

The Power of the Ideal

Emma Goldman

1912

The man I touch, there awakens in his blood a burning fever, that shall lick his blood as fire. The fever that I will give him shall be cured when his life is cured.—Olive Schreiner, in “A Dream of Wild Bees.”

TWENTY years ago the Power of the Ideal touched my soul, and there awakened a burning fever. I thought then that the cure is the most desirable thing in all the world, the thing one must strive for, the thing so close at hand.

Since then I have learned that the inexorable, implacable Power of the Ideal concerns itself not with the cure; that it is itself the cure, that shall lick your blood like fire. This, too, I have come to know, that he who will be cured must forswear the Ideal. Never again shall the fierce, inspiring light lure him to its lofty heights; never again shall he know the longing for the thing that awakened him. to life. Such is the fate of him who has forsworn the Ideal.

Twenty years play but a small part in the eternity of time; yet in the face of disheartening, discouraging, and paralyzing events, twenty years themselves are an eternity. But once the fever is awakened, time and space become obliterated, blood and tears are wiped out, all pain and sorrow put to naught, by the compelling Power of the Ideal.

For a brief period it seemed almost as if American labor had been touched by the magic hand, as if its soul had been born to life with the burning fever to lick its blood as fire. But it was a false alarm, a mere symptom mistaken for the real thing. The danger is now safely locked away behind the iron bars of St. Quentin prison, and American labor has fallen back into its usual state of mental inertia and spiritual apathy. They saw in the McNamaras merely the cure; but to the force that consumed the two brothers as with the burning fever, the American workers remained blind and indifferent.

Thus the truism has again proven itself that they who aim but for the cure are doomed to die. It matters not of what nature the cure: it is never aught but a drug, never aught but an apology for the dying fires of the ideal, too weak to kindle into life the burning fever that shall lick one's blood as fire.

Nowhere is this truism borne out with greater force than among those who pass as Socialists to-day. Time was when they were awake with a burning fever, when the illuminating light on the mountain top drew them on with impelling force. But that time is no more. Instead, the Socialists are now content with the cure,—the most dangerous of all cures, the politic cure, which has drugged their ideal to sleep, and completely extinguished the fever within them.

In Cleveland and Lorain, in Elyria and Columbus, in Dayton and Indianapolis, in St. Louis and Chicago, the political quacks are busy concocting the pills that are to bring the cure. Woe be to him or her who refuses the proscribed dose! They are anathema, and must be stoned to death. Like the Catholic Church, the Socialist machine has become the relentless, blind foe of the Ideal.

In Cleveland the machine dictates who of its members may be permitted to face the heathen Anarchist in public debate. In Lorain and Elyria, in Columbus, Indianapolis, and St. Louis, the same machine proclaims the ban on those who will not be cured by the political quacks. But the place that has proved most conclusively that the Socialists in their mad clamor for the cure have lost their ideal, is Dayton, O.

Perhaps our readers had better judge for themselves, that they may fully realize what the political zealots are doing in the name of the burning fever that once licked the soul of Socialism as a fire. In Dayton, O., the following resolution and statement were adopted antagonizing the scheduled debate for Sunday between Emma Goldman, the Anarchist, and Frank Midney:

Resolved, That Local Dayton disapproves of any of its members debating with Miss Emma Goldman at this time, and hereby forbids such action on the part of any member.

Resolved, That we authorize and instruct our recording secretary to secure a competent person or persons to attend the Goldman debate, if it should be held, in order to accurately report the same to the local; but that outside the person or persons so chosen by the recording secretary, Local Dayton requests the Socialists to remain away from the proposed debate

Following is in part the statement prepared for the press:

The Socialist Party has reached the stage of its constructive work. Our ultimate object is to take over the collectively used means of life and conduct them democratically for all the workers, and so for all the human race. And our method is just as fully determined as our ultimate object. We propose to accomplish our work by patiently and persistently building a political organization of and by the workers, which organization shall at last secure the entire power of government. We work entirely in the open. We are opposed to intrigue and individual action. We seek the intelligent and collective action of all the workers.

We are therefore opposed to Anarchy in all of its forms. But we are especially opposed to the Anarchists who are in power, the Anarchists of corrupt government and corrupt business. These are the opposition to our cause, and we seek to meet them in the open and defeat them.

We would have taken no notice of Miss Goldman's visit to this city if the public had not been imposed upon. The Socialists of Dayton are not debating with Miss Goldman at this time. We ask all Socialists of this city (organized and unorganized) to remain away from the proposed debate if it is held. The Socialists will not be represented should the debate occur.

All members of Local Dayton are expressly forbidden to take any public part in the proposed event.

We warn the public in advance that if any "Socialist" demonstration or opposition is reported to have occurred at the debate, if held, it will be a demonstration of Anarchists masquerading as Socialists. The answer of the Socialists will be to remain away from the proposed occasion. If the general public is interested in knowing the authorized word of the Socialists of Dayton with reference to the alleged dynamiters, they are cordially invited to attend a free meeting at the Auditorium Theatre, Sunday night, where that subject will be discussed.

The sinner has since been excommunicated from the Socialist party, for a period of two years. Luckily this new church lacks the power to erect its scaffolds, or Mr. Midney would meet with the fate of the heretics of the past. It is to be hoped, for his sake, that he may see the terrible

danger of this growing inquisition which would, if it could, become the modern Torquemada, yet more cruel, because lacking even the vision of the Spanish predecessor. Such is the penalty for those who mistake the cure for the ideal. A cure indeed, from its own life-dream, its own inspiring purpose, its own idealism, even. A cringing, creeping, nauseating thing, is this cure.

It seems dark just now on the horizon of American life; yet there is a glimmering light in the distance, calling and comforting to him who can but see it. Lawrence, Mass., is that light,—and the burning fever its newly awakened, impelling force. Thus the Ideal is never to be eradicated.

My meetings, though small, have made up the lack of numbers by interest and enthusiasm for the light that streams from Lawrence. Everywhere this light is giving birth to new hopes, to a new chord in the great human struggle. Never once have I appealed in vain in behalf of Lawrence, the battle ground where the great fight is being waged so heroically. If, then, my work had accomplished nothing else, the help for Lawrence would surely justify the pain the tour entails.

“And the burning fever I shall give him shall not be cured until life is cured.” But life creates life; it therefore recreates the fever that shall lick the blood as fire. Such is the inexorable, implacable Power of the Ideal.

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