

DAILY PEOPLE

VOL. 6, NO. 258.

NEW YORK, THURSDAY, MARCH 15, 1906.

ONE CENT.

EDITORIAL

JUST A FEW QUESTIONS.

By DANIEL DE LEON

TOO much time can hardly be bestowed upon the contemplation of the anti-trust posture of Senator La Follette, as already depicted in these columns.

La Follette is an anti-monopolist and trust-buster. His philosophy is that monopoly is bad, and that the evil can be ended by mending. Speaking in the Senate on the 2nd of this month upon the way in which the railroads center wealth in their hands, dominate the people and ruin enterprises, he argued, from the railroad and mining history of Pennsylvania, as follows:

“Many years ago, in the State of Pennsylvania, the anthracite coal fields were in a measure taken possession of by certain railroad companies that built into those fields. Those railroad lines furnished the only highways over which that coal could go to market. Being themselves owners of coal lands, these railroads could push the freight rates up on owners of coal lands who owned no railroads. The consequence was that these independent mine owners were ruined, their property falling into the hands of the railroads.”

That is quite luminous, so far. La Follette then proceeded to narrate the history of the efforts made to mend the evil. The State of Pennsylvania adopted a constitutional amendment in 1873 prohibiting any railroad company from owning lands in that State either for mining or manufacturing purposes. Did this improve matters? Not in the least. La Follette himself explains why: “There was no provision that officers and stockholders of those roads might not organize companies and take possession of coal lands for mining purposes”. This also is perfectly luminous. The Pennsylvania constitutional amendment was passed to keep fools in false gaze. It seemed drastic; it was bottomless. The railroad companies, as companies, ceased to own coal lands. But the individual directors and stockholders held coal lands, and the result was the same. Independent operators were ruined through the unequal

competition in freight which the coal lands owning railroad directors and stockholders enforced.

Perfectly clear upon all these antecedents, Senator La Follette arrives at the conclusion: "To enact a statute barring the railroad companies [from holding coal lands, etc.] and stop there, is to give husks instead of the kernel of practical legislation to the interests that are crying out for protection". Neither can any fault be found with this conclusion. The Senator proposes to give "practical legislation". And what is the practical legislation that he proposes? He observes: "of what avail is it to enact a statute barring railroad companies from becoming competitors in production with those who are producing and transporting over their lines, if the railway companies are permitted to accomplish exactly the same thing through their officers and stockholders?" In other words, the Senator recognizes that ownership of coal lands or other business enterprise by officers or stockholders of the railway companies is as mischievous as direct ownership by the railroad companies themselves, is but beating the devil around the stump, is giving husks instead of the kernel. The Senator, anxious for "practical legislation", proposes a law by which the officers and stockholders of railroad companies shall be themselves barred from owning coal lands, grain lands, or any other business enterprise. It is upon the "practical legislation" feature of this proposition that a few questions are in order:—

We would ask: Are the wives, the sisters, the cousins and the aunts, to say nothing of the chums or stool-pigeons, of the officers and stockholders of the railroad companies also to be barred from owning coal lands and other business enterprises? Of course, not! The bare idea of such a law is too obviously visionary for consideration. If, then, these wives, these sisters, these cousins and these aunts, to say nothing of these chums or stool-pigeons, are not to be barred, of what avail would it be to bar the officers and stockholders? Will not these officers and stockholders be permitted to accomplish exactly the same thing through these, their wives, their sisters, their cousins and their aunts, to say nothing of their chums or stool-pigeons? In what respect would such a law as the Senator proposes be less husk and more kernel? In what way would such a measure beat the devil to a standstill any sooner than did the Pennsylvania law of 1873? For what reason

would such a proposition be deserving of the title of “practical”, if that title is undeserved by the Pennsylvania statute?

Vicious is the circle, and leading from one will-o'-the-wisp to another, in which he moves who would end the crimes of capitalism by the methods of capitalism itself. The man bitten by a mad dog may be cured by a hair of the dog that bit him, but the mad dog himself is not to be cured by any such process. His cure lies in the shot that ends him.

Transcribed and edited by Robert Bills for the official Web site of the Socialist Labor Party of America.
Uploaded February 2009

slpns@slp.org