EDITORIAL

Before the Battle

By DANIEL DE LEON

At the hustings, the battlefield of civilization, a battle of deep interest will be fought next Tuesday. The forces are marshalled. What does the conflict betoken?

Hitherto, since the Civil War, the political parties of the land were exclusively the political forces of the uppermost capitalist class. They were divided in their own class interests, and each sought to gain the government to promote them. There were two other classes that had already taken shape in the country; the middle class whose machinery of production rendered its existence more and more precarious, being less and less able to compete with the large capitalists, secondly, the growing army of the proletariat, the wage earners, who, owning at all no machinery of production, were compelled to sell themselves into wage slavery. But neither of these two classes had yet waked up to a consciousness of its special economic and political interests; both indulged the illusion that they could yet thrive; and they became camp followers of the large capitalist parties. Thus the issues “Reform and Retrenchment” in ’76, and the subsequent ones of “Tariff and Free Trade”—both of them upper capitalist issues, with which neither middle class nor proletariat had any concern, were the sole issues of previous campaigns. The real combatants were the capitalists, with the middle class and proletarians as food for cannon.

Since then both the middle class and a perceptible portion of the proletariat have waked up to their respective class consciousness, the development of capitalism has roused them; the political chess-board has changed accordingly. For the first time in our history we find in the field three contending political forces, each standing upon a political platform that sharply marks the class interests of the three classes into which the country is divided.

The class of large capitalists that grew out of the small bourgeoisie which freed this country from feudalism, is in possession of the nation—economically and politically. It
was born mid the roar of cannon and smell of gunpowder, the child of a revolution. It
developed apace, it fulfilled its mission of pointing out the capabilities of co-operative
labor, it is now tottering to its fall, and is only an encumbrance in the way of progress.
No such social encumbrance ever removed itself; on the contrary, it seeks to perpetuate
its existence, and, like a dribbling dotard, seeks to cover itself with the trappings of
sanctity. This is the Republican party, whose platform logically proceeds from
capitalist principles and seeks to preserve things as they are.

The middle-class is ranked under the Democratic colors. It is not now the same small
bourgeoisie out of which grew the large capitalist class. That bourgeoisie, or former
middle-class, had its future before it, it was the raw material out of which the
capitalist was to be hewn. The present small bourgeoisie or middle class is the ash-barrel
refuse of the present industrial system, its future is behind it. Its endeavor is to
restore the days of yore, while its predecessor had the mission, which it accomplished,
of overthrowing the old and rearing a new system. The modern middle class has
preserved of the old middle class its phrases of liberty only, and these sound to-day to
knowing ears only as bluster and bravado. Production must be carried on only by large
concentrations; the modern middle class or Democratic party is bent upon a counter
revolution—the most unmistakable sign of the utter imbecility of a class.

The class conscious Proletariat is the historic successor of the bourgeoisie of 1776. Its
mission is to carry on the revolution from the point where capitalism dropped it.
Capitalism has revealed the capabilities of co-operative labor, the proletariat is called
upon to make these possibilities a reality, by stripping the co-operation-compelling
and abundance-producing machinery of production from the fetters that now paralyze
it and render it a hindrance to human happiness. The historic mission of the
proletariat is to abolish class distinctions by establishing the Co-operative
Commonwealth. The political army of the proletariat is marshalled around the
banner of the Socialist Labor Party.

Not yet can it be expected to witness the victory of the Proletariat. Old habits of
thought will yet keep many in the camp of the Republican or capitalist party; the
bluster and the revolutionary phrases uttered in the Democratic or middle class camp
will probably entice many thither. In both cases the bulk of these class-conscious
proletarians will have been food for the political cannon of their exploiters for the last
time. Which of the two camps will keep or draw the larger portion of these this year
and thus win the victory a few more days will tell. But that “victory” will be an empty
victory. It will crumble in the hands of the “victors.” The only victor next Tuesday will
and can be only the Socialist Labor Party, its growth will be marked, and to it are
bound to flock in the immediate future the class that belongs there. It’s is the future.