

EDITORIAL

PENSIONS FOR FORMER SLAVES.

By DANIEL DE LEON

A BILL has made its appearance in Congress for pensioning colored people who were slaves until emancipated by the proclamation of President Lincoln. It is a pity that the elements that have taken possession of this bill, and under whose auspices it is now pushed forward, mark the thing a fraud, as Pension Commissioner Evans designated it, or a “wild-cat scheme,” as President Roosevelt called it. This circumstance will prevent the idea embodied in the bill from receiving the proper consideration. That idea did not originate in fraud. It originated in a fractional appreciation of the Labor Question. It was a flickering and stray ray of light caught by the well-intentioned, but untutored, pupil of the eye in the brain of an Iowa ex-member of the House of Representatives.¹ Stripped of its present fraudulent shell, the idea is worthy of study. What is just in it is worthy of appreciation; above all it is worth realizing how true it is that fractional truth, so far from promoting, hinders the realization of the whole truth. In this sense the original idea at bottom of the bill, together with the fate that awaits it, is in itself a magnificent sermon on the folly of seeking to rear moral aspirations on aught but a solid and material foundation of fact.

The originator of the bill in question visited this office a few years ago and explained his plan. He argued this wise:

“While the Negro was a slave, he produced wealth. On that wealth both he and his master lived. It follows that the Negro was robbed of the product of his labor. The wrong done to him must be redressed. It cannot be wholly redressed. The dead slaves are beyond the reach of redress on earth. Even the living ones cannot be fully reimbursed. It is our duty to atone for the wrong done to the extent that we may. My bill aims at that. I want your support.”

¹ {Most likely William Vandever (1817–1893), a Representative from Iowa before the Civil War and later from California. His visit with De Leon occurred in 1891.}

The answer to this appeal consisted in fetching down from the library shelf in this office one of the volumes of the *Works of John Adams*, and turning to and laying before the gentleman from Iowa the following passage:

“Where the working poor are paid in return for their labor only as much money as will buy them the necessaries of life, their condition is identical with that of the slave who receives these necessaries at short hand. The former may be entitled ‘freemen,’ the latter ‘slaves,’ but the difference is imaginary only.”

Heavy drops of perspiration gathered on the forehead of the Iowa gentleman. Finally, when asked:

“Seeing that in point of being robbed of his product, there is no difference between the Negro ‘freeman’ wage slave of today and the same Negro chattel ‘slave’ of before, upon what ground can a demand be maintained to ‘reimburse’ him for the robbery committed upon him formerly, while leaving him unreimbursed for, and thereby tolerating, the robbery perpetrated upon him today? Upon what ground of justice can the white ‘freeman’ wage slave of today be allowed to be robbed of his product, along with his colored fellow-workingman, while demanding ‘justice’ for the old surviving Negro chattel slave?”

—when asked that, the gentleman from Iowa closed the volume of Adams and observed:

“That beats me! This is a hell of a problem!”

Evidently too hot for the gentleman from Iowa, he dropped the problem, and his plan has evolved into a fraudulent scheme engineered by frauds,—whither all “One thing at a time” moves evolute to; whither lands all aspiration after Justice unballasted by sound knowledge.

But the problem thus relinquished by the originator of the pensions idea for former slaves, is still pursued unflinchingly and successfully by the Socialist Labor Party. His mind illumined, not by a stray or flickering ray of the Labor or Social Question, but by the flood of light that the Question sheds, the Socialist, so far from being disheartened, gathers strength by the comprehension of the problem in all its fullness.

Full knowledge removes perplexities that otherwise might arise from subsequently discovered details; subsequently discovered fullness of a problem drowns under an

avalanche of perplexities the fractional detail, previously ascertained and erroneously taken for the full problem.

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