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ARTICLE

FLASHLIGHTS OF THE I.W.W. CONVENTION, 1906.

[I shall adopt with regard to the recent convention of the I.W.W. the course I adopted with regard to the Amsterdam Congress two years ago. Rather than write up a continuous report, which would necessarily have to be condensed, I shall publish a series of articles upon several men and things that figured and took place at the convention. These articles, together with the series on the leading amendments to the constitution adopted by the convention, will convey a clear idea of that memorable gathering.—Daniel De Leon.]

I. CHARLES O. SHERMAN.

TO say that Sherman is a crook, pure and simple, would be to do the man an injustice; to say he is a weakling, pure and simple, would be to do the Movement an injustice. Indeed, in either case it would be to do the Movement an injustice. The militants in the Movement may not, except at their own peril, be left in blindness upon certain characters that are bound to crop up, and bound to give trouble.

Sherman is a weak man, but he also is cursed with a certain quality that implies some strength—vainglory. The vainglorious man can not be wholly weak. But woe to that man in whom the vainglory is not coupled with virility. Only a large amount of virility can save the vainglorious man. Only mental and physical fibre can protect him from being the dupe of flatterers, and from ultimately running amuck—to his own undoing.

That Sherman is a weak man he gave numerous proofs of at the convention. Cronin drove him to the outrage of autocratically appointing a committee on credentials, of turning his back upon the wishes of the delegates, and of summarily

adjourning the convention to the afternoon; the indignation that he saw his conduct had aroused took the starch out of him: he rushed to Trautmann woebegone, asked if he had done wrong and what he could do to retrieve himself. I find him in that mood an hour later and succeed in securing his approval of a system of procedure to be adopted with regard to the report of his committee on credentials, and at the afternoon session he accepted my motion and it went through; the very next morning, when the procedure, thus established on the previous afternoon, was violently opposed by McMullen, Mahoney, McCabe and Cronin, Sherman, then in the chair, began to take backwater; appealed to by me on the floor of the convention to tear himself away from the evil geniuses that had fastened upon him, he straightened up again and supported the procedure. On one occasion, he was acting crawlingly conciliatory towards the revolutionary delegates; McCabe sent word to him, he called Mahoney into the chair, he and McCabe withdrew to a contiguous room, and, within 6 minutes by my watch, he returned, took the floor and made a violent, frenzied screech-owl attack upon the same delegates. Incidentally I may here remark that it was at that convention, and it was Sherman as an orator,—I shall later return to the man's fatal vainglory regarding his oratorical powers—that first illustrated to me the pithiness of the Shakespearean warning not to "tear a passion to tatters." But to return. One moment—whenever the vote of Ryan, or St. John, or of some other delegate, who was known not to be of the Socialist Trade & Labor Alliance contingent to the I.W.W., gave his side the majority on some inconsequential motion—, Sherman would become puffed up and overbearing, going on one occasion so far as to forget himself by walking over to me and petulantly saying: "What do you think now of 'political unity'—'tis further away than ever!"; and the next moment, when on some matter of importance the revolutionary or industrialist element plumped its vote, as it did regularly against reaction, he would again collapse into despondency. He read his flimsy report in the pose and tone of a conquering hero, or of a Jupiter laying down the law from Olympian heights. What could have happened just before to puff him up so I can not imagine. When, however, he saw the marked coldness with which the report was received, he walked over to me and with looks almost pitiful to behold, asked what I thought of his report, was it not thorough? did I like it? I told him the report was woefully

deficient in recommendations. He pricked up his ears, and rushed into the adjoining room to which he frequently retreated. About a quarter of an hour later he reappeared holding several slips of paper in his hands, and informed the convention that he had a large number of recommendations to make, would have them ready the next morning and wished them printed together with his report. I have notes enough on this head for a couple of columns. The instances mentioned should suffice. I now believe what I was told by several Western delegates that, before addressing a meeting, it was Sherman's custom on his Western trip to inquire whether the workingmen were radical or conservative. If told they were radical, he would make what he considered a radical speech; if told they were conservative, he would out-Gompers Gompers in reaction. Such is the weakness, mental as well as physical, of Sherman that the man is a feather driven by the cross gales of the Labor Movement.

Would, for Sherman's sake, he were nothing but a feather. His weakness would keep him out of posts of danger. His vanity, however, thrusts him forward to his ruin—and the no little annoyance of the Movement. The crow in the fable drops to the ground the cheese he holds in his beak, owing to his desire to exhibit his sweet voice to the flattering fox below. The injury to the crow ends with the loss of his cheese, and what is a loss to him is positive gain to the fox. The vainglory of Sherman, however, causes his ruin without tangible advantage to his flatterers. Upon the exceptionally weak ground of Sherman's character and mind the officialdom of the Socialist party dropped the seed of their adulation. If that ground had been simply weak the seed would have dropped harmless, like seed in a quagmire without a speck of earth to take root in; the ground being, not wholly a quagmire, the seed took root, and shot up poisonously.

