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EDITORIAL

WHAT ARE “NORMAL TIMES?”

By DANIEL DE LEON

THE discussion regarding future industrial conditions in this country continues apace. It having been conceded that “prosperity” has run its course and “a return to normal times” is inevitable, the question as to what constitutes “normal times” is now raised. This question is answered in a way that indicates that the conditions existing prior to the advent of the “prosperity” “boom” constitute “normal times.” From this the inference must be drawn that the continued depression that characterized American industry from 1873 to 1889 and from 1893 to 1896 is the norm to which industry must return.

It must be confessed that this inference does not afford a pleasant outlook to the American working class, as a return to such a norm means a return to conditions in which employment is more precarious than during “prosperity,” and in which the law of supply and demand of labor, which regulates labor, will operate, because of the greater supply of labor, due to this lack of employment, to the detriment of the working class. With greater unemployment, in other words, there will come still greater wage-reductions than at present; reductions against which it will be impossible for trades-unionism to contend, and to which it will accordingly submit, but not without losing the bulk of its membership, who will withdraw because of their inability to pay the high dues demanded, and the impotency of the organization to protect them. With the wage reductions, there may come a reduction in the cost of living, which will somewhat offset these ill-effects of the return to the capitalist norm, though this is not at all certain, as prices on Thanksgiving Day were higher than those of a year ago, despite the wholesale wage reductions that have taken place since that time.

In one respect there will be no return to the conditions prevailing in previous “normal times” for the working class. That is in the matter of intensified labor.

During “prosperity” the output of labor in this country was increased enormously, at the expense of the life and limb of labor, such intensification being accompanied by an increased mortality and accident rate among the workers. This intensification will continue, as American capitalists, in order to increase export trade, must sell larger quantities of commodities at ever cheaper prices. In fact, this intensification has already begun. In the steel trust certain classes of labor are to continue without a reduction of wages providing they do not restrict output. Certain other classes are to have their wages reduced, while still others will be displaced by centralization. Thus production will be both increased and cheapened by the intensification of labor and the reduction of its wages. In other industries, this policy of unrestricted output, centralized and intensified labor, at lower wages, is also being put into execution, so that it may safely be said that the comparatively easy labor of the “normal times” antedating “prosperity” will be unknown in the “normal times” that are to follow it. Unemployment, reduced wages, impotent unionism, have a possibility of a reduced cost of living and intensified labor—these constitute the “normal times” to which the working class is to return.

The shadows in this picture are also its high lights and soft tones. “Prosperity” through its organization of trusts and the extension of international capitalization, has prepared the way for national and international Socialism. It has given an increased social character to industry and emphasized the necessity for its social ownership. No more will “a return to normal conditions” mean a return to the small production of the ante-trust era. It means ever greater concentration, ever greater socialization. It means, finally, the inevitability of Socialism.

On to Socialism!

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