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Sympathy for the Devil

Kevin Carson

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In the comments on “WTFWWTOD?” an interesting discussion sprung up over which think tanks and publications were most prone to vulgar libertarianism. The emerging consensus seems to be that most are a mixture of good and bad. But Mises.Org, for some reason, is a place of extremes, combining the best of the best with the most vulgar of the vulgar. As an example of the latter, Joel Schlosberg links to an especially awful piece, “In Defense of Scrooge,” which seems to resurface around Christmas every year at Lew Rockwell or Mises.Org. Now you might wonder why, of all people, Levin picked Scrooge to defend. Oh, wait, I know—because he’s *rich!* And as we all know, “free market principles” mean defending big business and the rich. Geez, I wonder why so many liberal Democrats instinctively reject libertarians as “greedy Republicans” in sheep’s clothing, and why we have so much trouble promoting libertarian ideas in their venues. The answer, Mr. Levin, is in the mirror.

Levin’s article includes this gem:

So let’s look without preconceptions at Scrooge’s allegedly underpaid clerk, Bob Cratchit. The

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fact is, if Cratchit's skills were worth more to anyone than the fifteen shillings Scrooge pays him weekly, there would be someone glad to offer it to him. Since no one has, and since Cratchit's profit-maximizing boss is hardly a man to pay for nothing, Cratchit must be worth exactly his present wages.

Note the standard vulgar libertarian pose of defending existing wealth, on the assumption that this is a free market. Now where have we seen this before? "Wal-Mart *can't* be exploiting workers or competing unfairly against small retailers, because *the way a free market works* is blah blah blah blah..."

Now, mind, Dickens' setting is an England where the Combination Laws and Laws of Settlement are still fairly recent, and large-scale waves of enclosures are still a living memory for many. In the previous two centuries, a majority of English peasants had been robbed of copyholds, commons rights, and other customary forms of tenure, and transformed (by state violence in collusion with the owning classes) into a propertyless proletariat. Any worker in an overpopulated parish of London who attempted to vote with his feet and seek work in the underpopulated industrial districts of the north, without permission, was a criminal under the terms of the internal passport system known as the Laws of Settlement. But voluntary movement being prohibited, the parish Poor Law overseers were more than happy to auction off denizens of the poorhouses, by the gross, to factory owners in said underpopulated industrial districts. Voluntary association to bargain for higher wages, likewise, was criminalized by the Combination Law—enforced, not by juries, but by administrative law with none of the customary common law protections for the defendant.

To summarize: the vast majority of English had been robbed of their property, society forcibly reconstructed from above, and the working majority put under totalitarian social controls

by a plutocratic government, exactly as an occupying power would have done to a conquered population—all in order that they might be more easily exploited by the rich. The situation of the English working class during the Industrial Revolution, in other words, was slavery.

What next—a "free market" defense of wage rates in the Warsaw Ghetto?