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EDITORIAL

Reforms and Reforms

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“Dr. Parkhurst is a good man a good citizen,” remarked Mayor Strong recently, and then added after a moment’s hesitation: “but he is a good deal of a radical. I want to say that I am not opposed to radicalism, for I believe that it has brought about many of the reforms which have made the world better. The results were never reached by methods advocated by the radicals, though, not at the time of their advocacy.”

That Dr. Parkhurst’s proposed reforms will not be reached by the methods he advocates, is quite certain, and as far as that goes, the Mayor talks sense. When, however, he generalizes upon that, and says that reforms were never reached by the methods advocated by the radicals, nor at the time of their advocacy, the Mayor talks nonsense.

There are “reforms” and “reforms.”

One class of the changes called “reforms” are of a superficial nature, however estimable they may be. Such reforms do not contemplate any fundamental change. A three-story house may be reformed by raising it two stories higher, or a yellow house may be reformed by painting it green, and that could be done without any change in the original house or its fundamental plan. Similarly, there are political and social institutions that can be altered for the better without affecting the whole social structure. Such reforms have always been accomplished by the “reformers” both with the methods they advocated and at the time of their advocacy. For instance, the Vice-Presidents of the United States were at one time the Presidential candidates that came out second best; again, the tariff was found at one time to be too high, at another time too low; in both these instances a change was deemed advisable and it was carried out by those who advocated it, at the time that they did, and by the methods they adopted. Already in this the Mayor’s generalization is wrong.

There is, however, another class of “reforms”—“reforms” that go to the root of questions. In such cases it is not like putting an additional story to a house or changing its color, in such cases the “reforms” demanded imply the overthrowing of the house and the building of a new. Say, for instance, that a house whose foundations have been eaten up by rats, whose walls bulge and threaten to tumble down, and whose roof, by reason of the structural decrepitude of the house, lets in the water freely. In such a case, two different sets of reformers will spring up. Both are agreed that the house is leaky, both are agreed that the water should be kept out, both recognize the fact that the walls are shaky, but, the one knows that the cause of the trouble lies in the foundation, and consequently he addresses himself to the task of reform by advocating the pulling down of the rickety thing and building up of a new house upon solid ground while the other, ignorant of the cause of the leak, will propose to reform the house by tinkering its roof. If the latter is let alone, the chances are he will break his neck by the roof giving way and dropping him on the ground. But whether he is let alone or not, the reform he proposes—the stoppage of the leak—will never be reached by him or by his methods, or at the time he advocates them: his methods are false and he is intellectually disqualified to do the work. On the other hand, however, the reformer who starts with a knowledge of fundamental weakness of the house and advocates the stoppage of the leak by the building of a new structure will every time reach the reform he advocates, he will reach it by his methods, and he, or those who hold his views, will reach the reform at the time of its advocacy: his premises being correct, his methods are sound, and only he is intellectually qualified to do the work. So likewise in social and political reforms.

When the foundations of a social system are eaten up, social evils will spring up, and will be admitted to be such by all hands, but, just as in the above illustration, the reformers will be of two classes: one, ignorant of the facts, will imagine the evils complained of can be remedied by tinkering; the other, well posted, will listen to nothing short of revolution. In such cases it is only tinkering reformers who never reach their object; while the revolutionary reformers have every time reached theirs, substantially with the methods they proposed, and at the time they proposed them. It was so with the British bourgeois when he accomplished the first English revolution; it was so with the American patriots when they snapped the feudal bonds of British rule; it was so with the French bourgeois when they tore themselves loose from Bourbon feudalism; and it has been so in each {and} every instance where reform was not possible without revolution.

Now, then, what is the reform that Dr. Parkhurst wishes to accomplish? He wishes to stop prostitution, alcoholism and crime. Are these leaks in the modern social structure due to local or to structural defects? They are of structural origin. The capitalist social structure is like the house whose foundations are eaten up by rats, which consequently

cannot hold its walls straight, and which therefore must inevitably be affected with the leaks of prostitution and other evils. Does Dr. Parkhurst understand this? He does not. He is of the species of tinkering reformers. The Mayor, therefore, spoke sensibly when he implied that Dr. Parkhurst would never reach the reforms he aims at. But the Mayor spoke nonsense when he at the same time implied that the reforms arrived at by Dr. Parkhurst would not be reached by any one who is attacking them. The tinker Parkhurst will not, the scientific revolutionary movement of Socialism will—just the same as all other revolutionary movements have.

The Mayor's opinion upon this subject simply illustrates that is as superficial a bourgeois as he is illiterate.

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

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