

ARTICLE

NATIONALISM.

Aspirations That Gave It Birth And Forces That Give It Strength.

By Daniel De Leon

On occasions when important events of the past are commemorated, a review of the conditions and incidents of the present is of interest. It serves to show whether progress has been made, or retrogression set in; it points the trend of evolution; it indicates the course of history; in a word it forms a base upon which to strike a balance sheet, so to speak, and ascertain where we are.

Among the incidents of the day, one of the most important, if not absolutely the most important, is the appearance of the Nationalist movement and its rapid, steady strides.

No Socialist is not, or should fail to be, an evolutionist. Movements do not grow in the sense that *Topsy* did. Their slight tendrils shoot forth from the propitious soil, and are, according to the continued and increasing propitiousness of surrounding circumstances, nurtured, developed, and finally caused to blossom forth with vigor. That the general principles underlying that philosophy which is to-day generally known as *Socialism*, have, at an early day, vaguely manifested themselves in this country, the study of our own history shows and daily brings forth into clearer light. True, it were idle to seek for the socialist principle, expressed in as many words, in the writings of the revolutionary fathers; and much of the justification for some of the modern whims (notably that most whimsical of whims ycelpt *Anarchy*), pretended to be found in those sources is but a contortion of the text, similar at all points to the forced interpretations of biblical passages which wrangling priests love to hurl at one another's head. Nevertheless, the radical tendency and aspirations of the men who rocked the cradle of the country could not fail to lead them into expressions that justified keen observers of events to prognosticate, as did Alison in England, that the rebellion in America and its successful accomplishment

. . . Would in time gain upon privilege,
And throw out greater themes for insurrection's
arguing.

In what direction rebellion was to gain upon privilege, and what exactly were to be the themes thrown out for insurrection's arguing, the line of evolution was evidently to determine for itself. Accordingly, soon as the laws that govern capitalist production had had an opportunity to reveal their effects, and cause it to be begun to be felt that those effects were none else than the destruction of all that was precious in the individual, the first protests began to be heard in the land; and from that day to this, Professor Hadley's complacent diagnosis to the contrary notwithstanding, have continued to be muttered with ever increasing volume until those mutterings have now finally assumed the character of distinct, articulate sounds portending organized, intelligent action—*i.e.* ADEQUATE REFORM, or be it SUCCESSFUL REVOLUTION.

It is not necessary to go into the details of the various manifestations of socialist philosophy that, stimulated by the surrounding conditions, have one after another appeared on the surface, then seemed to disappear, and again reappeared with increased force. We know of the movement, in this city, of 1825; of that in the central part of the state from fifteen years later; of the New England uprising in 1845, turned temporarily aside by the abolition movement; of the *New Democracy* agitation again in this city in 1865, by veterans of the war whose Socialistic spirit and words are preserved in their declaration of principles; of the Greenback agitation; and of the short-lived Anti-monopoly and Granger conflicts. These all, one by one, came up, did their work of education, and withdrew.

In the meantime, fostered and favored, mustered and incited by the economic conditions, as well as enlightened by the discussion during the previous movements, the Labor or Social question was steadily shaping himself. As a matter of course, it at first recruited its forces exclusively from the ranks of the manual workers. Crowded down by the competitive struggle for existence, they occupied and occupy to-day the lowest wrung of the social ladder, and the pressure from the ranks above being heaviest on them compelled resistance by them first of all. But the capitalist policy or system of production carries, like the scorpion, the means of its own destruction in its womb. Being but a period of transition, the law of its existence is motion, a motion that gathers velocity as it rushes onward; and since that motion brings with it the gorging and congestion of wealth at one extremity, which ever diminishes in numbers, the other extremity must of necessity become more and more pinched and squeezed, and must grow apace in numbers and in quality until it takes in the masses of the people. Thus the resistance first made by the worst paid manual laborers is

