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EDITORIAL

“WAGES”—AN ECHO OF “WAGES, MARRIAGE AND THE CHURCH.”

By DANIEL DE LEON

THE below question, answer, reply and rejoinder will speak for themselves. They will help to confirm both economic principle and the tactical use of terms.

I.

To the *Daily* and *Weekly People*:—In *Reform and Revolution*, by D. De Leon, in answer to a question by Mr. Dooling, D. De Leon states that “Wages are the price of labor.” This is stated repeatedly. Why so?

The statement is ambiguous, since you further state that “Labor stands on the same footing as any other commodity.”

The question is a technicality of economic (Marxian) terms but, nevertheless, specifically important, as it is absolutely necessary for the revolutionary proletariat to know exactly what are wages, in order to be correctly guided in their fight for the overthrow of the wage system.

We cannot be too exact in the terms we use in our economic teachings.

Why publish such answers at the present advanced stage of the development of economic knowledge in the ranks of the S.L.P.

I take it for granted that D. De Leon would not make such statements nowadays.

However, I await a reply in the Letter Box.

Query No. 2. Is the New York Labor News Company the property of the S.L.P. I understand it is, but I wish to have it from an authentic source.

As one who does not believe in giving necessary publicity to such serious errors despite the fact that the pamphlet referred to above, possesses high educational value, I remain, in the cause of the workers,

David M. Halliday.

Roslyn, Wash.

II.

(*Sunday People*, March 19, and *Weekly People*, March 25.)

D.M.H., ROSLYN, WASH.—The statement “wages are the price of labor” (meaning labor-power) should not be considered ambiguous; and the

following sentence—“Labor (meaning labor-power) stands on the same footing as any other commodity”—so far from making the first statement more ambiguous, makes it absolutely clear. A commodity is a thing sold in the market. Seeing that labor-power is sold in the labor-market, labor-power is on the same footing with any other commodity. What a commodity sells for is its price. Seeing that labor-power is sold by its owner, the workingman, for wages, it follows that wages are the price of labor-power. Seeing, furthermore, that labor-power is part and parcel of the seller (the workingman) and that the workingman is generally referred to as labor “wages are the price of labor.” Nothing ambiguous about that. Next question next week.

III.

A REPLY TO EDITOR OF “THE PEOPLE.”

Since the breaking up of primitive tribal communism, i.e., the dawn of civilization on through the different epochs of human society, none of the methods of economic production have been analyzed to anything like the extent to which the present capitalist system of wealth production has been analyzed.

Furthermore, no economic system has had so many complications and intricacies and were consequently so difficult to analyze as is the capitalist system, the real nature of which is hidden behind the phenomena “wages.”

Under the first stage of human slavery, which was chattel slavery, there were, practically speaking, no complications in the method of wealth production. The chattel slaves knew that they were abject slaves and that their mental and physical capabilities were the sole property of their master and that by virtue of said ownership the master appropriated the product of their toil over and above the maintenance of his slaves.

Under feudalism, the stage of human slavery which followed chattel slavery, it required no keen perception on the part of the slave of that economic system, i.e., the feudal serf, to know that he (the serf) worked three days per week for himself and the remainder of the week for his master, the feudal baron. Over and above the subsistence of the serf the product of his toil went to the storehouses and granaries of the feudal lord.

Unfortunately, it is not so with the modern slave of the wage system, who generally thinks he is a free man. The form under which the modern proletarian receives remuneration for services rendered his employer, e.g., when he receives wages for work performed by him, hides from him the real secret of capitalist exploitation. He feels that when he receives his wages he has been paid for his labor. Hence all his efforts at bettering his economic conditions are spent in the trades union movement trying to advance his wages, with that as the ultimate goal to be reached.

To those members of the working class, however, who are students of Karl Marx (the man who revolutionized economic science), and who have

studied Marx’s *Capital, a Critical Analysis of Capitalist Production*, the present system reads like an open book. The workingman who has so studied cannot be fooled by the statement that “Wages are the price of labor.”

With the above preface I will now come to the point I wish to get at.

