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EDITORIAL

WHERE “CHAGRIN” SLIPPED.

By DANIEL DE LEON

THE Berlin *Vorwaerts* of March 2 has a report of an address, delivered in that city a few days previously, by Chagrín, the gifted collaborator whom the Stuttgart *Metallarbeiterzeitung* sent abroad to study Labor conditions, and many a passage from whom has been reproduced in these columns.

Chagrín's Berlin address was upon American affairs. With his habitual perspicacity he describes the corruption that is rampant in the ranks of the capitalist class; points out how the poison is quickly absorbed by the immigrant, and how it reaches down into the Trades Unions, debauching the same; and in rough strokes he sketches the fatal manifestations of the evil in the Unions—the principle of “harmony between Capital and Labor”; the anxiety of Union officers to improve their condition by accepting lucrative positions in the employer's establishment; the readiness of some to accept a Judas pay for using their influence against the interests of their own organization; the failure of all recent large strikes; hence the “tremendous difficulty to set on foot a strong, class-conscious Labor Movement in America.” Having, so far, correctly sketched the lay of the land, Chagrín closes with these words:

“The Social Democracy is still weak in America, on top of that it is divided into two groups. The American workingman is very hard to gain for Socialism. In point of fact it is the German immigrant workingmen who read the Social-Democratic papers and uphold the banner of Socialism. It is they who labor in America for the propagation of Socialism. In their difficult task they are strengthened and filled with fresh hope by the tidings of the progress of the Social Democratic Movement in the Fatherland. Every report of a victory that crosses the ocean from Germany is gladsome news for the party comrades there.”

The philosophy of this passage is fundamentally erroneous.

While in the very front ranks of the Socialist Movement in America many sturdy German immigrants are seen to figure, it is, in the first place, incorrect to say aught that bears the construction of their standing alone, or even of there being the front rank majority: they stand in a company in which all other nationalities—natives, Swedes, Irish, Italians, Hungarians, Letts, Russian and Polish Jews, etc.—are well represented; in the second place, and above all, the conception, sweepingly expressed as Chagrin does, is incorrect that the German immigrant is the particular propagandist of Socialism in America, and that the tidings of the Socialist triumphs in the Fatherland give him fresh stimulus. This concept demands serious modification.

So much lies in the facts in the case; so essential is a knowledge of the facts to the understanding of things American in the Labor and Socialist Movement, and towards the solving of the—to our European comrades, in general, our comrades in Germany, in particular,—incomprehensible riddle of the backwardness of the Movement here, that Chagrin's slip, made, moreover, at the very season when the popular error to which he succumbed was being exposed by the great Philadelphia strike, deserves treatment. It is an interesting subject that goes directly to what may be called the "philosophy of the American Movement." The matter for the subject is voluminous enough to fill a thick book, and will eventually fill such a book. In the meanwhile, a shorter article with the facts taken "hot from the oven," will serve to illumine the matter.

Of all the large Trades Unions in the land, none is so essentially German as the United Brewery Workmen. Its national officers are, even if occasionally not wholly, yet preponderatingly, German. Its national Editor is German. Its national organ, though one-half in English, bears exclusively a German name—*Brauer Zeitung*. Furthermore, no large Trades Union, surely none affiliated with the A.F. of L., has so conspicuously fluttered the Social Democratic flag. The very front page of its national organ bears the Marxian motto, "Workingmen of all countries unite," under the clasped hands of two workingmen. Nor does this Union limit itself to Socialist mottoes in its utterances. Its national organ frequently contains Socialist articles; its public declarations bristle with Socialist phraseology—the "class struggle"; "Das Ausbeuterthum" (the exploiting class); the "solidarity of Labor"; etc.; etc. The

national officers have ever boasted of their Union's leading the progressive wing of Labor. And never is there a Social Democratic victory won in the Fatherland but the event is recorded, and what may be called a Socialist Te Deum sung in the columns of the *Brauer Zeitung*. Here, certainly, is an instance of Chagrin's German immigrant workingman, laboring in national loneliness for the propagation of Socialism, strengthened in his difficult task to win the hard-to-be-got American workingman for Socialism, and inspired with new strength for his arduous mission by the tidings of Social Democratic triumphs in the Fatherland. The conclusion would be rash. The facts are not yet all "in court."

In February of this year a strike broke out in Philadelphia, a strike that extended into the next month—and spread as it extended. The employes of the Rapid Transit Company, exploited to the marrow, maltreated, even hounded, reached the end of the tether of their patience, and struck. So greedy-grasping was the Company, which, moreover, is affiliated with the bourgeois municipal government, that it is detested by the traveling public. The strike of its employes struck a responsive chord outside of that particular industry, and when the mounted State Constabulary was called in by the Company to trample down the strike, the reply of Organized Labor, uttered through its city central organization, of which the brewery workers themselves are a part, was a call for a general strike. The response to the call was prompt. From 60,000 to 80,000 workingmen dropped their tools. Hic Rhodus, hic salta—here was an opportunity for the United Brewery Workmen to show its mettle, and to "redeem its protestations." Did it? Conspicuous among the few Unions that remained deaf to the call of their fellow wage slaves, and deserted them in battle, was—which?—*the United Brewery Workers of Philadelphia*. The reason calmly given by their national officers being that they had a contract with their employers and "only under in extreme provocation" could they "violate" their contracts.—Not yet are the facts all in.

