

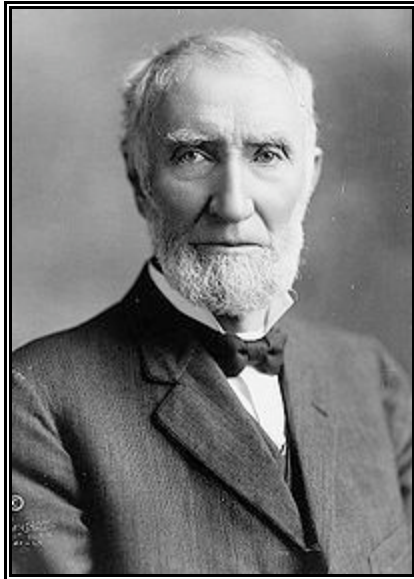
EDITORIAL

## THE “DESPOTIC SPEAKER.”

By DANIEL DE LEON

**C**URIIOUS what the tenacity is in a phrase, when once current, however absurd.

Even now, when Joe Cannon—stigmatized these many months as the “Despotic Speaker” — has been virtually dethroned after a protracted parliamentary



JOSEPH G. CANNON (1903–1911)

struggle of nearly 48 hours, that is to say, even now when the country resounds with narrative that expressly disproves the charge of despotism, and places the despotism where it really belongs, even now the “despotic Speaker” continues to be the epithet hurled at the thrashed Uncle Joe by the very forces who beat him down, and thereby disproved their own charge.

Speaker Cannon was the choice of a majority in the House of Representatives, the identical majority framed the Rules of procedure investing the Speaker with certain attributes. The exercise of the attributes was despotism, no doubt. But who was the despot? Surely not the agent—the Speaker. The despot was the agent’s principal—the majority in the House. So long as the Republican majority tolerated the Rules which itself had framed, not a single member of that majority could with any show of sense or decency yell “Despot!” at the Speaker.

On the part of the Democratic contingent in the House, the yell of “Despot!” at Speaker Cannon was imbecility—they were blaming the wrong man, thereby shielding the real culprits. On the part of members of the Republican contingent the yell was bad faith—they sought to saddle upon another their own misconduct.

The issue proves it.

So soon as the supporters of Speaker Cannon, which means, so soon as the real despots became a minority of the House, by the defection of their former forces to constitute a majority with the Democrats, “despotism” fell. And how did “despotism” fall? Did the defecting Republicans move the removal of the “despot”? Not at all. What they did was to move a new set of Rules that shore the Speaker of the powers which they themselves had conferred upon him.

There is no such thing as a one man’s despotism. The only “despotism” conceivable is the despotism of an unprincipled majority towards the legitimate rights of a minority.

Yellers of “Despot!” are a base crew. Either the yell is a lie of the whole cloth intended to promote purposes that the yellers themselves are ashamed of and seek to conceal under the semblance of democracy; or the yell is intended to free the yellers from responsibility for the “despotism” which they profit by; or the yell is a confession of mass poltroonery. In all instances the yell is a badge of infamy.

No one man can practice despotism.

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