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Freedom Discussion Meetings [Nov, 1888]

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On October 12 Dr. Merlino opened the meeting by reading a paper on "The Organization of Labor." He dwelt upon the necessity of revising the whole system of the production of the necessities of life, and pointed out that if this was done by a government it would be an artificial organization of labor, whereas in a period of the development of society a free-handed policy was a necessity. Of course the usual objection would be made to this opinion. It would be asked, How without a central government can the workmen organize themselves? What would be their guides? He replied, reason and interest. People would begin to use their reason and to trust in it more than they do at the present day. It was necessary that people should know something of hygiene and medicine to preserve their health, and the better people were informed on these matters the more healthy they were likely to be. In the same way people would acquire the necessary knowledge to organize their labor. Every individual should be himself the chief organizer of his own labor. Under Socialism the whole plan of production would be changed.

We cannot realize the importance of this change. To-day production instead of being regulated by the wants of the producers, takes its direction from the capitalist who only cares for profits. We are made to work against our inclinations, we are deprived of what the soil produces, simply in the interest of the capitalist. The present system is just the reverse of a rational one, you leave your reason at the door on entering it. Every time you attempt to reason on social facts you are baffled by the contradictions you find in them. Capitalist society is against reason, reason is against capitalist society. Progress is a goal towards which reason every day brings us nearer. One of the most important changes that would take place in the organization of labor would be in the treatment of the soil. Agriculture would be redeemed from the degraded state into which it has fallen. The decay of agriculture was the most marked feature of the capitalist régime. The revolution which would take place in connection with agriculture would be far greater even than the political revolution. Manufacture would be an adjunct of agriculture instead of the reverse.

In the course of the discussion Comrade Donald said that the majority of the inhabitants of this country were not in the habit of depending upon themselves to any extent whatever. Surely the agricultural laborers who were the most ignorant portion of our population, or the poor people in the East End, who only know one particular branch of industry, were not going to revolutionize the conditions of industry. He thought that if such talent had been latent in these people they would have organized themselves a very long time ago.

Mahon was of opinion that the central government in this country had been a distinct blessing during the present century because it had forced people to take sanitary precautions in their own towns which otherwise they would not have done and epidemics would have resulted.

Alf. Marsh thought that Donald in common with many Social Democrats, seemed to look upon the mass of people as being very low down and incapable of doing anything to regenerate their lives. Everything was to be done for them by a select few.

Kropotkin meant by the Revolution that the means of production should become the property of the producers themselves. In Whitechapel for instance, the streets were badly lighted because the people felt that the place did not belong to them. He had witnessed in his life one great change, the liberation of the serfs in Russia. The serfs were considered as quite stupid fellows who would never be able to manage their affairs themselves. But some said, Give them their liberty and you will see that they will organize their labor on the land much better than we could organize it for them. It was very easy to make a law, but when it was applied to the various districts it was a failure. He would admit that initiative was missing to the people of Whitechapel, but we should favor initiative in every possible way and try to get people to act by themselves.

Mrs. Shaack mentioned the cooperative societies as an instance of self-organized and managed bodies

Dr. Merlino in replying, said Anarchists did not say that people would immediately become very intelligent. What they said was that there was an obstacle in the way which prevented the people from organizing themselves. We want to remove that obstacle, and when it is removed, they will begin to understand how to organize themselves and do it.

The next meeting will take place at 13 Farringdon Road, on Tuesday November 20, at 8.30 p.m., when the discussion on Free Communism and the Organization of Labor will be opened by T. Pearson.