Whatever may be said in favor of tangible fractions of the rank and file of the Socialist party, unquestionable is the fact that, with very few exceptions, the officialdom of the party consists of an element from which the Working Class has nothing to expect but a specialized form of exploitation. This element would fain have the Socialist Republic established; who would not, unless he be a militant in the ranks of the plutocracy? Nevertheless, due to their training—some being the product of craft Unionism, others the product of the frayed-out middle class—they

have no conception of the nature of Socialism. They have no inkling of the fact that Socialism is the Movement of the WORKING CLASS. Where they do not downright despise, they, at least, place no faith upon the proletariat. Like true craft Unionists and bourgeois, the horizon of their mind is bounded by bourgeois thought. To the bourgeois, the petty measure of whose aspirations are contained in the cupful of "Reform," the ballot is all sufficient; in the schemes of such folks the proletariat figures only as voting cattle for its politician herders. Needless to say that, in the eye of such folks, the economic organization of workingmen is silly, at best good only as convenient corrals in which to round up votes on election day, and appropriations for political campaigns, or for some private scheme. Needless to say that, to such folks, the mission of Unionism is a closed book, and that the rise of the I.W.W. was correctly interpreted as the knell of their doom. The officialdom of the Socialist party set about averting the threatened danger. The method was to flatter Sherman out of his senses. They made him believe he was an orator able to do what Debs does, and he was enough of a simpleton to repeat it to others, and to indicate that he might give up his place in the I.W.W. and start lecturing tours. They stuffed him with the notion that his popularity would be boundless, if he would only put an extinguisher upon the revolutionists, i.e., the Industrialists, and the weakling tried the trick. They did even more. But the time is not yet ripe to make the revelation. Such a revelation, when made, must be specific. The season to be specific upon this head has not quite arrived. Suffice it to say Sherman fell in heels over head.

In this whole dark conspiracy the Socialist party officialdom played foul with Sherman. Even if their scheme succeeded, they knew full well they could not "deliver the goods," and Sherman would be left wrecked on the beach of the Movement. Twenty-four hours after the meeting of the convention it was evident the scheme had failed. It became more evident every day. The evidence of failure did not, however, call off the flatterers. What it did was to reconcile them to the prospect of a trifling gain—the prospect of causing whatever little discredit they could to fall upon the I.W.W., even if the price paid therefor was to be, not merely the leaving of Sherman stranded on the beach, but the leaving of him eternally disgraced besides, disgraced as a knave and disgraced as a fool. Accordingly, the flatterers stuck to their crow. From the second day on, Sherman convicted himself

more and more irretrievably. Things that could have been known to but few delegates, charges upon which no thoughtful delegate could have acted, being only rumors and surmises,—his complicity in the McCabe outrages, his protection and hiring of spongers as “organizers,” his swollen bills of expenses without even the shred of a receipt or a voucher to back up huge sums for “incidentals,” his apostacy from the industrial system of Unionism, etc., etc.—were being proven by the hour on the floor of the convention. By the hour Sherman was forfeiting the respect and whatever confidence in his integrity and good intentions many a delegate might have entertained for him—but all the while a cloud was being raised over the head of the I.W.W. Out of that cloud, true enough, the organization was certain to rise all the more triumphant, all the more vigorous for the sturdiness with which it wielded the broom; in the meantime, however, nearsighted pure and simple political Socialism had a plausible pretext to sneer. For the sake of such flimsy advantage the flatterers egged their victim on and on, though his intellectual and moral ruin was made all the more certain; nor did they let up on their dupe even after the convention. On the contrary. It is thanks to them that, since the convention, Sherman put the finishing touches upon himself—he was driven to set himself up Kangaroo fashion as above the Convention; still worse, he was driven to resort to detective sluggers against the duly elected officers of the body; and, finally, worst of all, he was made to put his signature over and state UNDER OATH that he never had called the convention!!!

The conduct of the pure and simple political Socialist party officialdom towards Sherman was vandalic. It was like the slaughtering of an ox for the sake of one pound of its meat. Such conduct was inhuman: it was the utter sacrifice of a human being upon the altars of petty, selfish and transitory purposes. The momentary glee at the superficial appearance of a disrupted I.W.W. is over. The solid results are that, such a conspiracy notwithstanding, the I.W.W. emerges triumphant. To Sherman, to the utterly victimized Sherman, this consolation may be tendered—his weakness and vanity, his betrayal of the Cause of the Working Class, crowned by the crushing defeat he has suffered, has done what nothing else could have done for the proletariat. It has evoked among wide layers of the unorganized proletariat, and of the proletariat organized outside of the I.W.W., an enthusiasm that was not there

before for the Cause of Industrialism; it has inspired confidence in the power of the I.W.W. to enforce its programme. Priceless as these effects are, never would the I.W.W. have sought to purchase them with the immolation of one of its own members. The immolation having taken place without the connivance of the I.W.W. the organization is free to, and does profit by it to the fullest extent.

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