In the pamphlet *Reform and Revolution*, a lecture delivered by Daniel De Leon, the Editor of *The People*, he states, in answer to a question by Mr. Dooling, that “Wages are the price of labor.” This being a statement fit for a pure and simple trades unionist and not the Editor of *The People*, I, a few weeks ago, sent a question to Letter Box of *The People*, asking if “Wages are the price of labor,” and if “Labor is a commodity” are correct statements.

Because a man is considered an authority on scientific Socialism is no reason why I should take his reply to my query as final, since I have studied Marx and I hope I have reached the stage of intellectual development necessary to a correct comprehension of Marx’s masterpiece, i.e., *Capital*, and know positively that the aforementioned statements are scientifically unsound.

If I am wrong in the premises, then to use current American parlance, “I am from Missouri, you’ve got to show me.”

I am for soundness in our economic teachings. If I am not sound then it is a specific wish on my part to be absolutely sound, in economic knowledge.

To state that “Wages are the price of labor” and to further state in an evident attempt to patch up the matter, that “Wages are the price of labor (meaning labor power),” only makes matters worse, as it shows the entire mixing up and consequently misuse of the two terms.

When Marx talks of the commodity which the proletarian sells on the market, he states specifically that it is labor power as contradistinguished from labor. To prove this I will take what I consider some judicious extracts from Marx dealing with the point under discussion.

If you look up page 120 of the *Students’ Marx* by Dr. Ed. Aveling which is an authentic summary of *Capital*, since Aveling translated a considerable portion of *Capital* from the original, and the chapter I have reference to in particular, you will find the definition of “Wages” as follows: “On the surface the wage of the laborer appears to be that which it is not, viz.: the price of labor. It is really the price of LABOR POWER.”

Again on page 547 of *Capital* you will find the following: “That which comes directly face to face with the possessor of money on the market, is in fact not labor but the laborer. What the latter sells is his labor power. As soon as his labor begins it has ceased to belong to him, it can therefore no longer be sold by him. Labor is the substance and the imminent measure of value but has itself no value.”

Marx’s definition of labor power is as follows: By labor power or capacity for labor is to be understood the aggregate of those mental and

physical capabilities existing in a human being which he exercises whenever he produces a use-value of any description. Page 145, *Capital*.

Again Marx says of labor power and labor in reply to Rossi, a bourgeois economist: “When we speak of capacity for labor we do not speak of labor any more than when we speak of capacity for digestion, we speak of digestion.” See *Capital*, page 152.

Since receiving your reply to my query, I have carefully perused several chapters of Marx’s *Capital*, and I find that the terms labor power and labor are not by a long way synonymous terms, as you have stated, but instead are two different and distinct economic terms, and both come into play at two different periods of the labor process.

You confuse labor power with labor in the same manner as the bourgeois economists, as Marx termed them. (See *Student’s Marx*, page 39.)

A correct knowledge of wages, labor power and labor is absolutely essential to the scientific Socialist in order that he may be able to tell the workers just where they are robbed and how they are robbed. He who does not know the exact use of these economic terms cannot possibly know the meaning of value and of surplus-value, and, consequently, cannot tell the workers how the product of their toil is stolen from them.

The statement that “Wages is the price of labor” must be placed in the same category of economic absurdities as the statements that “the workers are robbed as consumers” and “the working class pays the taxes.”

It is the duty of the scientific Socialist to arouse the working class to action and illustrate and emphasize the particular points at which they are robbed of the product of their toil and thereby prevent as much as possible “the hopeless, helpless, grasping after straws that characterizes the conduct of the bulk of the working class.”

The Socialist propagandist must concentrate all his energies in enlightening the proletariat as to the merchandise character of their labor power which they sell to the capitalist class on the labor market, to trace the labor process, i.e., the process by which the product of their toil is confiscated by the class who owns the means whereby the workers live, and prove that the working class is robbed of all they produce at the point of production and at that point only and cannot be robbed anywhere else, only receiving for their labor power a mere pittance called “wages,” which allows them to repeat the dose day after day, and if they fail in the sale of their commodity, they starve, as their commodity is a perishable one. That their commodity labor power possesses one quality which is entirely absent from all other commodities, e.g., that labor power is not only the source of value but of more value than it has in itself.

