

EDITORIAL

NINETY YEARS AGO AND NOW.

By DANIEL DE LEON

SENATOR LA FOLLETTE having driven Senator John Sharp Williams of Mississippi to admit, in the course of the August 27 debate on the income tax, that the “inequalities of fortune are a menace to the Republic,” Senator La Follette uttered the following weighty words:

“The Senator realizes the danger that may follow from the passing of an enormous fortune from the deceased promoter of that fortune to somebody else. Does he not also realize the danger of the use of that fortune in the hands of the man who accumulated it?”

“Mr. President, just a word more. When a fortune has passed from the hands of the dead to his successor, perhaps to his son, perhaps to one who has inherited no attribute of the man who accumulated and used that fortune for 30 or 40 years to oppress his fellow men, or even though the person inheriting had all of the attributes and all of the genius of the one from whom he inherited it, he would require years of training and experience to make it as great a menace as it was in the hands of the man who accumulated it. Then, instead of awaiting the opportunity to reach after death that great accumulation of wealth which the Senator has admitted is a menace, why not diminish it by a system of taxation that is constitutional, legitimate, and proper?”

Nearly ninety years ago, in this State of New York, and responsive to the throb of the social issues which as early as then began to outline themselves on the horizon, Thomas Skidmore advanced the principle:

“Inasmuch as great wealth is an instrument which is uniformly used to extort from others their property, it ought to be taken away from its possessors, on the same principle that a sword or a pistol may be wrested from a robber, who shall undertake to accomplish the same effect in a different manner.”¹

¹ [Thomas Skidmore, “Statement Proclaiming Formation of the Workingmen’s Party,” 1829.—R.B.]

The only difference between what Skidmore said ninety years ago, and what La Follette said yesterday, is that Skidmore was more explicit in his principle and object, and more clean-cut in his method. Have we retrograded? In a way yes. In another not. Surely the economic development of the land did not yet warrant the application of Skidmore's method in Skidmore's days. The land was not yet ripe for the Socialist or Industrial Republic. The land is ripe today. What in Skidmore's days could be only an aspiration, in our own, or La Follette's days can be a reality. The aspiration embodied in Skidmore's words did not retrograde. It stood in abeyance. It is beginning to recognize itself tentatively, in La Follette, as it has fully recognized itself in Socialism, that is Marxian, not Berger, Socialism—in short, as it is preached by the body over which waves the standard of the Socialist Labor Party.

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