

EDITORIAL

DEMOCRACY AND CENTRALIZATION.

By DANIEL DE LEON

LET not the recently “threatened strike” of the New Haven trolley men be wasted. It should be contemplated with care. It demonstrates to perfection that, as at present organized, the general run of the Unions combine only the caricature of democracy and only the corresponding caricature of centralization.

The rough but sufficient outlines of the “New Haven Conflict” are these:

The trolley men of some lines centering in Providence went on strike nearly a year ago. The strike was totally lost. When the men reapplied for work, none was accepted except he signed a contract not to join a Union. Since then, such contracts became a condition precedent for jobs on the said Providence lines. Subsequent to these events there took place a “consolidation” of the trolley lines along the north shore of the Long Island Sound, taking in Connecticut and New York. Upon the consolidation the “Rhode Island system” began to be practiced all along the consolidated line. At least long and effective steps began to be taken in that direction. Within a short time a number of Union men began to be dismissed peremptorily. For the purpose of the specific point in this article, all such other features of this “conflict” as the crocodile smiles of love and affection that the Consolidated Company has been bestowing on Unionism while stabbing the Union in the back will be left aside; also will be left aside for special treatment the parallel between the company’s action in “organizing” itself up to the handle, and the same company’s action in seeking to shatter the organization of its men. All that must be left aside for the present, in order fully to appreciate the inherent defect of Unionism, as at present constituted, and strikingly illustrated in the course of this “New Haven Conflict.”

That the dismissal of the Union men, preparatorily to demanding of them contract-pledges not to join a Union, is a preparatory step to longer hours and lower

wages, needs no proof. “Worse conditions” of hours of work and earnings gleam through every turn of the move. What, under these circumstances, did the occasion demand, and demand peremptorily in view, moreover, of Labor Day being at hand? The conditions demanded a strike—prompt and swift. In that lay all the hope of some measure of success. Did that take place? No! What took place was the caricature of democracy. Under the guise of “democracy,” the Union wasted valuable time in a “taking a vote” on whether to strike or not; the only effect of such grotesque democracy was to “give notice” to the enemy, to the already powerfully ready enemy, and thereby afford it time to get readier. The company availed itself of the “democracy” of its wage slaves; broke in quickly hundreds of raw recruits; and thus recruited, it faced its “democratic” adversary. The issue was to be foreseen. The strike did not come off. The company made money hand over fist on Labor Day. Although democracy voted to strike, it was as if no such vote had been taken. “Democracy” having insulted democracy, the result was zero.

The fundamental fallacy of the equality of Capital and Labor spawns a vast brood of poisonous insects—poisonous to Labor. Masses of men can not operate upon the same principle that may prevail with a few. Masses of men need organization; organization demands centralized authority. Democracy reserves to itself the power to pull down the centralized authority that the very law of its existence requires, and replace such authority with a centralized authority to its liking. Never yet did, or could democracy expect *executive* functions from bodies so large as to be capable of *legislative* functions only. A democratically constructed army chooses its own general and removes him when it likes; only a mob takes a vote on the eve of battle.

’Tis not the cartoonists of the capitalist press, ’tis the misinformed working class itself that sketches the worst cartoons against itself—truthfully holding itself up to the ridicule of its plunderers.

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

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