

The People.

VOL. V, NO. 30

NEW YORK, SUNDAY, OCTOBER 20, 1895

PRICE 3 CENTS

SECOND EDITORIAL

Those ‘Captains’—That ‘Individuality’

By DANIEL DE LEON

We have frequently reproduced in these columns copies of the sort of contracts that with increasing frequency are now being extorted from employees for the boon of being given a chance to labor, i.e., to starve by slow fire. For this boon American citizens, said to be “free,” are made to strip themselves of all the rights with which the statutes cover them against the neglect of the employer, they are made to sign away their individuality, they are forced to submit to the condition of pariahs. A recent case in the U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals for the Western district of Virginia, furnishes an additional illustration of the point; it brings out a brand-new field for extortion of this sort; and, withal, it sheds further light upon the nursery yarn about that superior intelligence and valuable labor of the capitalist that entitles him to emoluments of “Captain of Industry,” i.e., to the lion’s share of the products of labor.

The Bonsack Machine Company is a corporation that constructs machines for the manufacture of cigarettes. In this, as in most other instances, the wage slaves engaged in operating the plant, the men who really do the work, frequently discovered improvements, invented improved methods, and sought to secure for themselves, by means of patents, the benefit of their genius.

The idea that a man shall enjoy the product of his brains was good enough to declaim upon, but not to practice. It was all right enough to claim that Socialism would take from him who worked and invented the proceeds of his labor and his genius, and that capitalism was the paladin of property; but to allow such a theory to be put in practice was all wrong. The Bonsack Company would none of that, and with the aid of the U.S. courts, put a damper on the notion of the “free” American citizens whom it employed that capitalist declamation was to be taken seriously. It forthwith required all persons whom it engaged to agree by a contract TO DONATE TO THE COMPANY ALL THE INVENTIONS THEY MIGHT MAKE WHILE IN ITS EMPLOY!

As others sign away other rights to other corporations, hunger drove the Bonsack Company’s employees to sign away their rights to the fruits of their genius. One of

these, having discovered a method by which a crimping device could be substituted for paste in the process of making cigarettes by machinery, labored for three months WITHOUT SALARY at his valuable invention, and when it was perfected the company simply took it away from him, refused him all remuneration, and obtained from the U.S. Court a sanction of its robbery.

The additional profits the Bonsack Company will now derive from this employee's invention will be credited by it, its hired professors, prelates and politicians to its "Captain of Industry" talents. The inventor may, and, as most of them do, will sink into a pauper's grave; the robber will flaunt his stolen goods, and be pointed out as a leading citizen whose "thrift, industry and frugality and genius" raised him to a position of wealth.

The Bosnack Company case knocks into a cocked hat the "individuality" that the capitalist so much praises, his false claims to superiority and his system's morality. This case alone is full of instruction. We can hardly think of one that is fuller. It is as full of instruction as an egg is of meat: Besides all the lessons it conveys on the economic dependence of the proletariat and on the robber instincts of the capitalist class, it conveys additional and striking proof of the fact that all the public powers are held by the lackeys of the robber class—the Republican and Democratic politicians.

Kick them out! Hammer them out with the uplifted arm and hammer of the Socialist ballot.

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

Uploaded February 23, 2003