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Alexander Berkman

Emma Goldman

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ON the 18th of this month the workhouse at Hoboken, Pa., will open its iron gates for Alexander Berkman. One buried alive for fourteen years will emerge from his tomb. That was not the intention of those who indicted Berkman. In the kindness of their Christian hearts they saw to it that he be sentenced to twenty-one years in the penitentiary and one year in the workhouse, hoping that that would equal a death penalty, only with a slow, refined execution. To achieve the feat of sending a man to a gradual death, the authorities of Pittsburg at the command of Mammon trampled upon their much-beloved laws and the legality of court proceedings. These laws in Pennsylvania called for seven[23] years imprisonment for the attempt to kill, but that did not satisfy the law-abiding citizen H. C. Frick. He saw to it that one indictment was multiplied into six. He knew full well that he would meet with no opposition from petrified injustice and the servile stupidity of the judge and jury before whom Alexander Berkman was tried.

In looking over the events of 1892 and the causes that led up to the act of Alexander Berkman, one beholds Mammon seated upon a throne built of human bodies, without a trace of sympathy on its Gorgon brow for the creatures it controls.

These victims, bent and worn, with the reflex of the glow of the steel and iron furnaces in their haggard faces, carry their sacrificial offerings to the ever-insatiable monster, capitalism. In its greed, however, it reaches out for more; it neither sees the gleam of hate in the sunken eyes of its slaves, nor can it hear the murmurs of discontent and rebellion coming forth from their heaving breasts. Yet, discontent continues until one day it raises its mighty voice and demands to be heard:

Human conditions! higher pay! fewer hours in the inferno at Homestead, the stronghold of the “philanthropist” Carnegie!

He was far away, however, enjoying a much needed rest from hard labor, in Scotland, his native country. Besides he knew he had left a worthy representative in H. C. Frick, who could take care that the voice of discontent was strangled in a fitting manner,—and Mr. Carnegie had judged rightly.

Frick, who was quite experienced in the art of disposing of rebellious spirits (he had had a number of them shot in the coke regions in 1890), immediately issued an order for Pinkerton men, the vilest creatures in the human family, who are engaged in the trade of murder for \$2 per day.

The strikers declared that they would not permit these men to land, but money and power walk shrewd and cunning paths. The Pinkerton blood-hounds were packed into a boat and were to be smuggled into Homestead by way of water in the stillness of night. The amalgamated steel workers learned of this contemptible trick and prepared to meet the foe. They gathered by the shores of the Monongahela River armed with sticks[24] and stones, but ere they had time for an attack a violent fire was opened from the boat that neared the shore, and within an hour eleven strikers lay dead from the bullets of Frick’s hirelings.

Every beast is satisfied when it has devoured its prey,—not so the human beast. After the killing of the strikers H. C. Frick had the families of the dead evicted from their homes, which had been sold to the workingmen on the instalment plan and at the exorbitant prices usual in such cases.

Out of these homes the wives and children of the men struggling for a living wage were thrown into the street and left without shelter. There was one exception only. A woman who had given birth to a baby two days previous and who, regardless of her delicate condition, defended her home and succeeded in driving the sheriff from the house with a poker.

Everyone stood aghast at such brutality, at such inhumanity to man, in this great free republic of ours. It seemed as if the cup of human endurance had been filled to the brim, as if out of the ranks of the outraged masses some one would rise to call those to account who had caused it all.

And some one rose in mighty indignation against the horrors of wealth and power. It was Alexander Berkman!

A youth with a vision of a grand and beautiful world based upon freedom and harmony, and with boundless sympathy for the suffering of the masses. One whose deep, sensitive nature could not endure the barbarisms of our times. Such was the personality of the man who staked his life as a protest against tyranny and iniquity; and such has Alexander Berkman remained all these long, dreary fourteen years.

Nothing was left undone to crush the body and spirit of this man; but sorrow and suffering make for sacred force, and those who have never felt it will fail to realize how it is that Alexander Berkman will return to those who loved and esteemed him, to those whom he loved so well, and still loves so well,—the oppressed and down-trodden millions—with the same intense, sweet spirit and with a clearer and grander vision of a world of human justice and equality.