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SOCIALISM AND THE NEGRO

WE have an interesting letter from John H. Owens of Washington, which we would like to publish in full but can only note certain extracts. Mr. Owens says, in answer to the editorial in the July CRISIS on "The Negro and Radical Thought": "Is there not just the bare possibility that some of the issues which you consider subordinate to your central idea (of the emancipation of the Negro) might possess the nucleus of a tangible and definite solution?"

There is more than a bare possibility, and the Negro must study proposals and reforms with great care to see if they do not carry with them some help in the solution of his problem. But he must not assume that because a proposed solution settles many important human problems, for this reason it is necessarily going to settle his.

Mr. Owens continues: "The Negro group is almost a pure proletarian group,—this fact admits of no denial. Above 90 per cent. of the Negroes are unskilled, untrained workers, and unorganized. Thus it would seem that the race as a whole has less reason to be suspicious of any movement of a proletarian nature than of some scheme which offers a questionable solution for the ills of the talented minority."

The Negro has little reason to be suspicious of a proletarian movement if that movement is for the good of the proletariat; but it does not follow that all movements proposed by the proletariat themselves are for their own good. The workers of the

world are, through no fault of their own, ignorant, inexperienced men. It is not for a moment to be assumed that movements into which they are drawn or which they themselves initiate are necessarily the best for them. If, however, the Negro sees a movement for the proletariat which, after careful thought and experience, he is convinced is for the good of the working class, then as a worker he is bound to give every aid to such a movement.

"Universal political enfranchisement would offer no positive relief. This the Northern Negro already enjoys; yet he suffers under the burden of social, political, and economic injustices. His condition is little more to be envied than that of his Southern brother."

The vote is not a panacea. It is a means to an end. The condition of the Negro in the North because of his political power is a great deal better than the condition of the Negro in the South. He is, of course, hindered in the North by greater competition for work, while in the South certain fields are open to him. The voter, white and black, has not yet learned to control industry through his vote, but he is learning, and only through the use of the ballot is real reform in industry and industrial relations coming.

"Does not the editor think that State Socialism, Communism, or even the dread dictatorship of the proletariat, offers a better solution to the problems of the proletariat than any scheme suggested by the exploiting classes,—those who profit by the present system? And since the Ne-

gro is over 90 per cent. proletarian, is it not almost logical to assume that this would also offer a better solution to this problem than anything heretofore proposed?"

I do decidedly think that many proposals made by Socialists and Communists and even by the present rulers of Russia would improve the world if they could be adopted; but I do not believe that such adoption can successfully come through war or force or murder, and I do not believe that the sudden attempt to impose a new industrial system and new ideas of industrial life can be successful without the long training of human beings. I believe that Socialism must be evolutionary, not in the sense that it must take 50,000 years, but in the sense that it does mean hard work for many generations. Beginnings can and should be made this minute or tomorrow or next year. It is precisely because of our present ignorance and our widespread assumptions as to profit and business that we cannot immediately change the world. It is true that those who today are sucking the industrial life blood of the nations get their chance to keep on by simply asserting that no better way is offered and present methods suit present human nature. We who suffer and believe in reform must not think that we can answer such persons successfully simply by saying that present industrial society is *not* in accordance with human nature. It *is* in accordance with human nature today, but human nature can and must and will be changed.

"We are both of the opinion that the present method of control and distribution of wealth is desperately wrong. We are *en rapport* on the conclusion that a form of social control is inevitable. We hold this particular truth to be self-evident,—that a change must come about. But how? I think that we both may be safe in assuming that any initiative in bring-

ing about a better distribution of wealth must be taken by those who benefit least by the present system."

The change in industrial organization must come from those who think and believe. We cannot assume that necessarily redemption is coming from those who suffer. It may come from those who enjoy the fruit of suffering, but who come to see that such enjoyment is wrong. The point that we must hold clearly is that a proposal for reform is not necessarily good and feasible simply because it comes from a laboring man, and it is not wrong and unjustifiable simply because it comes from a millionaire. It must be judged by itself and not by its source.

"You ask the question: 'How far can the colored people of the world, and the Negroes of the United States in particular, trust the working classes?' This is a good question, and easier asked than answered. But I would like to ask further: How far can the Negroes and other dark peoples trust the exploiting Nationalists and Imperialists? Is it the English working classes that are exploiting India, sucking the very life-blood from a starving population and grinding the natives down into the desert dust in order to support English 'gentlemen' in idleness and luxury? Are the English, French and Belgian working classes raping Africa, taking ill-gotten gains from a trusting population? Are the working classes of America attempting to fasten the yoke of subjugation upon the neck of Santo Domingo, and stifle liberty and freedom of speech and press in Haiti? If we have cause to distrust the working classes, by what precept of example should we put faith in the specious promises of the masters?"

I think these questions touch the center of much modern effort and reform. I maintain that English working classes *are* exploiting India; that the English, French and Belgian laborers *are* raping Africa; that the

working classes of America *are* subjugating Santo Domingo and Haiti. They may not be as conscious of all they are doing as their more educated masters, called Nationalists and Imperialists, but they are consciously submitting themselves to the leadership of these men; they are voluntarily refusing to know; they are systematically refusing to listen; they are blindly voting armies and navies and hidden diplomacy, regardless of the result, and while the individual white employee in Europe and America is less to be condemned than the individual capitalist for the way in which the darker nations have been treated, he can not escape his responsibility. He is co-worker in the miserable modern subjugation of over half the world.