

EDITORIAL

TOPSY-TURVY PROHIBITIONISM.

By DANIEL DE LEON

THE Prohibition party, in national convention assembled, has again flown to the wind its standard, which heralds, in condensed form, the economic(!) principle(!) that liquor is the cause of involuntary poverty, and that, consequently, in order to abolish involuntary poverty, “the manufacture, sale, importation, exportation or transportation of alcoholic liquors for beverage purposes” shall be prohibited.

That many a Prohibitionist actually believes in this bizarre doctrine is undeniable. It is undeniable that, to these, the fact of drunkenness among capitalists who remain rich is a problem of no significance. The fact that, if liquor were the cause of poverty, the capitalist class, which drinks in one night more liquor than whole wards of workers from year end to year end, should be in the poor-house,—robust a fact though that is, leaves these Prohibitionists unmoved. The law of wages, which establishes penury for the proletarian, however sober he may be, and abundance for the capitalist class, however rum or champagne sodden it may be, is a closed book to the Prohibitionist.

In manner that follows no special economic lines of reasoning, but simply photographs reality, Eugene Sue covered the point in one of his many great works—*Martin the Foundling*. Martin had been apprenticed to a journeyman mason named Limousin, who got drunk regularly on Sundays. One day Martin asked him why he did so. The following passage thereupon occurs in Martin’s diary.

“‘Martin,’ said he to me, ‘Sunday is my own; were I not to get drunk on that day, I should go drunk all the week; aye, and more than that, I should become idle, envious, quarrelsome, and some day or other a thief, perhaps even worse than that. I am well convinced of it; the labor and poverty would be too much for me, were there no end or break to them; in short, were they like those long roads of four or five leagues in length, which,

when one is on the march, it is enough to break one's heart to see straight before you as far as your eyes can reach: Now, every Sunday, instead of this never-ending straight line of my miserable existence, composed wholly of sharp flints and burning sands, I see cascades of rock water, flowery mountains, enchanted palaces, in a word, my lad, a thrilling assemblage of delights compared to which I look upon the fine chateaux at which I work as so many pig sties, and their fine parks as so many mole hills. On the Mondays, when I return from my excursions, what care I that six currish days have to pass? Do I not see my Sunday at the end of them?"

"I drink, and I have the right to drink, for the purpose of transporting myself out of these surroundings, I know not whither, four or five times a month;—and is not that better than to madden through life?"

"I once asked Limousin, why, seeing that drunkenness seemed so great a comfort to him, he did not get drunk every evening? His answer was alike decisive and stern: 'Either I must steal in order to have the means of getting drunk without working, and I will not steal, or I should earn enough to buy the means of getting drunk daily. Now, those earnings would suffice for all my wants, I should then be happy;—AND HAVE NO OCCASION TO GET DRUNK TO FORGET THAT HAPPINESS.'"

With the poor who are held down in misery, drunkenness is but a means of emancipating themselves from physical surroundings that are unhappy. The disease of drunkenness can be cast off only by a healthy social system.

The Prohibitionist, who honestly aims at a "sober nation", belongs in the Socialist Labor Party camp. The Prohibitionist outside got the cart before the horse. Not drunkenness breeds poverty, but poverty breeds drunkenness.

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

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