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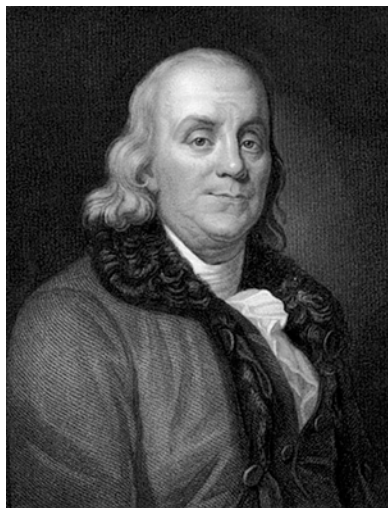
ONE CENT.

EDITORIAL

BENJAMIN FRANKLIN.

By DANIEL DE LEON

JANUARY 17 will be the bi-centenary of the birth of Benjamin Franklin. Papers eulogistic of his greatness are the order of the day. One editor says of Franklin in a prefatory note: "He remains more than Washington or Patrick Henry, or even Lincoln or Grant, the typical American." Considering the standards of greatness prevalent, this is high praise, indeed. But it is worthy the man. Franklin, scientist, inventor, philosopher and statesman, was a many and great



BENJAMIN FRANKLIN
(1706–1790)

minded man. He was versatile without being superficial; active without being strenuous; a genius without being an ego-maniac. Born amid Puritanical surroundings, he personified the most liberal culture of the world of his time. Karl Marx, in one of those luminous and profound foot-notes to *Capital* (P. 629), for which he is justly renowned, names Franklin as one of the great men who originally studied political economy, in contrast to the "reverend scribblers," like Malthus, who followed them. Says Marx: "Originally, political economy was studied by philosophers like Hobbes, Locke, Hume; by business men and statesmen, like Thomas Moore, Temple, Sully, De Witt, North, Law, Vanderlint, Cantillon, Franklin; and especially, and with the greatest success, by medical men like Petty, Barbon, Mandeville, Quesnay." To have one's name mentioned among such names by a man like Karl Marx, is a tribute to greatness of the highest order.

And Marx, in another of his admirable foot notes, on the discussion of the nature of value (P. 19), pens these very complimentary words: "The celebrated Franklin, one of the first economists, after Wm. Petty, who saw through the nature

of value, says: ‘Trade in general being nothing else but the exchange of labour for labour, the value of all things is . . . mostly justly measured by labour.’ (The works of B. Franklin, &c., edited by Sparks, Boston, 1836. Vol. II., P. 267).” This penetrating contribution of the foremost “typical American” to the basic economic doctrines of Socialism will, perhaps, jar those who otherwise venerate him.

But it is not alone as an economist that Franklin ranks among the great, and is so recognized by the greatest among them,—it is as a sociologist as well. Lewis Morgan, the great American ethnological writer, discussing the property career of civilized nations (P. 552, *Ancient Society*), declares that “The time will come, nevertheless, when human intelligence will rise to the mastery over property, and define the relations of the state to the property it protects, as well as the obligations and the limits of the rights of the owners. The interests of society are paramount to individual interests, and the two must be brought into just and harmonious relations. A mere property career is not the final destiny of mankind, if progress is to be the law of the future as it has been of the past.” Franklin anticipated Morgan by a century, when he declared “Private property is a creature of society, and is subject to the calls of that society whenever its necessities shall require it, even to its last farthing; its contributions, therefore, to the public exigencies are . . . the return of an obligation previously received, or the payment of a just debt.” This radical communistic exaltation of the social welfare—of human life—above property, will add to the jar the reverential worshippers of Franklin will perhaps receive from his contributions to the basic economic doctrines of Socialism.

Whether it does or not, the economic and sociological contributions of Franklin to the world’s progress, will add to his stature and raise him above the bourgeoisie he so well served.

All honor to Benjamin Franklin, genius of his age, and, like all genius, in advance of it!

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