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ARTICLE

FLASH-LIGHTS OF THE AMSTERDAM CONGRESS.

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IX.
THE GENERAL STRIKE.

THE adoption of the Dresden-Amsterdam Resolution was the one act of importance done by the Amsterdam Congress. All the others of the many subjects on the order of business were, as Bebel pronounced them, trifles (Nebensachen). Nevertheless, one of these trifles deserves special treatment. It is the "General Strike."

The strike is that question that, as much as any and more than so many others of the many sub-questions raised by the Labor Movement, incites dangerous lures. It is a topic so beset with lures that, on the one hand, it offers special opportunities to the demagogue and the "agent provocateur," while, on the other, it frequently threatens to throw the bona fide labor militant into dangerous proximity of thought with the out-and-out capitalist. Nothing short of calmest judgment can preserve the requisite balance of mind in the premises.

Whether great revolutions are considered in days when the battle field was the only court, the court of first and last resort, or whether they are considered since the days when the court of first resort has become the hustings,—at whatever period of social development great revolutions are considered, physical force has remained, down to the latest instance of recorded history, the final court where final judgment was finally pronounced. This circumstance has wrought a certain optical illusion in the popular mind; and the illusion{,} in turn, has reacted back and engendered at the opposite extreme what may be termed a peculiar mental malady. The optical illusion consists in presenting physical force—so prominent, because so

noisy, a factor in the settlement of great issues—as a creative power; the opposite, the mental malady, consists in what Marx has designated in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* as "Parliamentary Idiocy," meaning that abject fetich, reverence for "Law," a malady that "fetters whomsoever it infects to an imaginary world, and robs them of all sense, all remembrance, all understanding of the rude outside world." Neither physical force nor the ballot is a creative power. They are methods, successive methods, at that, of the real creative power. The four latest and leading events in modern and capitalist history are instances in point.

When capitalist interests had engendered in Great Britain a capitalist class, and this class felt hampered by the existing feudal institutions of the land, an inevitable social revolution designed itself upon the canvas of British history. The previous revolutions of the land resorted forthwith to physical force. Not this. The times had changed. The first field of encounter now was the hustings. There the preliminary battles were fought, and there the Revolution won. With the election of the Hampdens and the Pyms to the Parliament that bearded Charles I., Capitalism triumphed. That is true. But true also it is that the triumph was not final. The original court of first and last resort now became the court of ultimate appeal. Thither, to the court of physical force, the party aggrieved below took its case. Strokes thereupon arbitrated the issue. Physical force confirmed the verdict.

It was likewise with the subsequent Revolution in America. The issue at stake was to sunder or to confirm the feudal trammels to capitalist development. That issue was first taken to the hustings. Tory and Patriot candidates were the pleaders. The revolution won. With the election of the Continental Congress Capitalism triumphed; but, again, only in the court of first resort. Again the aggrieved party "appealed." The court of last resort entered final judgment at Yorktown. Not until then was the case settled.

It was likewise in France in the instance of what is known as the French Revolution, but which again was the revolution of Capitalism against Feudalism. The issue was fought out at the hustings. When the States General were returned elected with a bourgeois Third Estate triumphant over the noble and clerical candidates who contested the bourgeois seats, the Revolution obtained judgment in the lower court. French feudality "appealed," and the court of last resort confirmed

the judgment of the court below.

Finally in our own conflict over slavery, that navel-string of feudalism that still remained to be cut, the case was first conducted at the hustings. The election of Lincoln was the title of the verdict in the lower court; Appomattox was the title of the verdict with which the court of last resort finally settled the issue.

In all of these instances the ballot performed an essential, though not a complete mission; in all of them physical force filled an important, though not an all-sufficient role. Neither the "ballot" nor "physical force" was found to be enough. They were found to be supplemental to each other, but supplemental as methods only. The creative power lay in neither. It was found to lie back of both—in the pre-requisite work of Agitation, Education and Organization, three elements, which combined, imply clarification as to purpose, unity as to policy.

The strike spells "physical force." As such it is neither a creative power, nor yet, at the modern stage of civilization, the all-sufficient method that physical force once was. It is not even a first, at best it can only be a crowning method. The test applicable to the Strike—as a partial manifestation—is pre-eminently applicable to the Strike—as a general manifestation. The partial strike may be a skirmish, and skirmishes may be lost without the loss being fatal; the general strike—aimed at without regard to the principles established by modern experience as applicable to modern exigencies—is a general rout, and that is fatal. The advocates of the "General Strike" incur a double error: they keep in mind only the second court, wholly oblivious of the first; furthermore, they overlook the important fact that, not the Revolution, but the Reaction ever is the appellant in the second court, the initiator de facto of physical force. So long as a Revolution is not ripe enough to triumph in the court of first resort, it is barred from the second. The posture of the advocates of the "General Strike" is obviously archaic. On the other hand, succumbing to what Marx termed "Parliamentary Idiocy," there are those who totally reject the General Strike, their mental horizon is bounded by the ballot; as a rule they are people who see in the Trades Union only a temporary makeshift; they do not recognize in it the "reserve army" form of the Revolution that, ten to one, as taught us by modern history, will have to march upon the field of last resort, summoned thither by the Usurper, defeated in the court below.

