the aristocrats of labor. Their organization was a Hardshell Baptist arrangement. They looked upon themselves as the elect. Their fellow wage slaves in other lines of trade might be ground down as pleased the bosses, yet never a helping hand was extended. Under the leadership of “Grand Chief” Arthur the railroaders had become the “suspects” of the labor movement, and the whole labor movement suffered thereby. Debs it was who cast out of the railroaders the unclean spirit of Arthurism and inspired the craft with the nobler one of solidarity. He shook to pieces the old organizations of railroad workers and revolutionized them; he reorganized the men upon a higher plane; these extended last Summer the hand of fellowship to the outraged Pullman employees, and voluntarily joined them in a fight that will ever be memorable in the annals of the American labor movement. If a strike’s successfulness is to be measured, as partly it should, by the degree in

which it attracts public attention to, centres it upon and rivets it on the social problem; if a strike's importance is to be gauged, as it should to a great extent, by the extent to which it leavens the mass of the toilers with the sense of oneness of suffering and of aims, and to which it inspires the wage slave class with the spirit of resistance—the national railroad strike of last Summer stands foremost on the files of time, and their leader, Eugene V. Debs, is justly entitled to the esteem of his fellow American proletarians. Yet upon this notable American trade unionist leader Mr. John Burns expresses himself as follows:

“Debs in his profile resembles Napoleon, and he has wrecked himself and his followers trying to live up to the resemblance.”

This foul fling at a fellow trade unionist leader, whom capitalists the world over hate for his recent services to the cause of the wage slaves, appears in the *New York Press* of the 2d inst., not an interview got up by some irresponsible gutter-snipe reporter, but in a carefully prepared article over the signature of no less a person than Mr. Robert P. Porter himself, the chief editor of the *Press* and superintendent of the eleventh census, who in that article reports an interview he had with Mr. John Burns in London on last Nov. 23, i.e., just before Mr. John Burns started across the Atlantic to “harmonize,” “pacify” and “unify” the labor movement here, and to call our attention to the “painful spectacle of labor leaders being animated by petty jealousies against one another.”

Mr. John Burns' methods of “harmonizing” the workers, and his style of suppressing “petty jealousies among labor leaders” may be all right in England; we shall not presume to interfere or offer advice to people living in countries with whose conditions we are not sufficiently acquainted; no sudden rush of brains to our heads afflicts us. But Mr. John Burns will be kind enough to excuse the American workers if they respectfully decline to follow the example he sets in “harmonizing” the workers and in “suppressing petty jealousies” among trade union leaders, as emphatically as they decline to take his advice to relaunch in America the old stranded wreck of old British trade unionism, or trade unionism “pure and simple,” especially seeing that their English fellow wage slaves, who have more recently become to a considerable extent politically enfranchised, are now themselves

struggling hard to shake off the trammels of the old style union and are equipping themselves with the combined weapons of defense and offense—with the shield of the economic action and the sword of the ballot wielded vigorously against all parties of Capital, and in favor only of the international party of Socialism.

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