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FLASH-LIGHTS OF THE AMSTERDAM CONGRESS.

[Rather than try to give a condensed report of the Amsterdam Congress and what I saw of the European Movement in general, I shall present a series of articles under the above general head, subdivided under special heads. This flash-light method will be on the whole better. It will deal in detail with persons and things; and the flash-lights will, in the end, be seen to run into one another and portray the scene more effectively.—DANIEL DE LEON.]

II. AUGUST BEBEL.

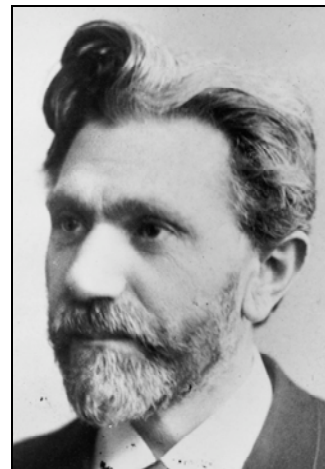
BY all odds, the most conspicuous—though not, as will appear in the course of this serial, the most important or pregnant—figure in the European movement of to-day is Bebel. The three million and odd votes polled by the German Social Democracy, of which Bebel is the unquestioned head, furnish no mean a pedestal for the statue that tops it. Even a small statue will tower up high when standing upon a tall enough basis. Much more so Bebel, who is no manikin, but a characterful man, a man of earnest purpose, exalted aims and great ability.

In “The Review of the Dresden Congress,” published in these columns in January of this year,¹ I had occasion to take the parallax of this distinguished man on his own, the German firmament, in juxtaposition with other luminaries of his own party. At the Amsterdam International Congress occasion was offered for observation of the man upon the broader firmament of the whole European movement.

Those who have read “The Review of the Dresden Congress” will understand

¹ [See “The Dresden Congress,” *Daily People*, Jan. 3, 1904.]

me readily; those who have not are referred to the said article, into the details of which I cannot here enter. The former I remind of the local situation of Germany. The Social Democratic movement of Germany is, as Lafargue, using continental-parliamentary idiom, recently termed it at Lille, a “party of opposition.” Seeing that that which it opposes, or confronts, is, not capitalism in its purity, but feudalism soused with capitalism—as surviving feudal institutions are bound to be at this late date—the party of Bebel has by the force of circumstances been constrained



AUGUST BEBEL (1840–1913)

to take the leadership and become the embodiment of radical bourgeois reforms. The task which circumstances thus rolled upon its shoulders is of present first magnitude. It is of first magnitude to Germany; and, seeing that Germany therein embodies the radical aspirations of the bulk of the semi-feudal continent, the German Social Democracy is actually pivotal for the whole European continent—France excepted, who is ahead of them all. None better realizes the huge responsibility of the German Social Democracy than Bebel, and, consequently, the tremendous weight upon his own shoulders, as the party’s head. The result of this manifests itself in Bebel in two ways—one a vice, the other a virtue.

The vice, quite a pardonable one under the circumstances, is the superstition that German conditions should set the pace for the whole world. Such, oddly enough, is man’s human, infirm make-up that, in the end, we contract a kind of latent, unconscious affection for that which we have long struggled against. The close grappling with a foe seems to impart to us some kindred feeling for him. It seems that the physical proximity of heart to heart in the wrestle establishes some degree of community between the two. The Lacedemonian maxim not to carry the pursuit of a foe beyond certain bounds may be the fruit of deep philosophic insight into this human failing. As certain as effect follows cause, the vice of excessive or nativistic love leads, first, to indifference to proper information regarding other countries, and ultimately to a cultivated ignorance regarding them,—a serious draw-back in a Socialist leader. Those who have read my translation of the recent thirty-third edition of Bebel’s *Woman Under Socialism* will remember a number of

foot-notes that I felt constrained to insert in correction of bizarre misstatements of fact on America. True enough, the misstatements of fact are irrelevant to the main question—Woman. On that question the work is a tactical effort of genius, an unerring shot at bourgeois society. Nevertheless, such errors of neglected information reveal serious weakness. Man studies the anatomy of even the dog in order the better to understand his own. Can the Socialist leader of a country, so far behind America as is Germany in both political and economic capitalist development, neglect to inform himself accurately on the political and economic anatomy of America without eventual injury to his own effectiveness at home? Manifestations of Bebel's vice cropped out here and there at the Amsterdam Congress.

The virtue that Bebel's deep sense of responsibility has developed in the man is his marked impatience with what, at the risk of seeming trivial, I can best express as "tomfoolery." Every line in the man's face means WORK—work to the point, no use for filigree, or twaddle. I recall two instances thereof. Of course, they occurred during the protracted sessions of the great committee on International Political Policy.

The first took place at the afternoon sessions of the second and third days. The committee had gone into session on the afternoon of Monday, that is of the second day of the Congress, and the Congress had been adjourned that morning to the next day, Tuesday, afternoon. This and the other committees were to do their work in the interval. This particular committee, however, had hardly begun its sessions when it became probable that its work could not be done in so short a time. The fact became obvious at the committee's session of Tuesday forenoon. It was thereupon decided to recommend to the Congress in the afternoon that it adjourn for the day. This was done. At the committee's session of Tuesday afternoon the turn of affairs clearly indicated that there were several days' work before it. What to do? Again ask the Congress to adjourn? Or should the Congress be allowed to go into session while this committee was absent? Objections were raised to the latter proposition; the objectors wanted the committee to adjourn. While this committee was in session, their argument ran, it drew to its lobby a large portion of the Congress; the meetings of the Congress would be slimly attended; and then there were important

