

WHAT OF THE PROPOSED CONGRESS.

By GEORGE D. HERRON

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1.

Wonderful as it was, impressing the world and uplifting the socialist movement, the Basel Congress was a lamentable failure in foresight and efficiency. It generated a high state of mind, but provided no practical program or machinery whereby that mental exaltation could effectuate itself in national and international action. We did well to declare war upon war; but we should have done vastly better had we organized a definite and aggressive campaign to follow the declaration; and we did badly to create the expectation that we meant to move against militarism, and then betray that expectation by providing no method by which we might fulfill it. And, be it remembered, the determined opponents of any resolute or formulated plan of fulfillment were the German socialists.

If the congress which the American socialists have called really assembles, it must not end with the mere speaking of brave words. It must evolve a plan of national and international action against war. Furthermore, it must evolve the machinery

and efficiency to put the plan into execution. It must resolve that never again, while there is a socialist movement in being, or a socialist left alive, shall the earth be drenched with the blood of its workers; that never again shall evil capitalist and governmental powers hold such festival of death as they are now holding upon the plains of Flanders and by the rivers of France; that never again shall the diplomats and the generals drive mankind back into its primal beasthood, and undo the best the sorrowful centuries have wrought. The socialist movement had it in its power to prevent the present universal disintegration: it failed. It may again have it in its power to command the nations: it must not again fail. To avert another failure, and to enable mankind to take a long onward leap, must this congress combine moral candor with efficient action in preparing for the future.

One of the first things that should be agreed upon is this: that whenever a nation begins an aggressive war, the socialists of that nation, if their numbers are at all considerable, shall declare a general strike; shall see to it, so far as in them lies, and at the cost of their lives if need be, that not a wheel moves within a factory or beneath a train until the declaration of war is withdrawn. And it should also be settled that the workers of neighboring nations, if not of the world, should join in the strike, so as to compel their respective governments to bring pressure to bear upon the government making the aggression.

Now there are those who will say that it is difficult to decide when a war is one of aggression or of defence. But they who so speak are dwelling amidst evasions. They are befogged, all too willingly, by the sophistry in which German socialist defenders have indulged since their kaiser flung this raging hell upon the world. The German apologists claim that they are fighting a defensive war against Russia. They are deceiving neither themselves nor their comrades in other nations by the shameful subterfuge. No nation is justified in beginning an aggressive war against another upon the ground that the nation so attacked will become the aggressor if it is not forcibly suppressed. Besides, in the case of Germany and Russia, the explanation is untrue. It was Germany, not Russia, that declared the war. The German socialists perfectly well know that Russia never intended to make war upon Germany. They know, on the contrary, Germany has long meant to make war upon Russia. She has indulged in yearly threats against her Slav neighbor, striving to drive her into war by a process of diplomatic bullying. The extraordinary war-tax raised by the kaiser and his chancellor, a few months ago, was justified by the chancellor, when speaking before the Reichstag, on the ground that Germany must soon engage in a life-and-death struggle with the Slav. It is Germany, and Germany alone, that has been the aggressor. She has steadfastly planned to eliminate Russia from the Balkans, to establish herself at Constantinople and Salonika, and then go on to

the Persian Gulf. All this the German socialists know. And they also know they are making Russia a mere excuse for their own apostasy. And what I say is not to excuse czarism, and the Russian tyranny: it is to accuse kaiserism, and the much more menacing march of the Prussian idea.

Then the question of the relation of the international socialist movement to the peace that shall finally be concluded, amidst the exhaustion and ashes of the world, must be thoroughly discussed and planned at the American congress. We should gather all our resources, moral and political and industrial, into the effort of enforcing the will of the workers upon the political peace-makers, whenever and wherever the peace-makers shall assemble. We should insist upon universal disarmament. We socialists can compel this, if we have the will and the organization wherewith to do it. It is not a question of acquiring more power; it is a question of the will to organize and exercise the power we already have. We should go to the point of saying that no work shall be done in the nations that refuse to disarm. The masters will then say to the workers: "You will starve." And the workers should then say to the masters: "You, also, will starve." And the masters will surrender. There is a point beyond which their governments will not go, if once they discover the workers have determined upon a course of revolutionary action from which they will not swerve. The Italian king and his foreign minister were bent on marching Italy beside Austria and Germany. The socialist

party made it clear that not a train should move, nor a soldier march, nor a king reign in Italy, if the government attempted its program. With like resolution, must international socialism put itself in a position to let the nations choose between universal disarmament and a universal cessation of work. The movement must have in it the moral force that will make men willing to die for the world's redemption from war, and from all the other evils of a capitalist industry and a merely political society.

