

EDITORIAL

“IMMUTABLE LAWS.”

By DANIEL DE LEON

MR. Bourke Cockran—the one-time apostle of McKinley against Bryan, and then of Bryan against McKinley—is again “in irruption.” This time he irrupted in New Rochelle, where he delivered an address on “The Conflict Between Labor and Capital.” As may be judged from the title, Mr. Cockran does not recoil from a subject by reason of its magnitude. On the contrary he sails in serenely—and settles it off-hand. Off-hand also is his method.

The pivot of Mr. Cockran’s argument was that wages are fixed by “immutable laws.” Can there be any neater disposal of the great Labor Problem? Who would be childish enough henceforth to attack immutability. The Socialist Movement with its many ramifications, and not in the hands of children, aims at the overthrow of the wages system. Had the Movement not better furl its banners and tackle the possible, instead of beating its head against what Mr. Cockran pronounces “immutable”? But the Socialist is a perverse being. He has a perverse way of placing statements under the lens, sticking the scalpel of analysis into them, and finding out. Applying this irreverent treatment to Mr. Bourke Cockran’s statement the following facts are ascertained.

Cholera microbes are “immutably” deadly—provided you allow them into your stomach, or once there, leave them to their pranks. But the moment you do not, their “immutability” comes to a dead stop.

Lightning is “immutably” destructive provided you do not presume to control it. But if you know how and do, it can be led like a lamb under ground.

Pestilence, how “immutably” devastating—provided you cower before it! But rise, equip yourself with knowledge, and its “immutability” suffers shipwreck. It can and has been actually banished by man.

Now, time was, when the human race, being in its infancy, actually looked upon these visitations in the same light that Mr. Cockran now does upon “wages” and their “fixings.” And people there were, who, partly sharing the superstition of the masses from whom they sprung, partly because they found their account in doing

so, went about preaching humility to the people, resignation to the "will of God" and pronouncing it a sacrilege to seek to overcome such "immutable" visitations—very much as Mr. Bourke Cockran now does, or would do if he dared, on the subject of "wages" and their "fixings." Experience with these one-time "immutabilities" induces a closer inquiry into the now alleged "immutability" of wages. The two are found to be essentially one—"immutable" if you let them, or tolerate the miasmatic conditions that breed them, "mutable" and uprootable if you don't.

Wages and their fixings proceed from the social-economic conditions where the natural and the social opportunities—land and capital—without which wealth cannot be produced, are tolerated in private hands. But how does this private ownership get there? Is it a natural growth, like the growth of apples on an apple tree? Obviously not. It is an artificial product. What man does he can undo. Social institutions are the work of man. They are, consequently not "immutable," but, in point of fact, the most "mutable" of things.

But man does not alter his work unless he has reason to be dissatisfied with it. The wages system has approved itself unsatisfactory. On the domain of sociology, it is no better than a devastating pestilence. No intelligent man, if he is honest, no honest man, if he is intelligent, dare deny that the inevitable, aye, the "immutable" result of the wages system is an ever deepening and spreading misery and abjectness among the masses—just like any other pestilential microbe. Knowledge having been brought to bear against the latter, despite the one-time declamation of superstition against the proceeding, and the evil having been quelled, so has knowledge turned its telescope upon the social microbe of the wages system, ascertained the laws of its existence, the conditions under which it thrives, accordingly, also the conditions under which it must die, and, with the "rough-on-rats" of Socialism, it is awakening the human race to a knowledge and a determination to extirpate that social microbe too.

Mr. Bourke Cockran is tugging at a false chord, when he tugs at "immutability" to besot the people of this century into that abject attitude towards the devastating influence of the wages system pestilence, which in the days of old the people assumed and were besotted into assuming towards physical pestilence, as "the will of God" and "immutable." Mr. Cockran is fully 1,000 years behind with his method; it will not work in the Twentieth Century. We do not propose to bow down to and be ravaged by the alleged "immutable will" of the God Capital.

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