Admissions, Crowding Fast

By Daniel De Leon

Time was, and that not so long ago, when the motto “laissez faire!” (Hands off!) was the roll of the drum to the tune of which the baronial industries of the land loved to assert their rights divine to treat the working people as they pleased. They either knew better but suppressed their knowledge; or they did not know the historic, the political, aye, the revolutionary genesis of the motto, and used it as a term with which to conjure submission to their rule. To utter the motto “laissez faire!” seemed to them all-sufficient to justify their acts as sacred, their policy as the only one approved by time, and to silence objection.

A leader in this view of the term has ever been the New York Evening Post. A striking illustration of the Evening Post’s application of the term was furnished by that paper’s attitude at the time of the New Jersey railroad strikes in 1887. New Jersey seemed to have been too slow, in the opinion of the railroad barons, in calling out the militia. The Evening Post was of the opinion that “the time had come for our industrial barons to protect their realms in the same manner as the feudal barons protected theirs”; and, seeing that there was question of the New Jersey legislature abolishing the blot of the Pinkertons, the Evening Post bluntly proclaimed in its issue of Jan. 25, 1887: “The occasion for the services of such men as the Pinkertons will soon be tenfold greater than it is now....The country will be filled with mercenaries made up, as the armies of ancient Rome largely were, with men excluded by custom or circumstances from peaceful avocations, nonunion men, who adopt fighting as a means of livelihood. There will be enough for them to do, and pay and rations will not be wanting when the legislature attempts to abolish Pinkerton’s men”—all in the name of “laissez faire!”

Such was the extreme position of American capitalist baronies, and such it continued to be in substance until the 10th instant. On that date the signal for a turnabout was given. Significant enough, the signal was given by the very Evening Post; and still more significant is the nature of the argument that backs the signal. The Evening Post suddenly recollects the revolutionary genesis of the term “laissez faire”; it makes the admission that “laissez faire” was a motto urged against privilege—that it was revolutionary.

And so it was. The slogan “laissez faire!” was the precursor of the Declaration of the Rights of Man by the French Revolution. The slogan was uttered by a bourgeois, and it was the first tocsin of the bourgeois revolution, aimed against the then enthroned feudal despotism. When that revolution was accomplished the despotism of capital mounted the throne which feudal despotism had previously occupied. From that instant, the lips of the bourgeois were the last upon which the slogan fitted. The continuance of its use by them, especially against the next,
the socialist revolution of the working class, was but a usurpation, a bit of hypocrisy.

The admission of the revolutionary genesis of the term “laissez faire” on the part of the *Evening Post* ranks with the admission implied by the then Secretary of Treasury Shaw, when last month he urged a bunch of capitalists at a banquet in Washington to pray to God to “save us” from our prosperity; and it ranks with the admission made shortly after by the *New York Sun* on the 28th of last December that “there is a greater unrest and a greater uneasiness in the air than there was before Sumter was fired on.” It is an admission tantamount to acknowledging that the capitalist class is the modern occupier of the throne against whom the slogan “laissez faire!” was intoned. It is an admission that the modern incumbent of that throne represents nothing but “privilege.” It is an admission that the modern incumbent will have to fall back upon the methods of its predecessor, such methods as the *Evening Post* of Jan. 25, 1887, suggested. It is an admission that capitalism now feels itself so cornered that it drops the mask of “principle” hitherto held before its face, and steps forth, or rather stands at bay, with nothing but its fangs to rely upon.

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1Spies and thugs supplied to capitalists by the Pinkerton Detective Agency during union organizing drives and strikes. Some 19th-century “liberals” opposed the capitalist practice of bringing bands of Pinkertons into one state from another as the equivalent of abetting a foreign invasion by a private army, and they advocated using the state militia to repel or disperse them.—SLP

2Leslie M. Shaw (1848–1932) was secretary of the treasury from 1902 until 1907.—SLP

3Fort at Charleston, S.C., where the first shots of the Civil War were fired in April 1861.—SLP