matters that would otherwise be left to a rump; there was, for instance, the “Immigration Resolution,” the “India Resolution”—Bebel’s patience gave way. “Nonsense!” he broke in with, “Trifles! All trifles! A rump can attend to all that! This here is the real issue!” and so forth. Bebel was certainly right. Those who sided with him prevailed. Wednesday and Thursday the rump Congress held its sessions and revelled in trifles. But the bother with the triflers and lovers of tomfoolery was not yet over. In the course of the committee’s Wednesday afternoon’s session, Mr. Morris Hilquit, the delegate of the Socialist, or Social Democratic party of America, came in with a washed-out dejected countenance. He had been appointed by the Bureau one of the Congress chairmen for that day. But there had been no glory in the office. The opportunity for stage-strutting was nil at a session from which the bulk of the members were absent—the serious ones in the lobby of the committee, the light-headed “doing” the town—and only the straggling few, who were listless enough not to know what to do with themselves, attended the session of the Congress. He came in with the suggestion that if that sort of thing continued it would have a very bad effect upon the galleries. Bebel could not contain himself in his seat; he finally blurted out: “Ach was!” (what of it!) “We continue in session!”—and we did.

The second cheering instance of Bebel’s impatience with tomfoolery was on the Thursday afternoon and closing hours of the committee’s sessions. The procedure was being discussed for the next day when the committee would make its report to the Congress. Troelstra, of the Holland delegation, and chairman of the committee, favored a series of displayful speeches after the committee’s report in the Congress, and he went sentimentally on to say: “When the heart is full—.” He got no further, at least the rest of the sentence was not audible. Bebel had broken in with: “Comedy! Comedy! Comedy! Comedy!” four times, each time louder.

In my preliminary report from Amsterdam, summing up the speeches made on the resolution on political tactics I referred to Bebel’s as weak. I shall here take up only that passage of his speech upon which the whole was poised, limiting myself here simply to pointing out its weakness or defect. Later, when I shall come to the resolution itself, together with its significant setting, the significance of Bebel’s weakness will become more obvious.

The burden of Jaures' song was that his policy had saved the republic, whereas a clerical-military monarchy would have set back the hour-hand on the dial of history; and turning upon Bebel he added: "You simply seek to conceal behind revolutionary declarations the fact of your political or parliamentary impotence. I anxiously await the day when I shall watch your doings in case you have a parliament that is a parliament—a parliament whose vote directly affects government." Bebel made a great pretence, by means of vehemence and of length of speech to meet the two points. He missed both.

As to the latter, his answer was that in Germany they needed, not a simple minority, as in France, nor even a bare majority, but an overwhelming majority to accomplish anything,—which was simply stating the reasons for exactly what Jaures had said, reasons that Jaures did not enumerate, justly considering the act superfluous. It is the feature of a real parliamentary government that it CAN control the Executive's hand; in such bodies, accordingly, a minority HAS opportunities for effective parliamentary manoeuvres. In such bodies, and in such bodies only, can the sincerity of the revolutionary declarations of a minority be tested.—Why did Bebel shrink from the admission? Why did he affect to assail that part of Jaures' position, when, in fact, he was but bearing out Jaures?

Even weaker was Bebel in his handling of the first part of Jaures' claim, the claim that his policy had saved the republic. Guesde denied point-blank that the republic had been in danger. Bebel did not. He took a different tack. His tack was a long enumeration of high-handed acts of brutality committed upon workingmen by the republican government of France. Bebel supplemented his list with the recent Colorado outrages. "Feudal-monarchic Germany," said he, "could not furnish so black a record"—very true, but what has that to do with the case?—"While we would prefer a republic," he went on to say, "we care not to break our heads for such a republic."

Every Socialist is aware that Capitalism brings in its wake outrages unheard of in previous systems. But every Socialist also knows that progress in the social evolutionary scale is not to be gauged by the volume of Labor's trials. The determining factor of social progress is the POSSIBILITY that a social stage offers for redress and for emancipation. Fred Douglas{s}, no less an authority than he,

admitted deliberately, shortly before dying, that “the present condition of the Negro is tangibly worse than when he was a chattel slave.” Whatever the reason therefor, the law of social evolution is from the paternally both kind and cruel feudal system to the freedom of the Socialist Republic VIA THE VALLEY OF THE SHADOW OF DEATH OF CAPITALISM. Whether he and we wanted it or no, the Negro HAD “to break his head” for his present “tangibly worse” position. It is progress because the present condition, the wage slave status, is the necessary precursor and key with which to open the gates of the Socialist Republic. Bebel’s answer implied a denial of all this, and brought him perilously near false sociological principle through nativistic absurdity. If he cared not to deny, as Guesde did, the allegation that the republic was in danger, the only answer that the supreme occasion called for was the plump and plain retort that the possibilities for progress contained in the bourgeois republic, a valuable, if not a necessary, stepping stone to the Socialist Republic, can be really endangered only in the measure that its existence is prolonged after it has waxed rotten-ripe to make room for the Socialist Republic—and that Socialism, as a contingent in a bourgeois parliamentary “bloc,” could only tend to scuttle such possibilities for progress.—Why did Bebel fail here, too?

August Bebel is recognized as a leading debater of Europe—the very foremost of Germany. Nor can his understanding of Socialism be questioned. With a thorough knowledge of Socialism, inspired with a serious purpose and zeal for the Social Revolution, and withal gifted with extraordinary powers for debate,—with all that, how came he to be so weak at that critical moment in Amsterdam? The answer will be given when I reach the Dresden-Amsterdam Resolution. I may so far here anticipate the subject by saying:—Bebel stood in, and he was manoeuvred into a false position at Amsterdam.

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