

Spontaneity Again

1887

People :

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Text :

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We spoke last month of the overwhelming importance of spontaneity as an element in human existence, and of the necessity for meeting it with full recognition. Perhaps it seemed to some of our readers that such inquiries were of interest but to students and dreamers; too curious for the needs of common life.

Well, the Belgian Workman's Party left all such merely philosophical considerations out of their reckoning when their Executive Council decided that a general strike must be started "to order," at a time when the leaders should have made up their mind that all was ready. And so, when the spontaneous impulse came to the miners and metalworkers to free themselves this summer from their intolerable slavery, the leaders and wire-pullers of the Workman's Party, the politicians and cooperators, found nothing better to do than to preach peace and submission, and to throw cold water over the strike in the name of universal suffrage and cooperation, until for the time being they had effectually managed to swamp the revolutionary movement.

Here is what a special communication from some members of the party to the *Sozial Demokrat* has to say about it: "First we saw partial strikes. . . . They spread rapidly and seemed to gain cohesion. In the center the Anarchists took possession of the active part of the movement for several days, until certain of their orators, were arrested. Still the movement continued. It spread over the Liege basin. . . . Numerous indications of strikes were to be seen elsewhere, especially at Brussels. The Council of the Workman's Party continue with all their might against the movement. They seemed resolved to nip it in the bud, especially at Brussels and Ghent. . . . The chiefs of the party left the different trades to themselves, they gave them no word of encouragement."

In fact the organizers stifled the rising enthusiasm of what might have become

an important revolutionary outbreak on the plea--*our* machinery is not ready; and so the healthy impulse of revolt was wasted and lost, and the forces of reaction in Belgium have gained the confidence which is strength.

A little more than fifteen years ago the citizens of Paris were passing through a sharper crisis than our Belgian comrades. It was the first week after the Commune had been proclaimed by the spontaneous action of the people. The bourgeois world had lost its head. It was paralyzed by that helpless confusion among the authorities which always follows a sudden outbreak of energetic revolutionary action. The impulse of the people was to march at once upon the disorganized army and terrified government at Versailles. "But wait," insisted certain well-meaning leaders, "we must first elect a popular government in due democratic form."

And "Paris sent her devoted sons to the Hotel de Ville. There disbanded from active service, up to the eyes in musty parchments forced to govern when their instincts impelled them to be and act with the people; forced to discuss when it was time to do, and losing the inspiration that comes from continual contact with the masses, they saw themselves reduced to impotence. Paralyzed by their distance from the well-spring of revolution, the people, they themselves paralyzed the popular initiative" ('Les Paroles d'un Revolte). And so the general enthusiasm died down, and the Commune was lost.

But it is not in grave social crises only that the spontaneous outleap of energy is the all-important factor of effectual action. It is the same in everyday conduct and everyday relations. Ask a man who has labored to keep together a political club worthy the name in a district where people have learned from bitter experience that parliamentary talk is no benefit to the workers, and where as yet they are not ardently inspired by the idea of Socialism. Such a man will tell you that, for all his pains, he has been whipping a dead donkey along the road. And yet whilst the hope was fresh in men's hearts that the ballot-box could bring them deliverance from their misery, there was no lack of cohesion and energy in the political clubs with which England was honeycombed. Any shed or garret was attractive enough then for a meeting-place wherein to exchange eager thoughts and plan common action; whereas now, in localities where the old idea is dead, men can only be drawn into sham fellowship by an endless round of amusements.

We might multiply instances in social and individual life by the thousand to

illustrate a fact which, once recognized seems self-evident, yet a fact more persistently ignored than any other of equal importance. But perhaps enough has been said to show why we--and especially those of us who are awakening to the inevitable necessity of great social changes--must, on reflection, come to consciously realize the enormous influence of spontaneity in human life, whether it be for good or ill. Next month we will return to the subject.

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