In conclusion I may state that I agree with James Connolly who wrote to *The People* a year ago, inasmuch as this great and important question of “wages” ought to be thrashed out since it seems a very debatable one.

I hope my contribution will not be considered a “Kangarooic vain splitting of hairs on economics” since I do not belong to the Kangaroo

species of the genus Socialist. I feel that I possess some of the material which is destined to be an important factor in emancipating society forever from human slavery.

David M. Halliday.

Roslyn, Wash., April 9, 1905.

IV.

The position taken by *The People*, together with the literature issued by the Socialist Labor Party, that “wages are the price of labor,” Mr. Halliday promises in the above reply to overthrow with “judicious extracts” from Marx, and with that promise he enters upon the arena. The gentleman makes four “extracts.” Of all these “extracts,” the only one that bears upon the point at issue, and bears him out, is a citation, not of Marx, but of Aveling. Affidavits are not lobsters; neither is Aveling Marx.

We shall confine ourselves to Marx.

The Marxian principle is that labor power is a merchandise. Now, then, it so happens that with this merchandise, owner or seller is inseparable from the article sold. A dealer in shoes may live in Roslyn, Wash., and have his factory or shop in New York; the latter may burn up, he need not burn up with it; or he may shrivel up and die, and yet his merchandise will preserve its full utility. It is so with all other sellers and their merchandise, except the workingman and his merchandise labor-power. If either collapses, down goes the other with it; neither can survive the other. In fact, the merchandise is so interwoven with every muscle, nerve, vein, brain-lobe, and tissue of the seller, the workingman, that the two are one. Important is the economic fact brought out by Marx, and insisted upon by him, that, from the viewpoint of economics, it is the workingman carries to market “for workingman sells and the capitalist buys”; and more than once—in his letter to the unity congress of the German Socialists, for instance—he finds great fault with the slurring of the point. But Marx was too well rounded a thinker to overlook the sociologic feature which lay in the inseparableness of the merchandise labor-power and the workingman. That, in the end and sociologically, it is the workingman himself that is sold in the Labor-Market Marx points out with lucid clearness and incisiveness when, in the chapter on the source of the capitalist’s profits, he points

out that it is his own “hide” that the workingman carries to market “for a tanning.” One stands, accordingly, with both feet upon Marxism—economic and sociologic Marxism—when the statement is made that the workingman sells HIMSELF. In fact the terms “wage slavery” and “wage slave” indicate as much.

All merchandise has its price in the respective market. So has the merchandise labor-power in its market; and seeing that, as pointed out by Marx, the seller or owner is himself sold in the instance of the merchandise labor-power, it follows that wages, the amount paid, is the price—of what? The term “labor-market” (did Mr. Halliday never come across it in Marx?)—the term “labor market” sufficiently tells that the price is the price of “labor.”

It is hard to ascertain exactly what Mr. Halliday objects to.

If his objection is merely to the word “labor” in the sentence “wages are the price of labor”—then his objection may be brushed aside as a mere quarrel of words, and fruitless.

If, however, his objection is to the whole idea, then he is seriously in error. How seriously appears from the passage in which he lightly throws Marx overboard by gayly declaring that “the working class is robbed of ALL that they produce”!!! This is not only an economic absurdity; it is not only a sociologic blunder; it is one of these errors that science condemns as barren in that it leads to no constructive thought:—how utterly unconstructive may be judged from Mr. Halliday’s definition of wages as a “mere pittance”!

Wages is the amount received by the seller of the merchandise “labor-power” for his merchandise, “labor-power.” Due to the circumstance that seller and merchandise are inseparable in this instance, the seller is himself sold. The circumstance embodies two facts—one of economic bearing, to wit, the labor-power feature, the other of sociologic bearing, to wit, the wage slave feature of the transaction. The transaction takes place in the “labor-market,” just as cattle is sold in the “cattle market”—hence wages are the price of labor.

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

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