II.

If the proposed congress meets, and if there is to be any virtue in its proceedings, the conduct of the German socialists will have to be candidly and unflinchingly discussed. We are not only in the midst of a day of judgment in the world; we are not only witnesses of a war which may yet result, through famine and pestilence as well as battle, in the extinction of a fourth or a third of the human race; we stand not only in the beginnings of a universal tragedy, a racial travail, that may issue in a new human beginning—in man's reversion to the beast or in his ascension to an immeasurably higher plane of motivity and association; we are also, as socialists, witnesses of another tragedy, the consequences of which are beyond calculation. We are face to face with the moral failure of the largest socialist party among

the nations. We stand appalled and bewildered by the German betrayal of the international socialist movement, and many are looking with disgust and despair upon the unworthiness and puerility of the apologies put forward on the treason's behalf. We must face and acknowledge the stark facts of the German conduct, or else the socialist movement, as we understand it, has run its course. If we hark to the German apologists; if we listen to plausible explanations; if we compromise with expediences at this hour; if we try to save the face of socialism by evading the issue thrust upon us; then just so surely is the international socialist movement on the road to extinction; and just so surely will it deserve the doom. The time has come to prove whether our movement can produce men; and the action of the proposed congress will decide this, and also decide whether we are worthy of our cause and its fathers. It is impossible to exaggerate the importance of what we now do and say, of what we now decide, both about what the German party has done and about what the socialist movement shall hereafter do. We shall prove whether or not there is a manhood in the world equal to the opportunity that now presents itself. We shall demonstrate whether or not the centuries shall have labored and suffered in vain. We shall decide if mankind must begin another cycle of blind evolution and slavery, having again been unequal to its opportunity.

III.

History has never afforded to a large body of men so great an opportunity as that which the German social democracy has just thrown away. The responsibility for the catastrophe that has come upon the world rests with the German socialist leaders as well as with the kaiser and the Prussian military caste. They have known that Germany was preparing to dominate the world; they have known the pressure and the poison of the Prussian idea; and they could have prepared against this evil day. German socialists could have prevented the war, if they had had the will to act. Their failure is not due to their lack of power, but to a lack of that moral force which is essential to the accomplishment of any great purpose or revolution. The failure is due to their taking counsel of their fears; to their following expediency rather than principle. They could have stopped every wheel in Germany, if they had decided so to do, and had been willing to pay the price. They could have made it impossible for the government to amass its armies along the French or the Russian frontiers. Some of the leaders would have been shot; some would have been imprisoned; but the kaiser could scarcely have slain or imprisoned five millions of his subjects. And those who so died would have died fruitfully, and would have glorified socialism in the eyes of mankind.

Or, if the German party had not the courage to act, it could at least have refrained from voting

the supplies for war ; it could at least have condemned the action of the government. Instead of this, it has failed both positively and negatively. It has bewildered and paralysed the international movement. It has done its best to make the socialist body a despicable thing in the eyes of men. And if the action of German socialists is a revelation of the moral quality of the socialist movement, then the world would be right in despising the whole of us forever. And the international movement can only redeem itself in the eyes of the world, and in its own eyes as well, by absolutely condemning the course the German party has taken. We must declare to the world that the German failure is not a failure of socialism, but a failure due to the lack of socialist faith and principle. It was the failure of a nominally socialist movement to be true to the thing it professed.

If the German social democracy had been weak in numbers ; if it had been as weak, in proportion to the population, as is the British socialist party, or the socialist party of the United States ; then it might wisely have held back from action, on the ground of uselessly sacrificing the lives of its members. But the German party was in no such position. It was the strongest party in the empire. It has justified the declaration of Hillaire Belloc and other critics to the effect that German social democracy means nothing but votes ; that it does not at all mean socialism. It has justified the fears of Bebel, more than once expressed to friends, that German socialism could not really

be depended upon if put to the test. It has been put to the test, and its failure is one to make the stars weep.

