

# DAILY PEOPLE

VOL. 6, NO. 220.

NEW YORK, MONDAY, FEBRUARY 5, 1906.

ONE CENT.

EDITORIAL

## MODERN WASTEFULNESS.

By DANIEL DE LEON

**J**AMES J. Hill, in addressing the St. Paul, Minnesota, Commercial Club recently, accused the capitalists of squandering the resources of the nation, without building up anything to take their places. He cited specifically the impending exhaustion of the forests, to enforce his point. And Hill predicted that the time would come when the nation would have to face an unemployed-and-starvation problem such as now confronts England.

The warning is timely; but can it, in the very nature of present conditions, be heeded? In the very nature of present conditions, the capitalists must waste. Waste to them means profit. Unlike their forerunners, the handicraftsmasters of the middle ages, profit lies not in producing with an eye to permanency, but with an eye to quick and frequent sales—to transitory conditions. The capitalist who would now make a suit of clothes, construct a set of furniture, and build a house of such quality as to cause them to be acceptable heirlooms for many generations, would be deemed insane. There must be frequent changes in style of



JAMES J. HILL (1838–1916)

clothes, in modes of furniture, and in designs of houses to keep factories busy, give the railroads plenty of tonnage to haul, and prevent the unemployed from swarming on the highways, and overturning society. Of course, the capitalist is not to blame for this waste of natural resources and the waste of human life accompanying it (the 17,000 killed and injured last year in the Pittsburg district, for instance); but the competitive system is. This has introduced machinery and caused invention to be rampant. As a result, the industrial processes of one year, with their products, are

relegated to the scrap heap by industrial processes and products of a cheaper character the next. This gives another impetus to competition and invention, with the result that there is another relegation to the scrap heap, and the vicious circle is gone around once more: more natural resources are wasted and more human lives are crushed out.

But, as Hill's warning shows, there is a limit to this sort of thing. Capitalism has been forced to set the limit. It has tried, for instance, in order to save the capital invested in industry, to stifle invention. The oil, telegraph and telephone trusts have bought inventions and never used them, being content to keep them out of the hands of competitors. And this tendency is growing. Capitalism is forced by the law of self-preservation to strive for greater permanency. It is not likely to succeed, however. For, by one of those strange fateful contradictions of which Capitalism is so full, what the capitalists acquire by the suppression of invention in one industry is used to advance invention in another competitive industry. For instance, what they acquire through the suppression of invention in oil, they invest in the extension of gas and electric systems—in competitive lighting industries of a different character. Thus the unsettled conditions created by the march of invention, together with its great waste of man and nature, continues apace. And thus it will be as long as the prime incentive to industry is private profit, instead of social use. Only under Socialism, which is fast evolving out of the present chaos, will industry for social use be possible. Then man will produce to live, not to waste both the means by which he lives and himself. Then will he labor, not to destroy, but to build up.

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Uploaded February 2009

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