

Editorial: Look Out for Pitfalls

Elsewhere we publish a letter from a Pueblo, Col., friend who is active in the People's party.¹ The excellent tone and above all the subject of the communication deserve something more than their simple reproduction. Moreover, they afford an opportunity to restate the Socialist position—a thing that cannot be done too often. We must preach line upon line. In the present confusion of terms that unfortunately reigns so generally, and in the dust raised by contention, iteration, and re-iteration can never be superfluous.

The attitude of THE PEOPLE and of the Socialist Labor party towards the populists has never been one of scoffing ridicule. We maintain that the Populist Movement—that is to say, the Populist Movement in the west, there where it is on its native heath, not here in the east where it is but an echo of the western article—is a middle class, reactionary movement. We have called attention to the planks of the Omaha platform; we have shown that not one of them could, or was calculated to, inure to the benefit of the wage workers: that the demand for more money would, if effectual, aid only, and temporarily at that, the small farming class, and greatly hurt the wage working class in that the former would, with such moneys, purchase the improved agricultural instruments it needs to place it in a better condition to compete with the larger capitalistic farms, and thereby would displace farm hands, who would be sent floating into the industrial centers, to compete

¹ J.A. Wayland. See “Correspondence: Would It Were So,” below.

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with the already overburdened city workmen, and we illustrated how far-reaching these results would be by pointing to the new cotton harvester, for instance, which, when in full operation will displace not less than 660,000 farm hands now engaged in that work; and finally and above all, that the Omaha platform carefully excludes even the demand for an Eight-hour day for government employes, and tucks it away in a corner together with other things considered odd ends, and headed by a declaration that they were NOT A PART of the People's party's platform. These important points we have made so clear that the frantic efforts of some eastern populists to meet the unanswerable charges only caused them to reveal their ignorance of their own platform. With these facts we illustrated the scientific principle that political parties are mainly built upon the economic class distinctions of those who call them into being, and that, consequently the wage working class should not stand upon and support the platform of the small middle class farmer. Of this position no direct denial has ever been attempted.

But, it is said, look at this Omaha preamble; can anything be finer, more radical and more aggressive of the existing old parties; can, does, anything breathe a nobler spirit?

Therein lies the main danger, and a pitfall against which it has been our duty to warn the well intentioned, but incautious.

It is *the* feature of an oppressed layer or stratum of society which is itself an oppressor—consciously or unconsciously—of the layer or stratum below it, that its language towards its own oppressors is of the most radical, aggressive, and noble. Nothing could compare with the radicalism and nobleness of language used by the French bourgeois, the oncoming capitalist, against the feudal lords and their system during the French Revolution; similarly was the case before them with the Roundheads in the English Revolution; so likewise was it with the British free-traders some fifty years ago; and just the same is it to-day with our own American apostles of free-trade. For all the love of freedom and of justice, which the French

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bourgeois professed, his system was based upon the slavery of the workers, and when with the assistance of these he conquered power, he became as bloodthirsty a tyrant as the feudal lord he had overthrown. The Roundhead revolutionists heralded the advent of the capitalist system in England; with the victory of these commenced a period of oppression for the working class that Thorold Rogers classifies as unparalleled until then.² The advent to power of the British free-trader, marks the time when women and children were drawn into the shops, factories and mines, and were slaughtered in inhuman style: their declarations on “freedom” did not interfere with the logical development of their class interests. And, finally, no intelligent man imagines that the wildest American free-trader of to-day, who declaims most emphatically against the “robbery” committed by the “privilege classes”, would hesitate a minute to take to himself the increased productivity of his workmen, brought on by a reduction of prices, and keep his wage slaves in subjection.

With this experience behind us we can establish the maxim that the test of the radicalism and true love of freedom of any party is not the phrases it uses but the concrete demands it presents. If these demands will benefit—not by inference and indirectly, or more or less remotely but—directly the whole mass of the oppressed, it can be trusted; if not, then it cannot. In view of this we are bound to discount the prettiest phrases of the Omaha preamble; and failing to find there as much as a crumb thrown at the wage working class, we are in duty bound to warn that class against entrusting its fortunes to such a movement.

“Then”, may we be asked, “is the Populist Movement a national misfortune?” To this we answer unhesitatingly, “No!”

The Socialists of the land view the action of the small farmer as one of the most encouraging signs of modern times. It is a

² A reference to Rogers' *Six Centuries of Work and Wages* (London: Swan Sonnenschein, 1884).

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sign, that convinces us, as the Sargasso seas of weeds convinced Columbus that land lay close by, that the Social Revolution is at hand. The breaking loose of so big a chunk from the capitalist iceberg denotes a degree of disintegration that must be a necessary precursor to the overthrow of capitalism. A large class of small farmers finds its existence no longer tenable. Its class interests are no longer those of the elements that in reality constitute the old parties. It has fallen off and looks for its salvation. On that route and with that object it is now groping about.

Our correspondent declares “the small farmers are going to get there.” He is in error. The small farmer will never get there until his political platform reflects the fact that he has stripped himself wholly of his special class interests; until he recognizes the trend of the times; until he has risen to the level of the proletariat in its demands; until his goal be the abolition of classes, the abolition of the wage-system, the Co-operative Commonwealth.

But when he does that, he is no longer a “small farmer”; in external appearances he may be that; in fact, however, he will be a citizen of the XIX. Century, fully equipped with the civilization and aspirations of such; then he, together with the rest of the proletariat of the land, will all “get there”, and together wipe from the face of our fair land the blot of Capitalism.

To hasten this consummation is the mission of the Socialist Labor party; and it performs its duty, with such light as is given to it, deliberately, without malice, without levity, with its eyes fixed upon the goal.

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Correspondence: **Would It Were So**

Editor of THE PEOPLE:—I read THE PEOPLE with interest every week, but I have to smile at your reference to the “small farmers’ party”, as you call the populists. But the “small farmers”, etc., are going to get there, and I want to say that the Socialist platform will be carried into effect by these same populists. All the leaders, and practically all the followers are as true and earnest Socialists as you eastern chaps, and by the election returns stood by those principles far better at the polls. We are using the same literature, too, after we give the patient a few doses of the money problem to get him in a condition to absorb it. We have used hundred of Gronlund’s co-operative commonwealth¹ and other like works. Socialism by any other name will be as sweet. Results are what we want. Children cannot absorb abstract problems at first—no more can the masses. So please don’t poke any more fun at the “small farmers and silver kings” until you get your own professed adherents to vote as they talk. The idea of sending a brother through your State with literature was a good one, but not in the heat of a campaign. Now is the time to do effective work. Out here we are working as hard now as before election. Passions have subsided and reason is again enthroned. We have a fund of \$100 a month that is going right into books and pamphlets. The *Coming Crisis*, which I edited during the campaign, was as surely and radically a Socialist paper as THE PEOPLE. It took better than any other paper in this section. Nearly 4,000 paid subscribers were added during the campaign and the seed sown has produced a rich harvest. The whole

¹ Laurence Gronlund, *The Cooperative Commonwealth* (Boston: Lee and Shepard Publishers, 1884).

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west is permeated with “Bellamyism”. All the speeches by the populists were Socialistic, and nearly all our candidates were avowed Socialists. So please think of us kindly. We are brothers in spite of your euphonious names.

J.A. WAYLAND.

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