

The Effect of War on the Workers

Address by Emma Goldman on February 20, in London

Emma Goldman

1900

FELLOW WORKERS.—Let me begin my address with a quotation from one of England's greatest men; not the England of to day, the invading, murderous, crushing England, but the England of a time when Liberty and Hospitality were her main virtues—the England that has given the world the profoundest thinkers, the most brilliant writers, the most touching poets, from among whom Carlyle stands out like a shining star upon the firmament. It was he who said, when asked “What is the net purport of War?”:

“There dwell and toil, in the English village of Dumdrudge, some five hundred souls. From these, by certain “Natural Enemies” of the French, there are successively selected, during the French war, say thirty able-bodied men: Dumdrudge, at her own expense, has suckled and nursed them: she has, not without difficulty and sorrow, fed them up to manhood, and even trained them to crafts so that one can weave another build, another hammer, and the weakest stand under thirty stone avoirdupois. Nevertheless, amid much weeping and swearing, they are selected; all dressed in red; and shipped away, at the public charges, some two thousand miles, or say only to the south of Spain; and red there till wanted. And now to that same spot.... are thirty similar French artisans, from a French Dumdrudge, in like manner wending; till at length, after infinite effort, the two parties come into actual juxtaposition: and Thirty stands fronting Thirty, each with a gun in his hand. Straightaway the word “Fire!” is given: and they blow the souls out of one another; and in place of sixty brisk, useful craftsmen, the world has sixty dead carcasses, which it must bury, and anew shed tears for. Had these men any quarrel? Busy as the Devil is, not the smallest! They lived far enough apart; were the entirest strangers; nay, in so wide a Universe, there was even, unconsciously, by Commerce, some mutual helpfulness between them. How then? Simpleton! their Governors had fallen out; and, instead of shooting one another, had the canning to make these poor blockheads shoot.”

In these few pithy words of Carlyle, lies the whole secret of War and Militarism. Only a short while ago in what is called the greatest and freest land in the world (I mean America), from each Dumdrudge, thirty, nay, more, men were selected, dressed in uniform and shipped to a strange country; and the same was done in many Dumdrudges of Spain. Both Spain and America had nursed and suckled their sons into strong and sturdy craftsmen. These same sons had children and wives to care for—often a mother and sister to support; but no amount. of tears or prayers could keep them at home; they were told to go, and so they went to blow each other's brains out.

Had they any quarter? None whatever; they, too, lived far enough apart, and in this wide world there was rather a bond of helpfulness between them. What then? In the case of the American man, we were told that a beautiful sentiment, a deep moral, was the motive power; and so it was to some extent—at least, the American people thought so. It was the deep sympathy with the suffering Cubans, tortured and starved by the butcher Weyler under the regime of the Spanish clergy and government; it was the just indignation of the American people over the atrocities committed in Cuba—I say: of the American people; I should say, of the American worker—and this noble sentiment, these humanitarian feelings, served the American governors as a good pretext for fighting Spain in order to get Cuba into their clutches.

Do you wish to know how the American-Spanish war affected the workers? I will tell you. First of all, America lost thousands of her sons—who either died of fever, lack of proper nourishment, or were killed by Spanish guns, or (as a reward for their patriotism and devotion to their country) by embalmed beef furnished by American capitalists. Instead of those strong, able-bodied men who left their shores for the battlefield, we have today thousands of broken-hearted mothers, hungry widows and orphans, who swell the number of the unemployed and reduce the wages of the workers. Then we have the War Tax of Two Cents—only a penny, you know; for the Government was kind to us— a penny War Tax that still, like the sword of Damocles, hangs over the workers' heads, that has increased the price of meat from 4d. to 6d., bread from 2d. to 2 1/2 d. per loaf, coals from 17s. to 25s, per ton, rent from 24s. to 30s. a month, beer, clothing and other necessities of life to still higher prices; it has ruined hundreds of small tradesmen, increased the ranks of the unemployed and reduced wages.

