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Reflections of a Propagandist

Lucy E. Parsons

March 1, 1911

I have been here in New York City for the last three months, selling the famous speeches of the Chicago martyrs. Here humanity is piled up in heaps, stored away in layers; forty families in a single tenement that should only suffice for a fourth that number.

In these Eastern cities, tens of thousands of children are born annually who will never know the beauties of nature. From the tenement they will have for playing space the hard, dirty, unhealthy, stone sidewalks and pavements, then a few years in school, where the training will be as inadequate to the development of a strong, self-asserting individuality as were the previous conditions to the upbuilding of a strong, physical body; then comes the last step, the factory, the slave pen. From there some will graduate to prisons, some to the hangman, and some become prostitutes, offering upon the streets, for a price, the remnant of a depleted body. This is the goal toward which the long procession of the working class is ever moving. Is the picture overdrawn? None could wish more sincerely than the writer that it is imaginary, but alas, it is too terribly true.

I have before me two reports from committees, returned in the last few days from New York City. One states there were

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“born in the city in 1910 8,750 children of weak minds, and that this tendency is ever on the increase.” The other, that something will have to be done to check the alarming overcrowding of tenements. There is no overcrowding uptown, where the rich live.

I met with very courteous treatment from the unions in the West and am meeting with the same here. I have credentials and endorsement from the Central Federated Union, and my success is splendid in the locals. But I find organized labor weak and dispirited. I have called the attention of several leaders to this fact, and asked for an explanation. They simply say: “You have no Ellis Island problem in the West to solve as we have here.”

I think there is a lot of reason in this position. For the countless thousands form a never-ending stream of humanity, dumped down in a strange land, hearing a strange language, with little money or means of a livelihood, they fall an easy prey to the sharks, little and big, and are used as an instrument to beat down and keep wages near the dead line of want.

The revolutionary societies of New York City held a very successful memorial meeting in honor of our Japanese martyrs. The large hall was packed and the speeches were good and to the point. After the speaking had been going on for a few hours, some of the young blood in the hall wanted to see the speeches translated into action. One of them went to the front and called upon the audience to go to the street, fall in line, and march upon the Japanese Embassy and voice their protest.

There was some opposition to the carrying out of this part of the meeting, but the young blood carried everything before it. The result was a fine demonstration in the streets, with the red flag. The only time the red flag ever typifies death is at the time of the death of a martyr to liberty; then it is appropriately draped in mourning, as it was on this occasion. Of course the capitalist press made heroes of the police and also got themselves all worked up to a great sensation.

The only regret I have about the street demonstration is owing to a misunderstanding and the slow exit of the large audience, I missed being with the “mob” of marchers. I have been kicking myself about this ever since.