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EDITORIAL

PARKER AND MACHINERY

By DANIEL DE LEON

ADDRESSING an audience at Bridgeport, Conn., Judge Parker¹ expressed the following views on machinery:

“In our later days the claim is often made, not only by practical men, but by students of economic history, that our rapid industrial progress is the result of machinery. This theory assumes that whatever our ancestors did in the way of building up institutions and industry, everything is now so changed that we have become dependent on the machine, and must be content to remain so. The fact, however, is overlooked that whatever machinery may have done, it has been devised, created and adapted by man’s ingenuity, has been perfected by human patience and industry, and that it must be operated by men of mind and bone and muscle. Nobody will presume that it has become an important factor in industry, but it is merely an incident, an auxiliary.”

These views illustrate the proverbial inability of the Democracy to learn. Man’s dependence on machinery is a widely recognized fact of great social significance. He who is without machinery cannot compete and is economically the slave of him who possesses it. The lack of improved machinery drives the workman to submission to exploitation and makes success for the capitalist in the world’s market impossible. One time, in the days of handicraft, man was the main factor. Now it is the machine. The man is merely an appendage to it, adapting himself to the economic conditions created by it, and regulating his actions according to its speed. In the degree that machinery attains automatic perfection, which is its most conspicuous tendency, it displaces man’s mind, body and muscle, for the supple, active, tractable labor of women and children. Thus we have girls making delicate electrical appliances in the Westinghouse factories at Pittsburg, Pa., and shoes in the big

¹ [Alton B. Parker, 1904 Democratic candidate for president.]

manufactories of Lynn and Brockton, while child labor becomes a problem in the textile industry both North and South. As John Foster, an English investigator, wrote after a visit here early last year: "With almost everything done by machinery, there is no need for skilled artisanship."

Machinery is not an incident, an auxiliary. Machinery is a permanence, a fundamental feature of modern life, making possible the abundance and leisure which the philosophers of old proclaimed essential to the higher development of man. And such it will be for all, when its deep importance is recognized, and it is made the property of all, instead of a few, as at present. Machinery cannot be ignored. It must be dealt with, and this is the only way of doing it.

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

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