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FIRST EDITORIAL

THE BOSS SUPERSTITION.

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FREE traders, protectionists, goldbugs and 16 to 1 silverites charge one another with superstition; but true though these charges be, the superstition in all these instances does not begin to hold a candle to that of the old style British pure and simple trade union—a baneful superstition that the convention of shoemakers, recently held in Boston, again fell a victim to by subscribing to the dogma of “no politics in unions.”

The Hollander, born in a country where canals are a necessity, presently arrives at the notion that the canal is a good thing under all conditions, and in all climes, and in all countries. The canal becomes a superstition with him. He forgets that the canal in his own country was resorted to only in order to overcome an existing geographical evil. With him, the canal eventually assumed the significance of an ideal in itself, a thing to be worked for and lived for. It thus happened, humorously enough, that wherever a died-in-the-wool Dutchman went to, whether to South Africa or to Manhattan Island, the first thing he did was to dig a canal. The thing might be wholly superfluous, even ridiculous to everybody else’s eye; to his own it was a beau ideal, and the canal was dug. Thus they started one in the Dutch colony of the Cape of Good Hope; and thus likewise, when they landed here on Manhattan Island they forthwith cut the island in two and joined the East and North rivers by a superfluous, unseemly ditch.

The canal mania that pursues the Dutchman has its exact counterpart in the mania of the “Pure and Simple” union that pursues the unbalanced British proletarian.

In England, the worker was a political pariah until recently; even now the

franchise he enjoys is, to a great extent, illusory. Originally bereft of the political weapon whereby to wrench from his exploiter the public powers of oppression, he was by stress of circumstances constrained to limit himself to the strike and the boycott as his only weapons of warfare. The old-style British union was, accordingly, the child of such stepmotherly conditions. Hence arose the British “Pure and Simple” union, an organization that excluded all thought of the ballot, and consequently of politics as a means of warfare. Like the canal in Holland, the “Pure and Simple” trades union was a clumsy device dictated by local exigencies in England; and like the canal with the Dutch, it has become a mania with many Britons.

Similarly with the canal-struck Dutchman, we find the “Pure and Simple” struck Briton forgetting the genesis of his old-style labor organization; he, too, now imagines it an ideal institution, the best there is, the best possible; and he, too, whithersoever fate may lead his wandering steps, the first thing he does is to commit the insanity of building up a “Pure and Simple” union, even in countries, where, like here, the workers are armed with the ballot, and where, differently from olden days in England, they can combat the exploiting capitalist with both the economic and the political weapon.

It is, accordingly, no accident that the founders and present leading upholders of the “Pure and Simple” union in America are British—P.M. Arthur of the Brotherhood of Locomotive engineers, Robert Howard of the Textile Workers, William H. Foster, the founder of the International Typographical Union; John Jarrett of the Iron Workers, Ira Stewart, Robert Crowe and Joseph Wilkinson of the Tailors; Richard F. Trellick, who organized the National Trades Federation after the war; Fred Turner of the Goldbeaters, Josiah B. Dyer of the Granite Cutters, and some lesser lights like Sammy Gompers, Dan Harris, Harry Lloyd, Prof. Green Goods (alias George Gunton), Joseph P. McDonnell, Hugh McGregor, Bob Blissart and little Edward King, are all British by birth, and as hopelessly soaked in the British mania of pure and simpledom as the Dutch are in that of canaldom.

The lesser evil, the Dutch mania, did not long live in this country. The canal, dug across Manhattan Island, has long since been filled up by a sane population, and now the broad thoroughfare of Canal street has superseded it. But the greater

evil, the British mania of pure and simpledom, of deliberately and willfully stripping an American labor organization of its political power and thus laming it in its struggles against capital, seems more difficult to eradicate. But its days, too, are numbered. Vainly it seeks to cloak itself in the mantle of Americanism. There is nothing more repellant to American conditions than this British importation, which, if it were to last many more years, will help the capitalist class to deliver up this country, bound hand and foot, back to the European grandees who already to-day exploit it more ruthlessly than ever did King George in his palmiest days.

The British “Pure and Simple” superstition must go, or be uprooted by the intelligent organization of labor—the New Trades Union.

Transcribed and edited by Robert Bills for the official Web site of the Socialist Labor Party of America.
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