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EDITORIAL

What a Continental War With England Portends

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The Transvaal incident has set agoing the penny-a-liners and penny-a-thinkers in the “intellectual” world of capitalism. With characteristic levity they are speculating upon the effect a continental war with England will have upon the map of the world. The Socialist cares naught for that; he looks below the surface and sounds the deeps. So doing he finds that a European war, especially one born of rival colonial interests, will be of far-reaching significance for the labor movement, above all in England.

We have repeatedly commented upon the leading contrasts between the “Pure and Simple” trade union in America and its parent, the “Pure and Simple” trade union in England; how in England the “Pure and Simple” trade unionist leader remained substantially pure, while here he has, as a rule, become corrupt; how the English “Pure and Simple” organization is still somewhat able to check capitalist aggression, while here such organizations have shrunk to the level of sick and death benefit associations, utterly impotent to resist capital whenever it is concentrated. In all such instances we have dwelt mainly upon the first of these contrasts, and shown how the purity of the British trade union officer is due to the fact that the British workingman was long and still continues virtually disfranchised, while here the suffrage held by the workers served to debauch them, owing to the ignorance of their officers. The prospect of a European war suggests the changes which explain the second contrast, to wit, the power, however slight, still enjoyed by the English organizations and long fled from the American.

England had the start of all European nations on the road to and of capitalism; the immediate effect thereof was, as Thorold Rogers points out, to degrade her workers to a condition never known before or after. But her capacity, owing to her insular position, to extend her markets by means of the floating pieces of her territory called ships—men-of-war and merchantmen—furnished her with an outlet for her goods that no nation has ever enjoyed. In that way the demand for her merchandise was virtually

unlimited. A large demand for goods brought on a large demand for hands; a large demand for hands is the hoop that holds together the staves of the trade union barrel. Other subsidiary causes, born of England's deprivations abroad, increased at home the demand for hands: British piracy set up colonies; these drew people from the mother country in the shape of colonists; such English emigration tapped the home labor market; and, with a relative decrease of hands at home, the trade union hoop was strengthened. The steadily increasing outlets for British goods, together with a steady outflow of British workers furnished the conditions under which purely industrial organizations can hold their own. These forces that made for the union did not, however, continue unchecked. On the one hand, steadily perfecting machinery reduced the demand for hands, on the other the acquisition of colonies by other European countries limited the outlets for British goods. In our own generation, the gradual effect of these two forces has been noticed upon England, and the hoops of the British trade union barrel grew perceptibly less powerful; the union's efficacy began to decline. A European war on the issue raised by Dr. Jameson's raid on Transvaal will infinitely hasten the downward course of the "Pure and Simple" labor organization in England. What are now colonies of England, may become free, other powers will appropriate big slices of the British commercial preserves, and the monopoly of sale, enjoyed by England until now, will inevitably be crippled, with the ultimate result that hoops of the British conservative trade union barrel will become as impotent to hold its staves as they have become here.

The strictly industrial trade union of the British stamp is a bulwark of capitalism. Though sprung originally of the class instinct of the proletariat in the struggle against the capitalists, it has as a matter of fact become petrified, lost all class consciousness, and grown as wedded to the existing system as the middle class. Just as the middle class clings to its paltry havings, and its aspirations do not rise above petty profits, the "Pure and Simple" trade union clings to its paltry treasury, and its aspirations do not rise above petty questions. To preserve the one and the other should be the aim of capitalism. But capitalism, as all other forces, is driven by laws it cannot control. A law of capitalism is to break itself down. By the destruction of the middle class and the scuttling of the "Pure and Simple" union, it kindles the spark of and extends the area of revolution.

The times are big with great events.

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

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