

REPORT

NOTES ON THE STUTTGART CONGRESS.

By DANIEL DE LEON

V.

Political Life.

THE continent of Europe has been frequently charged with lack of “political life.” If pure and simple physical forcists had had a delegation at Stuttgart, they might have added that European parliamentary activity, besides having proved itself barren of results for the benefit of Labor, has not done to the parliamentarians themselves any good. It has not even trained them in the elementals of parliamentary practice. The general charge is, the specific charge would have been, justified.

“Parliamentary practice” is not “trickery.” There are folks who have the habit of attempting to conceal their ignorance on things they ought to know with an affection {affectation?} of contempt for such knowledge. Anyone, at all active in the Labor Movement, is familiar with the species here at home. They consist of a heterogenous element—frayed “intellectuals” and morally “slum proletarians.” If, for instance, an economic or sociologic principle is advanced, that happens to take the plug from under some of their pet schemes, or that is beyond the weak grasp of their intellects, forthwith, although charlatan-like they may have assumed the airs of vast erudition on the subject, they give the information, wholly superfluous in the case, that they are not “professors.” Similarly, if their intrigues are shattered by parliamentary tactics they contemptuously declare they are not experts at “parliamentary trickery.” The I.W.W. convention of 1906, where the long-plotted schemes, which the reactionists sought to force upon the organization, were baffled by parliamentary moves that disconcerted the intriguers, presented copious illustrations of both instances, as the stenographic report of that memorable gathering reveals. “Parliamentary practice” is a code of methods that experience has

found to be useful and necessary in order to ascertain the will of a gathering as clearly as possible, and with the least possible delay or friction. To a great extent “parliamentary practice” consists of conventionalities, but even including these, “there is a reason”—as the recent slang phrase goes. It goes without saying that familiarity with the reason for parliamentary methods is promoted by the political life of a people, or retarded by lack of the same. Here in America, a display of blundering ignorance on parliamentary elementals, or of clumsiness in their application, denotes unfitness; while gross violation of parliamentary elementals denotes moral uncleanness. The active political life of the land has popularized parliamentary practice—a great boon, in that it makes possible the organizing into intelligent active forces what otherwise would be mind-mobs. Not so in Europe. How torpid political life is yet there among the masses, as a whole, is exemplified by the parliamentary crudities, that even our Socialist comrades who are members of parliaments incur almost continuously at the International gatherings. Here are two illustrations:

Anseele, a member of the Socialist parliamentary group in Belgium, was the chairman of the Committee on Trades Unionism. The Baer (Austrian) Resolution was the first presented. All the other resolutions were amendments thereto—the I.W.W.-S.L.P. American Resolution included in that number. One after another the amendments were either dropped or incorporated in the original motion with the consent of the mover, until the Baer Resolution became what I called it, an Omnibus Bill. The exception was the I.W.W.-S.L.P. amendment. It declined to have itself dropped, and the mover of the original motion declined to incorporate it. Thus, there remained nothing before the house but the Austrian motion and the American amendment thereto. Parliamentary practice orders an amendment to be put first; if lost, then the original motion; or, if the amendment is carried, then, the “original motion *as amended*.” The reason is sound. It is a method essential to the ascertaining of “the exact sense of the house.” Any other method—such, for instance, as putting the original motion first and the amendment afterwards; or, in case the original motion carries, not putting the amendment at all—any such method would fail to ascertain the exact sense of the house. It would fail to afford the house the opportunity to express itself in detail, as well as in whole. Any such method would tend to suppress, rather than to bring out, the sense of the house. Anseele proceeded to put the original motion first, and, seeing the original motion

was certain to go through, his theory was that there would be no necessity of afterwards putting the amendment to a vote. Kautsky evidently shared the mistaken view. It was with difficulty that I, backed by the outcry of several other delegates, succeeded in bringing him over to my view sufficiently to take a vote on the I.W.W.-S.L.P. amendment also, and thus enable the American Resolution to secure a substantive expression of opinion. But, so imperfectly did he understand the parliamentary principle for which I contended, that he put the cart before the horse—polled the house on the original motion first, then on the amendment.

The second instance involved a similar principle, concerning the identical subject, the difference being the theatre of operations— the full Congress, with Singer, a Reichstag veteran, in the chair. The I.W.W.-S.L.P. Resolution, now a minority report, was treated as such only in the presentation of the same before the house. It was impossible to make Singer, with whom I argued extensively on the subject, see the point. His sole, and to him sufficient, parliamentary argument was that the majority report would undoubtedly carry with an overwhelming majority (ueberwaeltigen Majoritaet). He gave no heed to the reasoning, concerning the propriety of voting first on the minority report of a committee. Thus the only substantive expression on the American Resolution was secured in the Committee. At the full Congress a direct vote was taken only on the majority report.

Such “parliamentarism” as that of Anseele and Singer, if undertaken here in America, would justify the charge of chicanery—an attempt to prevent a poll upon an unpalatable proposition—a manoeuvre to suppress, instead of affording full swing to the “sense of the house,” which implies a proper respect to the rights of minority views. In the instances of Anseele and Singer nothing was further from their minds than any such indecorous purpose. Their honesty of purpose was transparent. They simply did not know better. Well it will be for them to learn—and they will, with the inevitable increase of political life on continental Europe.

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

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