Nor can the German party point to Belgium and France. To do so is the veriest hypocrisy. The socialists of Belgium and France are indeed fighting a war of defence. And they are fighting in defence of socialism, as well as in defence of their nationalities. The triumph of Prussia in France and Flanders means not merely the extinction of the two nations, but the practical extinction of democracy and of socialist effort for at least a generation. And they are even fighting for German socialism the battle for its own existence—the battle it was too cowardly to fight for itself. For with the triumph of the Prussian idea, even the German semblance of socialism comes to end. Besides, and worse than all, it is the failure of German socialism that is one source of this most wanton war of historic times. German socialists have boasted that a third or even a half of the army belong to their party. What kind of socialists are these who march—not like sheep but like whipped and herded hyenas—against their unoffending and out-numbered Belgian fellow-workers, spreading rapine and desolation through that brave little kingdom, committing crimes that would have shamed Philip II and Napoleon? Upon what kind of moral and political food have these German socialists been reared by their party teachers? God save the rest of the socialist world from more of such nourishment!

It is no answer to say that if the socialists of other nations had been in the same situation, they would have acted as the German socialists have done. If so, then there is no hope for mankind in the socialist movement. If we are all cowards and serfs, in spite of our loud talk about revolution, then the socialist movement has no health in it. It is woven of the wrong moral stuff, woof and warp. If the conduct of the German socialists is the highest standard of practice the international movement has achieved, then we are no better than a lot of galley slaves; we are in the last stages of our decadence, only fit to be trodden under the feet of men; the Communist Manifesto becomes a blasphemy on our lips, and the very stones of the Paris barricades should rise up in judgment against us.

But I do not believe, not for a moment, that international socialism will submit to the shame the German party has put upon it. We are not as ignoble, our leaders are not as shuffling and servile, as German conduct and apologists would make us seem. We should utterly deny that Germany represents us. We should everywhere affirm that the German socialists have betrayed the socialist cause and comrades of the nations. And I would stake my life upon the assertion that there is one man who would agree with my position, were he standing among us to-day; and that man is August Bebel.

My feeling may seem to be bitter indeed, and may be important to no one but myself. But I speak

against all my personal predilections. I have dear friends in German universities; I like Germany and I do not like France; and I am certain that the next great human contribution will come from the Germans—if they are saved from themselves, from the Prussian idea; some of my best days have been spent among German peoples; yet I feel that the German socialist party has committed a treason the like of which is not to be found in history. The German leaders have given socialism a blow from which it will not soon recover. They have done their best to degrade it in motive and action, and they have disgraced it for years to come. And the only way by which the international movement can redeem itself is by boldly facing the fact of the German treason, and thence visiting judgment upon it. There is only one condition on which we should be willing to see the German party back in the international fold, and that is as a humble penitent, deeply and honestly confessing its apostasy, and bringing forth works meet for repentance.

Nor can the treason be nullified by some future action German socialists may take. If there should be a collapse of the Hohenzollern dynasty and the Prussian system, it may be that German social democracy will then precipitate some sort of revolution, when it can do so expediently and with safety to its leaders. The republic or commonwealth thus established, however, will be nothing but a bureaucratic tyranny, masquerading under the name of socialism. It will have little more of

freedom and moral health than the Prussian system it has supplanted. In no true sense will it be Socialism. Or even if, in the desperate misery of the splendid yet deceived German people, after a long war, the German socialists should really act with decision and self-sacrifice, I should be the first to hail and glorify their action; but not on the ground that it proves the wisdom or courage of their present course. It would be a repentance and a redemption, but in no wise would it be a denial of their recent treason and the universal damage that treason has wrought to the cause of labor and democracy.

IV.

A first result of the discussion, and no small one at that, will be the enfranchisement of the international socialist movement. German social democracy and the socialists of the rest of the world will have changed places. The international movement will at last be delivered from the paralysis which German socialism has so long laid upon it. The German spell is broken. We shall no longer go to each international congress humbly beseeching the Germans to tell us what to do. We shall waken from the huge German delusion—the delusion that the five million men who vote for the candidates of the German social democracy are, in any real sense, socialists. There is in Germany a vast political party whose hierarchy befools the world with its phraseology, and which

imposes its hegemony upon the international movement. But this German social democracy has about as much to do with either socialism or democracy as Christianity has to do with Christ, or as the Hohenzollern statues of the Tiergarten have to do with art. It is now the German socialists who shall stand before the seat of judgment, and the international movement shall sit thereon. No longer shall the socialists of the nations give account of themselves to Berlin, but Berlin shall give account to a regenerate and emancipated socialism. For this deliverance from German authority we shall give thanks and take courage. And thus and then shall the socialist movement prepare for the freer and braver future that, beyond the present shattered and burning world, beckons us to the building of a new world, wherein capitalists and kings, diplomats and soldiers, have no place, but only workers and brothers. And there shall be no socialist popes and dialecticians there, but only the free and fraternal sons of a truly socialized and unified humanity.

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