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ARTICLE

FLASH-LIGHTS OF THE AMSTERDAM CONGRESS.

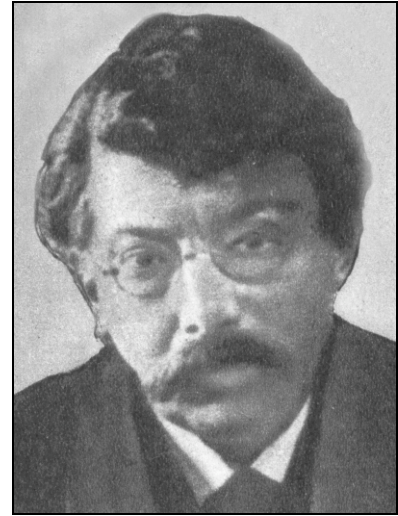
[Rather than try to give a condensed report of the Amsterdam Congress and what I saw of the European Movement in general, I shall present a series of articles under the above general head, subdivided under special heads. This flash-light method will be on the whole better. It will deal in detail with persons and things; and the flash-lights will, in the end, be seen to run into one another and portray the scene more effectively.—DANIEL DE LEON.]

IV.

VICTOR ADLER.

A STRANGE sensation comes over one when Adler speaks. He is a good speaker; he is an elegant speaker; he arrests the attention of his audience from the start, and keeps it to the finish, untired. One almost wishes to hear more. He spoke repeatedly in the committee. On one occasion he rose to submit a document, and started saying: "I'm not going to speak; only an explanation." Bebel thereupon called out to him banteringly: "Well, Victor, it must have pained you greatly to make the promise that you would not speak!" I leaned over to Kautsky, who sat just behind me, and asked him whether Adler was so fond of hearing himself talk? Kautsky answered with the neat epigram: "Whoever speaks well likes to speak." Indeed, Adler speaks well. He spoke often; yet, often tho' he spoke, he never said a foolish thing. Taken separately, in and by themselves, his sentences were weighted with wisdom. Nevertheless, taken connectedly, as speeches, in the place where and from the person by whom they were uttered, they were absurd—as absurd as a beautiful fish out of water, or a fine man under water. The finest of fishes is a corpse out of water, and so is the finest of men under water. They are out

of the conditions for their existence. In the council of war of Socialism, and in the mouth of the presumptive leader of a revolutionary movement in a great country like Austria, the nice balancing of pros and cons, the scrupulous scanning for possible evil in what seems good, and of possible good in what seems evil, the doubting and pondering—all that sort of thing is strangely out of place, downright absurd, however inestimable it may be in the philosopher's closet. It savors of the piping thoughts of peace, not of the rough thoughts of war. It savors of contemplative ease, not of action. The law of revolution is motion. Motion implies not necessarily hastiness: contemplation necessarily implies inactivity. As absurd as the revolutionist would be in a seance of philosophers, so absurd is the philosopher in a council of war. The former is a bull in a china-shop, the latter a mill-stone around the neck.



VICTOR ADLER (1852-1918)

I mean neither to flatter nor insult when I say that Adler is a Montaigne out of season. Montaigne, admittedly the philosopher whose thoughts, more than any other's, have been absorbed by the thinking portion of the world, had for his emblem a nicely balanced pair of scales, and for motto: "Que scay ie?" (What do I know, after all?) Every time Adler spoke, methought I saw Montaigne's emblem quivering over his head, with Montaigne's motto resplendent at its base. Rosa Luxemburg styled Adler's reasoning "sausage," what in America would be called "hash." Plechanoff brilliantly characterized it as the "theory of systematic doubt." Those who recall the witty, tho' often somewhat coarse, stories about General Geo. B. McClellan that sprang up during the Civil War, as the result of his Montaigne-like attitude in the field, may form a conception of Adler on the Socialist breastworks. The Adler-Vandervelde proposed resolution fittingly bears Adler's name as the first. What the Vandervelde contribution thereto meant I shall indicate when I come to Vandervelde himself. The document bore Adler's stamp in its paralytic contemplativeness.

Though not strictly germane to the subject of Adler, yet neither wholly disconnected therefrom, incidental mention may here be made, as food for thought,

that fraught with significance is the circumstance of such a resolution—presented, moreover, after full four years of Jauresist exhibition—being able to muster up such strong support at the Congress as to be defeated only by a tie vote. Nor is this other circumstance lacking of significance in the premises:—The International Bureau had declined to recognize the Socialist Labor Party of Australia, whose credentials I carried; it declined the recognition, despite that party's 25,000 votes; it declined the recognition on the ground that Australia was "a colony and part of the British Empire"; and it decided to postpone action upon the matter until the British delegation's views were obtained, myself notified thereof and the matter then taken up anew by the Bureau with fuller light. Now, then, despite all this: despite the credentials of the Australian S.L.P. being laid upon the table on the ground that Australia was "a colony and part of the British Empire," and as such, prima faciedly not entitled to separate recognition: despite any notification reaching me or action to the contrary being taken by the Bureau: despite all that, the very next day, what spectacle was that seen at the Congress?—the "colony and part of the British Empire," Australia, had a separate seat on the floor with a member of the British delegation, Mr. Claude Thompson, as the lone representative! And he cast the two votes of Australia (every nationality casts two) for, what resolution? FOR THE ADLER-VANDERVELDE RESOLUTION! Thus the two votes of Australia, manufactured in that manner, gave the resolution a chance; they came within an ace of triumphantly carrying the resolution over the stile. All comment is unnecessary either as to what had happened behind curtains, or what influences were at work.

Returning to Adler, talented tho' such a man is, his style of talent tells several tales on the movement that can evolute him to its head. The first of these tales is that the Austrian movement still vacillates on infant legs; the second, that the leader of the Austrian movement is still to appear. When he appears, when the current of the Austrian movement shall have gained steadiness of course, among the first of its acts will be to sweep the vacillating, the philosophic Adler aside. And when that day comes, probably no historian or philosopher will weigh the pros and cons of the removal with a more scrupulously judicial mind than will Victor Adler himself.

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

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slpns@igc.org