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ARTICLE

## WHAT DAMNED FOOLS MARX AND ENGELS WERE.

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**T**he story is told that, somewhere in the backwoods, a rustic, who knew as much about law as the potatoes that he hoed, was elevated to the Bench in his village. The man was a caricature of a Judge, and slaughtered jurisprudence as he slaughtered pigs. One day he had been particularly hard on the canons of the law, and gave a decision that staggered the lawyer against whose pleadings the decision was rendered. For a while the lawyer sat with his head between his hands; then he recovered himself, picked up a volume of Blackstone's Commentaries and rose to address the Court. "His Honor" growled out to him: "What, on your legs again; do you still insist I am wrong?"

"No Your Honor," answered the lawyer with a twinkle in his eye, "just the other way; I only want to show Your Honor what a damned fool Blackstone was"; and he then proceeded to read a passage from the reverend jurist that "His Honor" had just been transgressing.

The country Solon of the story (in point of law) is not in it with the *Volkszeitung* "Economist" (in point of political economy). In the language of the lawyer in the story, we shall here proceed to show what damned fools Marx and Engels were, by placing in parallel columns certain recent Solominian utterances of the *Volkszeitung*, on the one side, and the statements of the founders of modern Socialism, on the other:

### *Volkszeitung*, March 29

The workingman pays the indirect taxes of his country (in so far as these fall upon the necessaries of life) as consumer, out of his earnings. If, due to new or higher taxes upon the necessaries of life, the prices of these rise, the wages or earnings of the workingmen, DO NOT—on that ground—AT ALL RISE. (The underscoring is the *Volkszeitung's* own.)

### Marx, "Discourse on Free Trade", 1847.

Doubtless, if the price of all commodities falls,—and this is the necessary consequence of Free Trade,—I can buy far more for a franc than before. And the workingman's franc is as good as any other man's. Therefore, Free Trade Must be advantageous to the workingman. There is only one little difficulty in this,

namely that the workman, before he exchanges his franc for other commodities, has first exchanged his labor for the money of the capitalist. If in this exchange he always received the said franc while the price of all other commodities fell, he would always be the gainer by such a bargain. The difficulty does not lie in proving that, the price of all commodities falling, more commodities can be bought for the same sum of money.

Economists always take the price of labor at the moment of its exchange with other commodities, and altogether ignore the moment at which labor accomplishes its own exchange with capital. When it costs less to set in motion the machinery which produces commodities, then the things necessary for the maintenance of this machine, called workman, will also cost less. If all commodities are cheaper, labor, which is a commodity too, will also fall in price, and we shall see later that this commodity, labor, will fall far lower in proportion than all other commodities. If the workingman still pins his faith to the arguments of the economists, he will find, one fine morning, that the franc has dwindled in his pocket, and that he has only five sous left.

**Engels, Preface to the Above, 1888.**

Protection at home was of advantage to none but the producers of articles of food and other raw materials, to the agricultural interest, which, under then aristocracy. And this kind of protection was hurtful to the manufacturers. By taxing raw materials it raised the price of articles manufactured from them; BY TAXING FOOD, IT RAISED THE PRICE OF LABOR; in both ways, it placed the British manufacturer at a disadvantage as compared with his foreign competitor.

The hour is not yet to take hold of the allegations of fact in the *Volkszeitung* article of last March 7 and show them to be false, substantially false; show the “heavy burden” that “every man, woman and child” of the working class is therein said to be

made to bear, by reason of the recently imposed indirect taxes, to be a reckless fabrication, and the figures of dollars and cents, with which the fabrication is tricked out, a mere jugglery, worthy of the expertest "Tax-Reform" bourgeois juggler in figures. A special article on the subject, thus carrying this necessary war "into Africa," and exposing that, to the working class, perfidious article of March 7, is in preparation, and will in due time be published. On that line of the subject, the correspondence from Comrade Arthur Keep, found on the third page of this issue, may, for the present, suffice as a preliminary ray of light. In the meantime we shall take up successively the scientific economic principles at issue that the *Volkszeitung* is slaughtering, particularly with an eye on indirect taxation upon which it continues to harp.

The two passages above quotes from Marx and Engels give the obverse and the reverse of a medal, that may be called the Law of Wages as affected by indirect taxation.

