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EDITORIAL

“PEDESTRIAN” WILSON.

By DANIEL DE LEON

IT is not often that Washington correspondents of our metropolitan press exercise the art of terse pen-photography. Occasionally they do. One of these occasions was that in which the Washington correspondent of the *New York Sun* closed his description of President Woodrow Wilson’s Cabinet officers with these less than two lines:

“William Bauchop Wilson, the Secretary of Labor, will follow his leader.”

The passage is even more than terse pen-photography: it is also a terse summary of the American “Labor Leader,” and of his sociologic forebears, the “Plebs Leaders” of ancient Rome.

The Plebs Leader in ancient Rome was a “bourgeois plebian,” so to speak. His economic status was bourgeois, in that he held property, a quality that he shared with his patricians; and in that he, in common with patricians, exploited the plebian proletariat. Differently from patricians, the plebs bourgeois for long was excluded from political functions, these being the property of a virtual caste, the patriciate. By little and little the plebs bourgeois broke through the caste crust. This he accomplished by utilizing his plebian status in such manner as to cause his fellow plebians of the proletarian class to identify their interests with his own; to believe that if he rose to the magistrate’s rank their interests would have “a friend in court”; and to stand by him and back up with the number of their fists the political demands that he made, ostensibly for the plebians at large, in fact, for the bourgeois plebian only. The patriciate was intimidated. Thus did the Plebs Leader—picked out by patrician Consuls; picked out with an eye to what qualities one may judge;—take his seat in the Senate, along with the patricians, where jointly they promoted their property holders’ powers over the proletariat plebs, and where the Plebs Leader

rose to ever higher political distinction, thanks to his skill in "working" the class instincts of the plebs proletariat. For all this, not until the approaching days of the collapse of republican Rome did the Plebs Leader stand at a magisterial par with his patrician fellow Senators. The badges of inferiority were not a few; some of them were droll, besides humiliating. One of their badges of inferiority was the disqualification of the Plebs Leader to speak in the Senate. He was allowed to vote only, but not "viva voce." He voted with his feet. If he voted "Aye" he tapped the ground with his feet; if he voted "Nay" he kept his feet still. Owing to this fact the wags of Rome dubbed the Plebs Leaders in the senate "the pedestrians." For centuries the "pedestrians," having their vanity gratified, followed their leaders, the patriciate in the senate.

The closeness of the parallel between the Plebs Leader of ancient Rome and Labor Leaders of the English speaking world is the subject of the first "Page" of the pamphlet entitled *Two Pages From Roman History*. A passage in the first "Page" enumerates a number of Labor Leaders in Great Britain and America who held political office, and who, in approved Plebs Leader fashion, also held stock in the very industries in which their Union was organized and its members were being skinned. The American instance was given in this paragraph:

"Howard [Robert Howard], who had strenuously upheld the Capitalist System in the Massachusetts Legislature, was of the Fall River, Mass., Spinners' Union. When his mind recently failed him, and his property had to be administered, he was found to be worth \$100,000, a large part of it in stocks in the very mills in which were fleeced to the skin the spinners of whose organization he was an officer."

The *Two Pages From Roman History* were two addresses delivered in the Manhattan Labor Lyceum of New York, the first on April 2, the second on April 16, 1902. Eleven years ago, William Bauchop Wilson had not yet matured into the sociologic descendant of the Roman Plebs Leader, the Labor Leader of America. That he has done so since transpires from the double circumstance of his having become the owner of a mine at the time when he was a member and officer of the United Mine Workers of America, and of his now being picked out by President Woodrow Wilson for a seat in the President's Senate, called Cabinet, where as the *Sun's*

Washington correspondent expressed himself with sociologic graphicness, “William Bauchop Wilson, the Secretary of Labor, will follow his leader”—in other words, will join the ranks of the American “pedestrians.”

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