

EDITORIAL

THE “RIOT COMMITTEE’S” REPORT.

By DANIEL DE LEON

THE report of the committee, appointed by the Mayor to investigate the riot at the funeral of Chief Rabbi Jacob Joseph on July 30, is not satisfactory. It is not satisfactory, not on the score of what it says, but on the score of what it does not say, and that should have been said by a committee of men truly public spirited and level-headed, who had an unparalleled opportunity to strike a note of warning on a rising danger, and thereby render a public service of no slight value.

The committee justly lays the responsibility for the disgraceful occurrences of July 30 upon the employes of the firm of R. Hoe & Co. at Grand and Sheriff streets; the committee justly finds the police negligent and culpable in several respects. On that score no fault can be found with the committee’s work. Nor can any fault be found with the committee for not having confined itself to the bare questions immediately at issue. The committee acted wisely in extending its investigations to the general conduct of the police and the courts on the East Side; and its comments cannot but appeal to every man who has any knowledge of that neighborhood. It was eminently proper for the committee, that had the riot question to look into and report, to call attention to the fact that the bearing of the police on the East Side is in many cases hard and inconsiderate towards the Jewish population; that the magistrates who hold court in the district show in many instances an inclination to consider their own comforts rather than their duty to administer justice carefully and intelligently; in short, that the riots were, to a certain extent, but the reflex of the attitude of those charged in the district with the administration of law. No fault can be found with either the facts ascertained by the committee, nor the construction that it put upon the mission that it was charged with.

And it is just by reason of its correct construction of its charge, causing it to extend its inquiry beyond the actual occurrence of July 30, and looking into the remoter causes,

that lays the committee open to the adverse criticism which its report deserves. The committee should have extended its inquiry to a matter that has called the attention and aroused the grave apprehension of the thinking portion of our population in all parts of the city—a matter that is intimately connected with the riots of July 30, and that foreshadows graver repetitions of the disgraceful occurrence, unless checked in time. That matter is the growing inclination on the part of certain religious denominations to extend their religious rites outside of their own private premises, in other words, indulging in religious demonstrations in public.

The wayfarer is, for instance, aware that, with increasing frequency, certain religious rites—processions headed and sprinkled with religious banners and other paraphernalia—are taking place on the streets in front of Roman Catholic churches. The wayfarer is also aware that these ceremonials are rarely unaccompanied with adverse criticisms, more or less loud, from knots of people who happen to be standing on the street, and are not of Roman Catholic persuasion. So far, these public ceremonials have led to no riots. The processions are short, the streets crossed are few, and, as a result, the knots of non-sympathizers are limited in numbers. But extend the length of the procession, add to it religious songs and other observances, let it cross longer areas of the public thoroughfares, and, as an inevitable result, the numbers of non-sympathizers with that particular form of ceremony will be proportionally bigger. Such outside ceremonials become religious or sectarian "demonstrations." They irritate in that they tend to awaken the slumbering ired of that worst of all passions, religious differences. All the elements are, in such cases, ready at hand for a riot. Any slight accident may set the train on fire. Was the funeral procession of Chief Rabbi Jacob Joseph the exercise of a purely civic right? All the reports accessible combine to show that it was not. The singing of Psalms and the practice of other rituals, reported to have been a feature of the funeral procession, took the affair out of the ordinary exercise of a civic right, and placed it in the category of a religious ceremonial, in other words, of a public religious demonstration.

Religious ceremonials should be confined to the private premises of religious bodies. There, no stranger, unless a voluntary visitor, is present, and common decency will restrain him from indulging in his private views. On the public thoroughfares,

however, the matter is reversed. The wayfarer of all denominations has a right to the undisturbed enjoyment of the streets; religious demonstrations are there as indelicate an obtrusion upon others of religious rites that they care not for or may dislike, as the conduct would be of a voluntary visitor, to a church, who would there manifest his private dislikes. But such public religious demonstrations are even worse than indelicate. The manifestations of ill-breeding on the part of a visitor to a church, from whose rites he dissents, can be easily suppressed; the results, however, of the dissent incited in large bodies of men by religious demonstrations obtruded upon them in public are serious—serious, not only in deplorable overt acts, but especially serious and far reaching in the more deplorable Old Adam that they conjure up.

It is to be regretted that the Riot Committee did not report upon this point, and recommend that ordinances be passed to check the dangerous tendency to public religious ceremonies that aided in the riots of July 30, and that incite even worse ones in the future. The committee missed the opportunity to render a positive service to the whole city.

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