successively taken up by the better paid ones, then by those in closest relation to them, then by the social layers that lie above these and so on. The fact of all and each of these being engaged, in fact, in the same struggle does not at first dawn upon all and establish the needed solidarity between them. But a conflict by diverse forces against one common enemy cannot be long waged without drawing those forces insensibly together, removing by degrees the mutual suspicions, that at first arise among them, and finally welding them into one solid mass, animated by one principle, aiming at one and the same end. As soon as that takes place the philosophic line of demarcation between the contending elements is sharply drawn; the class that lives upon profits, *i.e.* upon the labor of others, and the class that draws no revenues from profits, *i.e.* that lives from its own labor, are brought face to face. From that moment confusion in the reform ranks is at end, and the onward course is clear.

This important stage in the labor or social question in this country is marked by the advent of Nationalism. The latent radical thought in the country was conjured up by Edward Bellamy's great work *Looking Backward*, a work which, leaving aside its literary parts and many immaterial incidents of its composition, condenses and asserts all the cardinal principles of the most advanced economic thinkers. As soon as the work appeared the thought of putting in practice its main ideas was taken up in New England.

Men of Puritan origin now found their unconscious thoughts expressed in fervid language and to the number of not more than 25, on ground that is classic in American history, they founded on December 19, 1888, the first club of a new party, whose name, NATIONALISM, was chosen by them to typify the fact that today we are only a mob of warring individuals whose interests are hostile one to the other; while the establishment of the social system such as we are ripe for, and in which the land and the instruments of production should be held by the organized people and not by individuals for competitive strife, would transform us from mutual enemies into citizens; from a wild mob, into a Nation. The founders of the Boston club soon had opportunity to realize that they had rightly judged the people. From Washington, New York, Chicago and San Francisco the response came, swift and strong. In May, 1889, five months after the inauguration of the first Boston club, 15 clubs were in existence in 6 different States. Two months later there were 24 clubs in 9 different States; and, steadily growing, it numbers to-day 79 clubs, distributed over 19 States: New York, California, Connecticut, Iowa, Massachusetts, Pennsylvania, Ohio, Illinois, Michigan, Wisconsin, Tennessee, Colorado, Washington, South Dakota, Missouri, Oregon, New Hampshire, Minnesota and the District of Columbia.

Nor is this all the Nationalist movement can record. The phenomenal rate at which

Looking Backward continues to be demanded is spreading through the breadth and length of the land the ideas it contains, and the seed is falling on fertile ground; the rudiments of a hundred additional clubs are already started. Here in New York city alone and contiguous Brooklyn 10 clubs are in operation. The aggregate enrolled membership of all the clubs is close to 10,000, among whom all ranks of labor are represented. The movement supports over 6 magazines and journals. And what the stimulus to thought of the Nationalist movement is may furthermore be judged from the recent appearance of a second work of fiction, *Speaking of Ellen*, from the pen of the most famous of our writers next to Bellamy himself, a work whose expressed purpose it is to inculcate the immorality of the Capitalist, the nobleness of the Nationalist idea.

With so short a history behind it the Nationalist movement cannot yet be expected to be more than an educational one, and its clubs throughout the country are as yet but centers of economic discussions mainly, or nurseries for the men and women who at the proper time shall go forth to address larger audiences for political and immediate action. In so far, its work is preparatory only; it is a labor of drilling and of propaganda. But that this period will be speedily passed and the period of action, of independent political action, is at hand, the growth of the movement makes manifest, and the inclination of its members renders inevitable. To this end, however, a more concrete platform is needed. As soon as a good majority of States can be represented at a national conference, the first Nationalist Conference of the Union will be called together; and from that moment it will cast off the hull of a propaganda party and become a factor in the political struggles of the land—a factor of irresistible power.

That this prophecy is not risky, none who diligently watch the signs of the times, and give them that interpretation which American history warrants, could safely gainsay. "Looking backward," the tide of progress has not receded; on the contrary, its swell is rising in the majestic proportions that the issue demands.

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

Uploaded August 2003