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EDITORIAL

THE CHICAGO FIRE.

By DANIEL DE LEON

“**T**HERE you have it!” we imagine some one or other say when he hears the Socialists point to the recent disastrous fire of the Iroquois Theatre of Chicago as another count in the indictment of capitalism. “There you have it! The Socialist can see nothing but Socialism. Whatever accident happens, straight they charge it to capitalism!” If ever appearances justified the criticism, it is in this instance. And yet the Socialist charge is correct, in this instance as well. Yes, the calamity of the Iroquois Theatre is a capitalist crime. Breaking through the crust of external appearances, the Chicago hecatomb points its gory fingers to an economic feature that is essentially capitalistic.

No sane man will deny that “accidents will happen in the best regulated families;” no intelligent man will gainsay the human proclivity to negligence. The chapter of “accidents” is inexhaustible. Making amplest allowance for all that, is that the sum total of the Iroquois Theatre lesson? No; of itself, that would be trifling. Below all that lies something else,—the real cause of the disaster, an economic feature special to capitalism that helps strew its path with disasters.

No industrial system, of the several that preceded the present, reached so deeply, as does capitalism, in revolutionizing and improving the methods of production, nor proceeded so swiftly, nor extended its progressive influence so widely. And yet, parallel with that fact is this other; in the instance of no other industrial system have antiquated methods and tools been clung to so tenaciously. To give an amusing illustration: In this city of New York, the metropolis of the nation, and in these days, one would say, of universal electricity, there are still seen dingy, slow-poking horse-tramways! The illustration suggests a number of others; all of them, in turn, point to this economic fact: Under capitalism the tool of production is there to knock off profits with; and seeing itself is a deposit of capital,

it is stuck to as long as a copper can be wrung out of it. As a consequence, the human race is kept, not abreast of its inventive powers, but behind: valuable improvements and inventions are kept locked in the private vaults of individual capitalists, so as to afford them time to recover the full outlay made in the now antiquated machinery that they operate, and that would become just so much junk the moment the improved tool were set in operation: as a final consequence, we have the continued, and now avoidable danger to life and limb that accompanies most industries, and that periodically shock the mind in reports of “cave-ins,” “explosions,” etc., etc.,—and in such disasters as this one at Chicago.

There is to-day, no excuse whatever for any but a determined suicide to be burned up in a theatre fire. Inventions galore there are whereby walls can be made fireproof and the insides of theatres absolutely incombustible. Chemical discoveries exist whereby necessary materials, such as wood, ropes, costumes, drapery and even paper—otherwise combustible—can be made as impervious to flame as sheet iron. And, as if to make assurance doubly sure, there is not, to-day, in these days of dynamos, any occasion whatever for the presence of fire in any shape within the precincts of public or crowded buildings. The Iroquois Theatre neglected all these precautions, or, to put it more in accord with the economic motive, the Iroquois Theatre, a private venture for profit, was bent upon knocking off all the profits it could on its now antiquated outfit—just as coal mine owners and other private concerns do with their antiquated methods; and, just as these, and for identical reasons, the Iroquois Theatre put human life in jeopardy and sacrificed it, rather than forego the hope of recouping itself by stepping forward abreast of the genius of the age.

Coolly, intelligently scanned, the horrors of the Iroquois Theatre are but a microscopic illustration of the chronic, continuous and mammoth horrors that capitalist economics afflict the human race with.

Stamp out the plague!

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

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