

EDITORIAL

THE “RIGHTS OF LABOR.”

By DANIEL DE LEON

“**M**R. President,” said Senator Nathan Goff of West Virginia on May 9, in the course of his effort to prevent the investigation of the miners’ strike in his State, “I believe in the rights of labor. So do the people of my State; I believe in the right of labor to organize and to strike; I have so decreed from the bench; and I believe in their right to be so protected when organized; but there comes a time when for their own good, as well as for the good of the country, those so organized should go no further. While they have a perfect right to strike and to quit work, they have no right to make others strike and to prevent those from working, who desire to continue to labor in order to support their wives and children. They must not drive other laborers out. They may go out, but the other people have a right—God-given right—to protect themselves and to earn their living, with which those who wish to strike have no right to interfere.”

As fate would have it, the very next day after these abstract principles were declaimed in the Senate, the New York *Wall Street Journal* published a report-essay on the “West Virginia Labor Situation and Its Interesting Problems.” The following passage occurs therein:

“The Labor that there is is the free West Virginia mountain white labor. Its efficiency is 30 per cent. and an average of 60 to 70 per cent. is necessary for profits. By doubling the production on the same amount of equipment it would be possible to increase profits four-fold. The key is, therefore, labor. Until the foreign miner is imported to displace or to supplement domestic labor, conditions will not be favorable. West Virginia must do what Pennsylvania has done.”

The report-essay of the *Wall Street Journal* furnishes the interpretation and

application of the abstract principles expressed by Senator Goff, to wit:

The rights of Labor must be no more than a rattle to entertain and humor the child Labor. Such rattles are to "organize," to "strike," to "quit work," to "go out." In the rattling of these rattles Labor must be protected. But the rattling must go no further. If, for instance, the profits which the employer makes out of Labor are not satisfactory to him; and he either lowers wages so as to preserve a larger share of Labor's product; and he imports foreign workers, who, due to a thousand and one causes he can cheat into working with greater efficiency, that is, harder and for lower pay;—if the employer does that, then Labor should understand that it is the God-given right of its imported fellow wage-earners to be cheated, and that it is for the good of Labor that it be displaced, thrown out of work, and trained in the exhilarating exercise of looking for work and life elsewhere, and to afford an opportunity to the cheated immigrant workers to support their wives and children so as to raise a goodly crop of abject and starveling proletarians for the good of the country, the country being the Employing Class. And if Labor should take it into its head to take a different view of the matter; if Labor should approach its immigrant fellow workers and endeavor to preach to them the theory that they are being cheated, the further theory that they are not only cutting the throat of their domestic fellow proletarians but are also sharpening the knife for the future cutting of the throats of themselves and their children, and the still more pernicious theory that, by joining hands with their domestic proletarians they would be able to live happier lives, earn more with less expenditure of tissue, and eventually wholly overthrow the social system which keeps them in wage-slavery,—if Labor should take it into its head to take such a view of the matter, and act accordingly, then Labor turns the rattle into a weapon; then Labor exceeds its rights, rights that even the now Senator Goff decreed when he was a Judge; then Labor must be delivered over to military tribunals, and punished with imprisonment by the sentence of drum-head courts-martial.

We venture to say that History is about to repeat itself by repeating its oft-enforced precept that there are "Rights" and "Rights"—one set of Rights that it is

the mission of History to leap to the rescue of, another set of "Rights" which it is the task of History to leap upon, and trample out of existence.

Transcribed and edited by Robert Bills for the official website of the Socialist Labor Party of America.
Uploaded August 2015

slpns@slp.org