Still, all this suffering could be patiently borne if only one knew that the Cubans had been helped. Were they helped? I deny it. I say that all the blood spilt, all the lives lost, all the money spent has been in vain; the Cubans have been freed from the atrocious government of Spain but only to fall into the hands of another almost as unscrupulous. We have but to think of Homestead and its strike where eleven men were killed and some 30 wounded; of the coal strike in the Coeur d'Alene mines in Idaho, where 200 men were thrown to rot in the Bull Run and confessions extorted at the point of the bayonet; when we think of the atrocities rampant in the South, of the negroes lynched, tortured and burned by infuriated crowds without a hand being raised or a word said for their protection—when we think of all these things, then I say that the American Government, is hardly an improvement upon the Spanish, signs of which already can already be seen in Cuba, where, 12,000 workers being out on strike, the army was threatened to be called out. We have saved the Cubans from the bullets of Spaniards, only, it seems to me, to expose them to the brutality of the bloodhounds of American capitalism. But, as if this were not sufficient, there is a still more degrading, humiliating and brutal result of the late American-Spanish war—I allude to the invasion of the Philippine Islands and the crushing of the Filipinos, those noble rebels who are still defending their independence, though slaughtered by hundreds, their homes burned, their wealth destroyed, and their women ill-used by the very men who went to free the Cubans in the name of Liberty. Columbia! cover your face under the shame of it; for you have become but a prostitute to the vice and good of your sons!

Again we can say with Carlyle, out of every British and Irish Dumdrudge, men have been selected, dressed in khaki and sent to the Transvaal to blow out the souls of the Boers. Have these Englishmen quarrelled with the Boers? Why, no; on the contrary they were friends until a short time back? What, then? In this case we cannot even say their Governors have fallen out, for the Governor of the Transvaal has certainly done more than any self-respecting man could

or ought to do in the effort to prevent war, by yielding to the demands of Chamberlain, Cecil Rhodes and Alfred Milner. No, it is not the Governors who have fallen out, but a few greedy and insatiable monsters, who have gone mad at the sight of the red Gold in the Transvaal like the proverbial bull at the sight of a red rag, and Britannia must sacrifice her sons at the demand of her hangman traders. No fight so justifiable, no more righteous a defence, no nobler struggle for liberty, than that We see today on the side of the Boers, a handful of farmers who have known little of military drill or modern warfare, who, a peace-loving people, have taken to their guns only from sheer necessity and are showing the world that when a people fights for Liberty and independence it needs neither God nor King on its side. I see a report in one of your dailies, that a number of ministers have called upon you to repent; God because of your sins, having been against you no little in this war. Now I always believed the English were the most pious people on the earth; at least, they have always pretended to be such yet God has punished you; might it not be because you obeyed the call of your Governors to invade and slay a peaceful people? But no, your ministers call you to repent because God for once in their crude imagination is on the side of the righteous—otherwise he is too often on the side of the rascal. I hardly, however, think it necessary to go into details regarding the English-Boer War; enough has already been said from different sides as to the results likely to obtain on the workers; blind indeed are those who do not see them already. Aside of the increase of the cost of the coal and food, aside of your 50,000 children going to school without breakfast, you have sold your breakfast, you have sold your birthright for a mess of pottage; you stand before the world as willing slaves to the whims of robbers and thieves, and you have shown yourselves incapable (in spite of the gifts of chocolate from her gracious Majesty and plum-puddings from your aristocrats) of meeting and beating a handful of farmers!

Do not tell me Mr. Chamberlain is responsible for this war; it is you who are responsible, With Ruskin I can say: “There are two kinds of Slaves—one are scourged to their work by their whip; others by their ignorance; some are bought with money, others with panic [or promises of chocolate?] Again, it matters not what kind of work slaves do; some are set to digging fields, others graves; some press the juice out of vines, some the blood of men, but it is slavery just the same, because you do things at the bidding of others.”

Yes, fellow-workers, this is your curse—doing things at the bidding of others. When, oh when, will you learn to be yourselves, to think for yourselves, to act for yourselves? Not until you have learnt to understand the wrongs of War, of bloodshed, of legal murder and robbery; that all class and racial hatred is but the result of your ignorance, and that while you wilfully choose this ignorance you become the easy tools of your Governors, who are too cowardly to go out and fight themselves.

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