The question of the General Strike was discussed only by and before what in the previous flash-light of this serial, "August Bebel," I termed the "rump Congress." The bulk of the delegates were at the great Committee on International Political Policy, or "doing the town." I heard only the fag end of the discussion, on Thursday afternoon, after the Committee on International Political Policy had concluded its labors. The S.L.P. gave its vote against the Allemanist proposition, which was cast in the mold designated above as "archaic," and voted with the majority for the Holland proposition, which, although not as precise, in some respects, as the proposition presented by the Socialist Party of France, was free from Allemanism and gathered the support of the bulk of the Congress. For the reasons stated above the discussion on the General Strike was spiritless at the Congress. Nevertheless, seeing that the principles which prevailed on the subject were those that found strongest expression at the national convention of the Socialist Party of France, held in Lille during the week just preceding the Amsterdam Congress, and that it was my privilege to assist at the Lille session from the beginning to the end, snatches of the discussion there are not out of place in this report—all the more seeing that almost all the delegates at Lille were also delegates at Amsterdam. The arguments of four of the speakers will be of special interest in America.

Lafargue used an illustration taken from America to clinch his point. "Who is it," he asked, "that has it in his power to bring about a general cessation of work? Is it the workingman or the capitalist? Look to America where these questions turn up on gigantic scales. When eight years ago Bryan threatened to be elected President, what was the confident threat made to the Working Class by the Trust magnates? It was this: 'If Bryan is elected we shall shut down!' Under present circumstances, it is the capitalist who has the power and may also have an interest in bringing about a general strike. The workingman can only be the loser."

Guesde made on the occasion two speeches. The second supplemented the first. It was an analytical review of the development of the notion of the General Strike. He traced its source to a resolution adopted by an old "radical" body in France. With much intellectual acumen he proved that the idea was born of and ever has been accompanied with that false conception of the Labor Movement that denied its

essentially political character.

Osmin, a delegate from Aube, summed up the attitude of the General Strike supporters, who seemed to be mainly Parisians, with a neat and satirical epigram. "Henry IV.," said he, "wishing to captivate Paris, the good will of the people of Paris, said: 'Paris is well worth a mass,' and he turned Catholic. It looks to me that there are people here, who, wishing to captivate the good will of some Parisian folks, hold that 'Paris is well worth a General Strike resolution'!"

Finally, a delegate from Paris, Chauvin, and one-time Socialist deputy in the Chambers, made a speech that, despite its being rendered in French, and despite the locality, made it difficult for me to keep in mind that I was in France, not in America; that the occasion was a convention of French Socialists, not of the Socialist Labor Party; and that the speaker was a member of the Socialist Party of France, not a member of my own Party. Chauvin's arguments were S.L.P. up to the hilt. Said he in substance: "The General Strike is an alluring notion. No doubt the chimera sticks in the heads of many a workingman. Quite possible it is even popular in the shops. What of it? Is that a reason for us to yield to delusion? Quite possible we may, if we did, ingratiate ourselves with workingmen, who now look upon us with disfavor, if not suspicion. But is 'Ingratiation' our mission? Is our mission not rather 'Education'? A policy of 'Ingratiation' looks to the immediate present at the sacrifice of the future. The policy of 'Education' looks to the important future athwart the thorny present. By echoing the errors of the masses of the working class we may ingratiate ourselves with them TO-DAY. But what of the MORROW, when bitter experience will have taught them that we were no wiser than they? Aye, when they will learn that all the while we knew better, and yet acted contrary to our own better knowledge? They will then execrate us; and we would deserve their execration. Not the echoing of our fellow wage slaves' errors is our task. Such a task is easy. Ours is the task of uprooting their errors. The more strongly rooted, all the more imperative is our duty to set our faces against such errors. That renders our task arduous (penible), you will say. Yes, arduous indeed, for the present; easy later on. The opposite policy, on the contrary, renders our task easy for the present—aye, so very easy!—but how about the future? The crop of thorns that we would thus have ourselves raised would tear our flesh to

pieces!"—Obviously Socialist theory and practice are the fruit of conditions. Similar conditions produce similar fruit. The thoughts of the militant Socialist are one wherever he be.

Chauvin is a hair-dresser by occupation. He is a man of middle age, nervy, spare, of comely features, modest and serious. His gestures, when he speaks, are American; they are well under control and emphatic. No howl against him intimidates the man: its only effect is to intensify the lines on his face. When his words arouse opposition, his favorite gesture is to stretch out his right arm with the palm of his hand out; and he proceeds unperturbed. When the day of reckoning comes, the French capitalist class will have to reckon with Chauvin.

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