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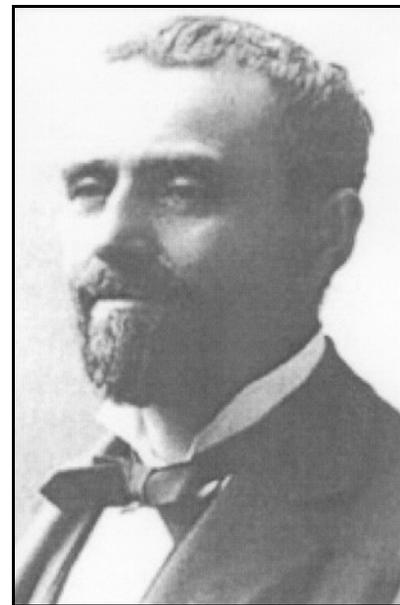
EDITORIAL

JOHN P. ALTGELD.

By DANIEL DE LEON

THE language of the plutocratic press on the death of ex-Gov. Altgeld brands them ingrates. In Altgeld plutocracy lost its most powerful outpost.

John P. Altgeld's political life fell in with a critical period in the nation's history. The small-property-holding, bourgeois, economic-political foundation, on which the nation emerged from its anti-feudal struggle with the British Crown, had rounded its cycle. On the stalk of that small-property-holding bourgeois system of old, there had developed into full blossom the new flower of plutocracy. Changed economic conditions dictate changed social systems. The changing of an existing social system always brings on conflicts. So in this instance. The small-property-holding bourgeois or middle class arrayed itself against the plutocratic or upper capitalist element. In the conflict that ensued both told the truth, and both lied by the truth each left untold. Truthfully enough did the former point out that its economic principles, maxims and tenets were strictly in accord with those of the "Fathers"; truthfully enough did the latter aver that its economic principles, maxims and



JOHN P. ALTGELD (1847-1902)

tenets were truly "American" in that Americanism meant progress. But the former suppressed the fact that what it contended against was not Tyranny, but only that portion of Tyranny that weighed down upon itself: it suppressed the fact that itself was a tyrant class towards the working class and that it had no objection to, on the contrary, approved of the social system that enabled it to fleece the proletariat. And similarly did the latter suppress the fact that "Americanism," as it understood the

term, did not stand, as it claimed, for national "Progress," but for the improved plutocratic methods of filling its pockets with the plunder of the nation. The programme of the middle class element was to take the country back to the days of small production, and that implied to the days when the volume of wealth producible could not be vast enough to free man from the need of arduous toil for bare existence: that programme proposed the stripping of the race of the advantages it had gained, and which rendered possible the emancipation of man from such animal-like toil. In conflicts of this nature, the element in power and occupying an advanced position in economic development, easily wins out,—provided a still more advanced Movement has not yet taken sufficient shape to take the field. In just that lies the danger.

The plutocratic or upper capitalist element held the advanced economic position over the middle class: concentrated production renders possible the emancipation of man from arduous toil. But advanced as is that position, it is not the acme of social development. The acme is reached only when the social advantages, made possible by economic development, become a reality to the whole people. Under the rule of capitalism the social advantages remain with the capitalist class only: the working class, the proletariat suffer more intensely than ever. Such a state of things is not, can not be more than transitory. Beyond the capitalist system lies another, the Socialist System, under which the working class comes into possession of the machinery of production, and thereby strips the present economic advantages of the fetters that restrict them to a small portion of the population. Beyond Capitalist Society lies the Socialist Republic. Had the Socialist Movement in the land taken sufficient shape to take the field? Yes. Had it progressed sufficiently to fit it for political masterhood? No. Accordingly, the situation was this:

Three political forces were in the field in the middle of the nineties:

1st: The Middle Class, generally Democratic force, that pulled the nation back, with no chance of success.

2nd: The Upper Capitalist Class, generally Republican, that wanted things to remain as they were, with normal chances of remaining in power.

3rd: The Working Class force, Socialist Labor Party, that pulled forward, but as yet too young to deserve power.

It was under such circumstances that Altgeld rose, and he did yeomen's work

for the Upper Capitalist Class,—and, under the circumstances, for the nation. At such times as those of '96, deep anger is often apt to stampede men to where they do not mean to go. In those days of ferment it was not beyond possibility that vast masses might have flocked to the Socialist Labor Party standard. The vastness of such masses, suddenly come over, would have dominated the Socialist Movement, and, seeing that only unreasoning anger and blind rage guided them, a Socialist victory, brought on by them, would have been a national calamity. From that calamity Altgeld saved the nation, and the necks of the Capitalist Class. From the quarters of the middle class there never was any real danger; danger threatened plutocracy only from the quarters of the blindly enraged multitudes whom the Socialist Movement had not yet been able to reach and might gravitate to it. With a set of bourgeois-brilliant but bourgeois-hollow epigrams Altgeld threw himself into the bourgeois camp; he thereby dampened their ardor; steadied the scales; enabled the electric wave, revolution, to pass under leaving the ship of state safe; and, however unintentionally, insured to the country breathing time during which to deliberately form its lines for the oncoming conflict between decrepit Capitalism and its stalwart off-shoot, Socialism.

It is not expected that the Capitalist Class will feel thankful to Altgeld for the services he thus rendered Socialism and the Nation; but the Capitalist Class might at least be grateful enough to be thankful to Altgeld for having saved their necks in '96.

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