

# The People.

VOL. I, NO. 46.

NEW YORK, SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 14, 1892.

PRICE 3 CENTS.

FIRST EDITORIAL

## BIGGEST STEAL OF ALL.

By DANIEL DE LEON

**T**HE greatest plutocratic scheme of this century—a scheme which contemplates the final transfer to private corporations of the whole public domain now extant, covering one-third of the area of the United States—is progressing finely and will probably be carried out by the Fifty-second Congress in its essential features without a protest from any one among the sixty-five millions of people who are going to be robbed of their national inheritance.

Follow its march.

In the first place an appropriation of \$850,000 was made some years ago for the purpose of surveying the so-called “arid lands” of the public domain, ascertaining the area and location of those which could be redeemed by irrigation, and estimating roughly the cost of necessary water works. The reason given for this action was that would-be settlers could no longer make homes for themselves under our land laws in this country, owing to the fact that the best lands had already been given away to railroad corporations, which held them at a price beyond the means of the industrious but poor pioneer.

In the second place the official in charge of the survey, instead of confining himself to his assigned and well-defined task, lost no opportunity of proclaiming publicly, in season and out of season, his opinion that the national government should not undertake the irrigation works that were needed to make the “arid lands” productive. This, he said, without being asked, should be left to private enterprise, under such conditions only as Congress might impose upon the monopolists to whom the government might be pleased to give the water and the valuable privilege of supplying it to settlers for a consideration. Whether this official was in league with the schemers or

simply their dupe; whether he acted with a full understanding of their object or was a fanatic believer in the capitalistic dogma that the government which employed him should do nothing, possess nothing, and the capitalists everything, does not alter the impropriety of his conduct. It was important that the schemers should not appear anxious to secure the privileges which they were coveting. It was more important still that they should not come to the front until their "aid" was apparently requested by the government, not officially, but through its competent, disinterested and patriotic official, whose private views would be of great weight in forming the public opinion. And so Major Powell, even before his work of survey was fairly advanced, came to deliver a lecture before the New York Chamber of Commerce upon the great service which its millionaire members would render to the country by monopolizing the waters through which hundreds of millions of acres of "arid lands" could be transformed into a blooming garden.

Public opinion, however, did not "pan out" so well as was expected, and the schemers began to apprehend that Congress might not prove so pliant as it would have to be in order to assure their success. The bold plan was then conceived to remove at once the whole public domain from the jurisdiction of Congress by transferring it bodily to the States within the boundaries of which the remaining public lands are situated.

In the third place, therefore, a so-called "Irrigation Congress" was held at Salt Lake City, Utah, in September, 1891, which declared itself "in favor of granting in trust all public lands, except mineral lands, to the several States and Territories, wherein situate, for the purpose of developing irrigation." Its memorial to Congress, which was presented a week ago, is very instructive. It sets forth, of course, the necessity of providing homes for new settlers and points out the present inability of the national government to meet the just demands of the people. It admits that the yield in agricultural products of lands cultivated with the aid of irrigation is from 50 to 100 per cent. greater than that of lands which depend for their productiveness upon the natural rainfall, and that the reclamation of the arid lands would prove a highly profitable enterprise. But it takes for granted, that the government, whose interest in the matter is deemed small because it has manifested itself by an appropriation of \$350,000 for surveying purposes only, will never take any further action; and it expresses the

doubt—which it does not entertain concerning several States with separate interests and distinct governments—that it would be “practicable for Congress to pass a law that would operate justly and efficiently upon all parts of the arid belt.” Finally, it concludes as above stated, with the assurance that “the arid lands, as soon as they come under the control of the State, will at once become the most prominent question in State politics and of so great and immediate extent to its citizens that their administration will be conducted under the surveillance of a deeply concerned people, who will permit no chicanery.”

Aye, the arid lands would immediately become the most prominent question in State politics; and we have the calibre of State politicians. We know also what becomes of the States, even the wealthiest, in the hands of the plutocrats; and what would become of the poor States in which the arid lands are situated. A fine field, there, for the investment of those hundreds of millions which are to-day sleeping in the banks of New York!

Congress seems to be unanimously in favor of granting the request. To the average member the public domain is a nuisance; “There is nothing in it.” The boodle press is silent; it would not “pay” to expose the scheme. The people are kept in ignorance of what is going on, and they will not wake up until they have lost their magnificent estate. Even then, and for many years, perhaps, they will not realize the value of their loss.

*Transcribed and edited by Robert Bills for the official Web site of the Socialist Labor Party of America.  
Uploaded March 2002*