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EDITORIAL

Retrospect and Prospect

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We have again and again pointed to the fact that the “pure and simple” trade union is an unnatural and vicious growth in America; that the thing was logical enough in England, where the worker was deprived of the weapon of the ballot for his defense, but that here in America, where he holds that powerful weapon, to establish a “pure and simple” labor organization, armed with only the old-style blunderbuss of the strike and the boycott, and depriving it of the force of united political action, is not only criminal, but unnatural; and we have also shown that the birth of old trade unionism, or “pure and simpledom,” in America is a stupid aping in America, where the thing is not needed, of a thing that was made necessary in England—very much like the stupid digging of canals by the Dutchmen wherever they went, simply because in Holland canals were a necessity.

The American historian, Charles Carleton Coffin, mentions an incident in the history of New York State that furnishes another parallel on this subject that may serve both as retrospect and prospect.

He says:

“The water spouts (on the roofs of the houses of the Dutch farmers in New York State) projected far beyond the stoop. The houses of their ancestors in Holland were built with such spouts to carry the rain into the canals, and the settlers constructed theirs after the same pattern, although there were no canals to receive the water.”

And, further on, reverting to the same subject, he proceeds:

“A Yankee moved into Albany in 1789. In a few years enough had joined him to elect one of their number Mayor. They passed an ordinance that no eave spout should project into the street. The Yankee sheriff came with

ladder and saw to cut them off. The Dutch women ran out with their brooms to give him battle. They scolded in Dutch and shook their brooms at him, but he made short work of the spouts. It was the going out of the old, the coming in of a new, order of things among the Knickerbockers.”

We have here a striking historic parallel. In Holland, the canals being part of the streets, the water spouts could conveniently project far beyond the houses; thereby the streets were kept free from the rainwater that fell on the houses, and pedestrians profited. To extend the water spouts far beyond the houses where there was no canal to take the water, and where the streams from the spouts could only add to the discomfort of pedestrians was, however, to be guilty of a bit of superstition, and the Dutch settlers in New York succumbed to it. The case was identical with “pure and simple” trade unionism. In England, its birthplace, it was beneficial, like far-projecting water spouts in Holland; but, just like far-projecting water spouts in America, where canals are rare, the British architecture of the labor movement could, as it did, do naught but substantial injury to the working classes here; it drew attention away from the road that was to be pursued, and nailed the workers to a policy that could bring no lastingly good results and that was to do positive injury in the long run through the demoralization that the ultimate failures were certain to bring on. The transplanting of the “pure and simple” union to America was a bit of superstition to which the British immigrant trade unionist succumbed here, at all points parallel with that of the Dutch.

But the parallel, fortunately, does not end there. A race, free and untrammled, with traditions as to how to build water spouts, finally got the upper hand with us; the far-projecting water spout nuisances were condemned; and, despite the scolding of old women and their broomstick threats, done went the old-style water spouts. Exactly the same thing is now going on in the matter of the old-style, or “pure and simple,” trade union. The free, intelligent spirit of the country has turned its attention to the old relic; unfettered by any traditions derived from other countries, the working class of America is decrying the absurdity of “pure and simpledom” here; it is condemning the thing more and more day by day; and, as it proceeds to saw off the old nuisance and rear the New Trade Union organization, it is assailed, just as the executioners of the Dutch water spouts were in their time, by the old women of all sexes, who, with their silly, we may say, “broomstick,” arguments, imagine that their foolish scolding can save their mischievous hobby.

Just the same as the old Dutch water spouts had to go in New York, so will the British “pure and simple” trade union go. Enlightenment will not put up with hollow tradition; experience will not tolerate superstitions.

A De Leon editorial transcribed and edited by Robert Bills for the Official Web site of the Socialist Labor Party of America.

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