

Socialism and the Servile State

By Daniel De Leon

There reached us some time ago from England a pamphlet containing the verbatim report of a debate on “Socialism and the Servile State,” which took place at Memorial Hall, London, on May 5, 1911, between Hilaire Belloc, Liberal member of Parliament in 1906–1910, and J. Ramsay MacDonald, then and still a Social-Democratic member of Parliament. The sender accompanied the pamphlet with a request for a review. Recent dispatches from London, reporting the Labor Party’s proposal for the nationalization of mines, give actuality to the debate.

So far as Belloc’s economic views are concerned, he may, or may not, be a Socialist. Hard to tell. MacDonald not unjustly charged his remarks with obscurity. From certain sentiments that he dropped, we should judge that, notwithstanding that he was a Liberal member of Parliament as late as 1910, Belloc belongs—not at all an uncommon thing among the intellectual bourgeois—in the category of communist-anarchy, a theory of small cooperative communities brought about by a cataclysm through despair. This, however, matters little to the subject. Belloc was not treating socialism, its merits, or demerits, its principles and its tactics. He spoke to a thesis, and that he elaborated with sufficient clearness.

Belloc defined the “servile state” as a condition of society in which the mass of the people, although enjoying a minimum of economic “security and sufficiency,” are “permanently dispossessed of the means of production.” With the servile state thus defined, Belloc maintained that the Socialists, meaning the Socialists typified in Parliament by MacDonald, are drifting ever further away from socialism, and ever nearer to the idea or perfect servile state. In other words, Belloc’s contention is that the Labor Party makes for a social system in which, schooled in the school of experience, a capitalist oligarchy, possessed of the means of production, will wisely “leave well enough alone”; will wisely rest content with an abundance without toil, instead of striving after a superabundance; and will secure their rule by drying up the headspring of revolt through a system of organization that will “humanely” give security through economic sufficiency for the masses.

In proof of this contention, Belloc cited a number of instances as illustrative of his theory that the steadily pursued policy of the socialism of MacDonald’s party is that of borrowing capital, from the capitalist, of course, and, of course, paying the capitalist interest, in order to establish municipal enterprises—tramways, wash houses, libraries, old-age pensions, etc.—by means of which “all those millions of English men and women who possess no land or capital and who work at a weekly wage” will be “confirmed, in that wage forever,” with their children, “looked after when in school,” and also “looked after in old age, but never allowed to get capital or land, while, on the other hand, the class

that has it shall remain having it"; in still other, and fewer, words, a policy calculated to promote mass contentment with a minimum of mass sufficiency, while leaving the means of production in capitalist hands, and even strengthening the hold of the rulers upon the means to rule—a servile state condition of things.

MacDonald acquiesced, as was legitimate, in Belloc's definition of the servile state, but denied Belloc's conclusion that his Labor Party was drifting further and further away from socialism, and was more and more directly headed toward the servile state. Apart from the assertions in support of his contention, MacDonald made just one economic argument of sociological bearing. The argument clinched the point for Belloc; the present Labor Party bill to nationalize the mines illumines the clincher.

With superb logic does Marx demonstrate that the investment made by the capitalist is shortly consumed, and that the consumed capital is usuriously replaced by profits. The two conclusions—the consumption of the capital and its usurious replacement by profits—are inseparable. MacDonald's argument in question dislocates the two. Endeavoring to disprove Belloc's reasoning that borrowing from the capitalist only strengthens the capitalist's hold on masterhood, and only confirms the proletariat (masses) in servility, MacDonald argued: "He says, when you do all your work, all your public work, your municipal trams, and so on, you will do it on borrowed capital. Precisely! How long does borrowed capital exist? It does not exist more than 20 years at the very outside."

Precisely! But if that means (as what else can it mean?) that borrowed capital is not eventually replaced by profits, or interest; if the economic fact that MacDonald mentions is to be construed (as how else is it to be construed in the connection in which it is mentioned?) as meaning that borrowed, hence, invested, capital vanishes in 20 years, leaving behind it no trace either of itself or of its power, if that is so, what is then left for MacDonald to do? Has not the capitalist abolished himself by his capital-consuming investments? Has not the capitalist himself deprived the Socialist Othello of his occupation? Should not the capitalist be as dead as the dodo? Are, then, the Socialists, MacDonald along with the rest of them, a lot of spook-chasers?

The capitalist is no dodo. He is a very live sociological factor. The \$675 million, for instance, for which the present Labor Party bill proposes to buy the country's mines would be a 675,000,000-power tentacle fastened in the arteries of the working class, to pump up blood into and fatten the vampire capitalist class, and strengthen its might to keep the masses in servility.

Belloc stated his point: MacDonald proved it for him.

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Socialist Labor Party