To say that the workingman pays the indirect taxes, thereby reducing his share of the wealth he produces, is the favorite trick by which the free trader and "tax reformer" generally seeks to cheat the workingmen into supporting him as "a reliever of the burden of taxation from the shoulders of the workingmen." The statement means that, the tax being removed, the workingman's franc, to use Marx' words, will be able to buy more than before. The above passage from Marx brilliantly nails the insinuated economic lie: just as soon as these indirect taxes are removed, the wages drop, and they drop harder than the tax. Does the "Economist" on the *Volkszeitung* know this? Either he does or he does not. If he does not, what a damned fool Marx was! If he does, how criminally tactless is not the method, adopted by the *Volkszeitung*, of treating so delicate a question, on which the capitalist class in this country has created so much confusion, without saying one single, solitary word on the subject that (even if indeed these indirect taxes are thought to crush the workers) THE REMOVAL THEREOF WOULD BRING NO RELIEF, because "the franc will dwindle down to five sous"! Silence on such a point, hand in hand with the accentuation of the claim that the workingman DOES pay the taxes, can have no effect other than to drive the workingman into the "Tax-Reformers'" shambles. It is not the American workingman alone who is particularly given "to jumping sideways" as the *Volkszeitung* insultingly and with its usual tactlessness puts it, but all workingmen of all nationalities are given the same way. Where man thinks he CAN get SOME relief, it is human nature that he should be inclined to try and get that. This the "Tax-Reformer" knows full well, and he has successfully made, not Americans only, but Germans, Jews, Irishmen, Italians and all the other nationalities in the country "jump sideways" with the lure of a relief that the economic Law of Wages makes impossible to the wage slave. Silence on such a point, whether out of ignorance or otherwise, brands a writer unfit, and marks the workingman's paper that tolerates him an ignis fetus to its workingmen

readers—however much he and it may thereby earn the love and affection of the small trader class, large beer saloonkeepers, little speculators in real estate, usurious money lenders, etc., who alone could find relief in a removal of such taxes. That much for the one side of the medal.

Engels gives the other side. A rise in the cost of the necessities of life does NOT AT ALL RAISE WAGES is the rigid economic law dogmatically laid down by the “Economist” of the *Volkszeitung*; to claim that a rise in the cost of the necessities DOES raise wages the gentleman repudiates with “NEVER!”; he declares that such a claim savors of the “long ago buried ‘iron law’ of wages,” and, in haughty disgust at the inferiority of the races who will need enlightenment on this subject, he glories in the thought that the “German Socialists” have “long ago made the correct theory party and parcel of their flesh and bones.”—How un-German; how given to dead and buried past errors; in short, what a damned fool Engels was to say that the indirect taxation on food in Protection England DID RAISE THE PRICE OF LABOR, i.e., the wages, and as a matter of course, at that!

The obverse of a theory that Marx elucidated as far back as 1847, Engels tersely gives, as late as 1888, the reverse of. Indeed every student and observer knows that the question of taxes is a question between capitalists; this face transpires clearly from the above quotations throughout the magnificent discourse of Marx and the clever preface to it by Engels. But they were no pedants, guiddy-headedly coughing up chunks of undigested learning.

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There may be those, who, of vulgar turn of mind, may gloat at this controversy as they cruelly would at a dog-fight; or others, who, sufficiently informed, may think the controversy idle. But it is neither a dog-fight nor an idle affair. The surprise has time and again been expressed beyond the boundaries of this city at the relatively slow progress of the party here. To point out the reason is to help to remove the evil. On the one hand, the German workingman in this city can not be taught false economics, he can not be left exposed to the lures of false economics, without the poison, injected into him by a daily paper in his own language, being carried over to and contaminating his fellow wage slaves of other extractions in his shop;—and if that poison comes from a paper that is considered Socialist, the poison will be only of all the surer effect. On the other hand, the German workingman here can not be blown up with racial conceit, a notion of vainglorious superiority over his fellow wage slaves of other nationalities, American especially, can not be breathed into him by a paper in his own language, without the day is postponed when his other fellow wage slaves and he can fraternize;—and if that mischievous conceit proceeds from a paper that is considered Socialist, the mischief is bound to be all the worse: men repelled by the racial conceit

of others are more likely to feel repulsion against than attraction for the principles of such people. Among the brightest intellects, among the foremost, hardest, most industrious workers everywhere in the party are German comrades to be found; they are second to none and abreast of the best, all along the line; but for THESE the party would not be even where it is to-day. But they, and, for the same reason that they, our non-German comrades here are, so to speak, swimming with leaden boots. The situation can not be better described than in the closing words of the first article we wrote when, on last December 25, we felt constrained to open fire on the *Volkszeitung*:

Passages, such as the one here submitted to the scalpel, can not find their way into the party's German organ, the *Vorwaerts*: it is in charge of too clear-headed and conscientious a man for that. But the *Vorwaerts* is read mainly outside of this city; and there, indeed, we find the German element moving with steady pace; in this city, however, the *Vorwaerts* is little read: the *Volkszeitung* is considered its daily edition. In view of the appearance of such and similar wrong-headed and misleading articles in a German Socialist daily paper in this city, is it at all surprising that progress from the quarter of the German element is not here what it might be?

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

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