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FIRST EDITORIAL

WHAT ELSE THE CANNON IN THE TRANSVAAL IS SAYING.

By DANIEL DE LEON

Engels or Lassalle observed somewhere that the exploiting, labor-fleecing class in a community does not dominate only in the sense of oppressing the bodies of the working class, but also dominates the minds of the workers in the sense of placing upon these the stamp of its own habits of thought or mental characteristics. Events in South Africa are furnishing a striking illustration of this interesting phenomenon, and they are thereby throwing valuable light upon quarters least expected, to wit, the conduct of “pure and simple” trade union labor leadership.

Since the war broke out, five important actions have taken place: Elandslaagte, Maagersfontein, Stromberg, Colenso, and just now, Spion Kop; at each of these actions the British were put to shameful rout, suffering heavily in wounded, captured and killed; and at each occasion they were bested by the identical Boer strategy, to wit, caught in a trap, laid by the pretence of fighting at a certain place, luring the British thither, and thus catching them on a fire-swept spot. Brilliant tho' the strategy is, it has become monotonous by its unvarying iteration. It should seem that any one, even though not trained in arms, who was caught once or twice by the same stratagem, would be apt to become wary, learn from experience. Not so with the British officers in command. Caught twice, they learned nothing; did not even learn from the third experience; walked blindly into the fourth; and, with the confidence of inexperience, have just tumbled into the fifth trap, spread out before them in the identical way with all the previous ones, and been mowed down at Spion Kop. Surely such persevering in and total disregard of experience, or incapacity to improve by it, cannot be accidental; it denotes, it is a trait of character.

Now, turn to the conduct of “pure and simple” trade union labor leadership. What is seen there? The identical perseverance in and total disregard of experience

that characterizes the conduct of the British officers in South Africa. Labor revolt after labor revolt has flung itself against the trenches of capitalism, and has each time been resisted and crushed by the identical capitalist strategy. Indeed, as monotonously identical as the Boer traps are, are also the capitalist traps into which the working class has fallen, and been routed under “pure and simple” trade union leadership with the regularity of clock-work. The illusion of fighting capital with capital, the illusion of holding the interests of the Working Class to be identical with those of the Capitalist Class, the blindness to the fact that the Labor Movement is essentially a political question, the resulting principle of leaving the political power with the Capitalist Class or of even deliberately placing that decisive and deciding power into capitalist hands,—these are the lures with which Capitalism has for the last generations regularly entrapped the workers, and with which “pure and simple” trade unionism continues to be lured to successive massacres.

Such perseverance in stupidity, such utter disregard of experience on the part of the old style, or “pure and simple,” or British trade unionism in its struggles with the Capitalist Class was a mystery, puzzling to the observer. The talk of the cannon in the Transvaal is dispelling the mystery. One now understands how the thing comes about.

Pure and simple trade unionism, as often shown in these columns, is the legitimate child of England. Strained through the loins of British conditions, the “pure and simple” mind carries the stamp of the habits of thought and of the mental characteristics of its exploiting and dominant British class. Important features of these characteristics are now being heralded to the world from the military field of battle by the hoarse roar of the cannon in the Transvaal, and thus light, valuable, inestimable light, is thrown upon the conduct of “pure and simpledom” on the economic field of struggle.

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

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