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The Motherland and the Workers

Enrique de San Martin

1889

It is not because we are “faint of heart”, not because we are “hot-headed” nor “for reasons of a personal nature, even though we be the sons of this land”, that we shy away from “defending [Cuba’s] dignity and grandeur”.

El Pais should know that in acting as we do we are prompted solely by the dictates of honest conscience.

This land it has fallen to our lot to be born in holds great, very great attractions for us, but at the same time we have paid fervent tribute... to “her dignity and greatness.” In our hearts, knowledge that the greatness of a country resides in the greatness of its inhabitants has caused us to amend our opinion of the defence of our own “dignity and grandeur”.

The continual growling from an empty belly, the heart-rending sight of children starving and naked and the wretched spectre of a weak and bloodless spouse: this is the picture that has presented itself to our eyes every time that we have tried to improve our comrades’ circumstances.

In vain, staking all on the wings of chimerical dreams, have we asked the art of politics in which part of its repertoire lurks

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the solution to the economic strife that tyrannizes us. To no avail, for the only reply we have ever had is silence.

What is more, much more, some bamboozler has stepped forward to reply, with the timidity of one who knows that he is uttering an untruth: “You ignoramuses, Politics will help you bring down the prices of consumer goods, which is tantamount to your receiving a pay raise which must leave you better off than you are at the moment.”

But this is just so much sophistry. It is not the case that lower prices for consumer goods are equivalent to a raise in pay, for the latter is always tied to the former, rising and falling as the cost of living rises or falls.

On which point we have in our possession conclusive statistics and studies that leave no room for doubt. The fact is that it could scarcely be otherwise, since elevating the labouring folk to comfortable circumstances would be tantamount to the ruling classes cutting their own throats.

Inevitably, therefore, we are trapped for all eternity in a vicious circle, as long as it is left to politics to iron out the vagaries of fortune and the manner in which we operate.

But, taking it for granted that this is the argument, and granting that we were to achieve a hike in pay some day, albeit even indirectly, through politics, should that be the be-all and end-all of our aspirations?

Certainly not.

Being wage-earners, dependent upon a wage, our “dignity and grandeur” must be at the mercy of those who live off our sweat; and — at least insofar as we understand the meaning of the word — it is not dignified for our exertions to be directed towards the maintenance of an order that keeps us in degradation.

Which is why we want no truck with politics, why we urge our comrades to keep clear of it as much as they are able and to form an essentially workers’ party, committed solely and exclusively to the championing of their own interests.

But what about the homeland! ...Ah, the homeland! The “dignity and grandeur” of the land that gave you birth!

But what do we mean when we speak of the grandeur of the homeland? Do we mean her independence! Precisely! Except that this, like everything else in politics is simply an abuse of words.

Does the independence of our homeland consist of her having a government of her own, her not being answerable to any other nations, etc., etc., even though her sons be subjected to the most degrading slavery? Can the homeland exist without her sons? Or can a “dignified, great”, happy and independent homeland include children who are slaves?

We cannot accept this interpretation.

We hold that the homeland is made up of her sons, and that there is no freedom for the homeland if some of her children are still slaves; it is of little consequence whether the slave-master is a foreigner or a fellow citizen; the result is the same. Slavery! Some may say: Where is the slavery? Has that stigma not been erased from our foreheads once and for all?

Sure. No longer will you find among us a slave with a branded skin, his flesh continually torn by the weighted tails of a brutal whip wielded by dull-witted overseers, the degraded henchmen of the ambitions of the mighty.

But that does not mean that slavery has been ended; very far from it; it is as powerful and as vigorous as ever, except that it has changed its form. Is that not what the “*Regulation and Charter for the Organization of Domestic Service on this Island*” represents?

Article 16 of the aforesaid *Regulation* reads as follows:

“No servant may absent himself from his residence on any personal errand, without the corresponding leave from his master, on pain of a one peso fine.”

And Article 21 of the *Regulation* reads:

“Should a servant be without employment for more than one month, he shall be deemed dismissed from service; and, should

he fail to furnish due evidence that he is plying another trade, or has other means of sustenance, he shall be deemed a vagrant.”

Lest this article drag on too long, we shall refrain from offering comment and urge *El Pais* to do so in our place, since it has so far said not one word on this score, such is its liberality! The remainder of the *Regulation* is of the same ilk.

Besides all this, we understand perfectly well the reason behind politics as far as certain classes of society are concerned. By whichever means they think easiest, each of them searches for a way of living independently; and so we find the capitalist dabbling in conservative politics, just as those with enough wit to sparkle and shine dabble in liberal politics, both feeling like slaves in a set-up that is ill-suited to their aspirations.

But let us leave them to it, for when all is said and done it is up to them to turn situations to their advantage.

As for ourselves, we will be the slaves — as ever — no matter what political system is put in place.

We workers cannot nor should we be anything other than socialists, for socialism these days is the only thing standing up to the bourgeois rule that has us enslaved.

Talking to us of homeland and freedom is a waste of time unless they start by guaranteeing our independence as individuals; we are not about to redeem the homeland while we are all left slaves.

The measure of the homeland's independence can be gauged by the amount of independence enjoyed by her children, and, as we have already said, there can be no free homeland while her children are slaves.

Enrique Roig de San Martin
El Productor, (Havana) 12 May 1889