The one Socialist party paper in Philadelphia is the *Tageblatt*, a German paper that flies Socialist colors. It is a paper of long standing. Oft and bitterly does the *Tageblatt* growl at the denseness of the American proletariat for "keeping its ears shut to Socialism." Lurid are the Socialist articles in its columns concerning the "bourgeoisie," the "proletariat," the beatitudes of Socialism, the necessity of

"solidarity among the working class"; etc.; etc. May this be an instance of a lone and hard struggling German concern, struggling hard to spread Socialism? Let's see. During the strike, the *Tageblatt* published a series of articles entitled "Rapid Transit Talks." (Transit Gespraechen.) See *Tageblatt* March 10, et passim. These articles were direct slaps in the face to those who sympathized with the striking carmen—and the articles were paid for by the Rapid Transit Company. The *Tageblatt* claimed it was "bound by a contract" to publish the articles.—Nor are these as yet all the facts in this case.

The same *Tageblatt* of the 19th of March, the general strike being at its height, and increased pressure being brought upon the Brewers for assistance on the ground of their oft-preached "solidarity," had a leading editorial in which it sided with the Brewers, and in the course of which it argued:

"The brewery workers find themselves in this city enjoying, to use a term of Bebel's, 'a raised standard of living.' Through their own organization and the help of the laboring class, they have secured for themselves comparatively favorable conditions of work. Were they to commit a breach of contract they would run the risk of losing everything and to shatter their own organization. It is a question of 'to be' or 'not to be.'" Etc.; etc. And this article was published without adverse comment in another German Socialist party paper, also established by German immigrant workingmen, the *New Yorker Volkszeitung*.

All the articles in the world on the "class struggle" and on "solidarity" can not outweigh one act that hits solidarity over the head, and that denies the class struggle by the example of fraternization between Capital and Labor, during in a labor struggle, at that. One single act, that tears up the ground for a strong, class-conscious Labor Movement to plant itself on, nullifies all ink-slinging and speechification on class-consciousness. One act of impurity undoes all denunciations of corruption. One such act would counteract all theories in the opposite direction, whosoever was guilty of the act. When, however, the guilt is incurred by an element that otherwise sails under the colors of Socialism and wraps itself in the halo of an unquestionably bona fide and powerful Socialist Movement like that of Germany, then the mischief done sinks immeasurably deeper and spreads immeasurably further. It gives a color of Socialism to what is exactly the reverse: more than direct

opposition to, it hampered the path of Socialism.

Is it to wonder that "tremendous is the difficulty to set on foot a string, class-conscious Labor Movement in America," when German institutions, that fill the popular eye of the land as "Socialist," are guilty of such misconduct?

The philosophy of the situation is this—true to Chagrin's observation, the corrupting influence of money-mad American capitalism works destructive to all sense of the Ideal, and filters down to and debauches "the American proletarian, who then adapts himself to the system and seeks to profit as much as possible thereby." Differently, however, from Chagrin's size-up, that baneful influence does not stop short at "the American workingman": it filters further and draws in the swirl of its demoralization the immigrant as well, *German immigrant workingmen not excepted*.

With the German immigrant workingman, however, who succumbs to the plague, the disease frequently assumes a feature of peculiar malignancy. Those who drop all the Idealism of the Fatherland, in thought as in language, sink not so low as those who drop the Fatherland's Idealism in thought, but preserve its words. The former retain the redeeming feature of frankness, the latter become hypocrites, and fasten the stain of hypocrisy upon Socialism. With Bebel's name upon their lips—as in the passage cited from the Philadelphia *Tageblatt*, and reproduced with silent approval by the *New Yorker Volkszeitung*—the latter element pocket the Judas pay from the Exploiter; with Marxian mottoes upon their brow, as in the instance of the national officers of the United Brewery Workers, this element "scab" upon their fellow proletarians under fire—"scab" upon the very men who admittedly helped them to attain the "raised standard of living" that they enjoy.

Finally, differently from Chagrin's size-up that the triumphs of the Social Democracy in Germany are universally utilized in favor of Socialism by the German immigrants who call themselves Socialists, the depraved German immigrant element under consideration utilizes those very triumphs as a cloak behind which to enjoy a freer hand in the pursuit of its nefarious private gains. As a consequence, this element is driven by the law of its posture to seek to sandbag all those—natives and immigrants alike of all nationalities, Germans included,—who, the triumphs of the Social Democracy in Germany being indeed an inspiration to them, seek to

uplift the morale of the proletariat by exposing and holding up to scorn the manoeuvres of their corrupt leaders.

Keeping in mind the present state of demoralization in America, obvious is the conclusion that the conduct of this peculiarly depraved German immigrant element, so far from being an arduous one, is the easiest: it falls in readily with the popular inclination to "adjust oneself to the corrupt system and to seek to profit thereby," as Chagrin well puts it. Hence a paradox that, however, escaped him. The paradox presented by the philosophy of the case is that, due to the circumstance that causes the triumphs of the Social Democracy in Germany to render easier the conduct of that element among the German immigrants with whom the plague of American capitalist corruption assumes the malignant type of using Socialism for a cloak, those same triumphs render, at present, vastly more arduous the task of those with whom Socialism is an earnest and honest endeavor.

Chagrin slipped in his sweeping eulogy of the German immigrants in America. Numerous are the facts that should have warned so keen an observer as he to be more discriminating. But, as the Spanish proverb has it, "from the expertest of hunters the hare sometimes escapes."

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