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THIRD EDITORIAL

WHAT ARE THE BRITISH CANNON SAYING IN SOUTH AFRICA?

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Stripped of all surplusage and more or less confusing elements, the struggle in South Africa simmers down to a very instructive lesson in capitalist sociology, taught by no mean authority, England, a leading capitalist nation, THE leading capitalist nation, as some claim.

Among the outrages charged by England against the Boers is that they will not allow the Uitlanders (British workingmen mainly, engaged in the mines, which British capitalists want to own), to exercise the right of suffrage. The Boers aver that these Uitlanders care nothing for the country; that they come there merely to make all they can, and then return home; that they think of nothing so much as of the day when they will leave the Transvaal; and that, consequently, such are not the elements that a nation can care to clothe with the suffrage, and give a voice in the affairs of the land. England demurred. Protracted negotiations followed at Bloemfontein. The negotiations broke off at the following point: The Boer negotiator demanded that the applicant for citizenship should renounce allegiance to the British Government; the British negotiator flatly refused. Thereupon war ensued.

Now, how is it in England in the matter of suffrage?

As a matter of fact, the British working class is disfranchised. Apart from the plural vote enjoyed by the property-holders; apart from the existing property qualifications that cut into the ranks of the workers;—apart from all that, the registration system and other “Law and Order” provisions in England, have the virtual effect of disfranchising the proletarians of England.

With a disfranchised proletariat at home, a proletariat that the British ruling class would do nothing to enfranchise, what is it that the British cannon are saying in South Africa, as they belch forth their powder and ball “in defence of the rights of suffrage of Englishmen” in the Transvaal? Are they simply announcing to the world

the hypocrisy of “our British cousins?” No; they are teaching something infinitely more important.

The ruling class of the Transvaal and the Orange Free State is well typified by “Oom Paul.” It is pre-eminently a landlord class, a class of large landed property, differing from the British old-style landlord class in this mainly that its income is derived from mining property, and not from rent-rolls. The landlord class proper has ever been fought by the capitalist class, with the proletariat as the club or food for cannon. When physical force was needed, the proletariat did the fighting; when physical force was not needed,—why, then, the proletariat did the voting for the capitalist class. That the capitalist is as quick to deprive the workingmen of the ballot, just as soon as that weapon is no longer needed against the feudal lords, does not affect the case. The same as soldiers are disarmed, war being over, so are the proletarians disarmed of the weapon of peaceful warfare, the ballot, just as soon as that is over; and for the same reasons: men in arms might use their arms in peace; the ballot might be used by the workers. What the British cannon in South Africa are saying is simply this:

“The British capitalist class made a miscalculation. It imagined that the Transvaal landlords had been overcome by the weapons of war, wielded by the British proletariat, under the command of the British capitalist class. It, accordingly, imagined that physical force warfare being over, the period of peaceful warfare, with the ballot as the weapon in proletariat hands, had arrived. Finding itself too previous, it takes a step back, and resumes physical force operations.”

Whether, in this instance also, British capitalism will prevail, will overcome the landlord, and, forming its proletariat into voting battalions, will later on continue the battle with the ballot in the Transvaal, is difficult to foretell. History does not always repeat itself. New conditions very materially affect the result of old forces. On the one hand, the Transvaal feudalists have themselves become quite capitalistic; on the other hand, the British proletariat may get tired of the Queen’s “sympathy” with their wounds, and do a turn for themselves.

In the meantime the British cannon continues to talk—but, ominously enough for capitalism pure and simple, more and more through their breeches, and less and less through their muzzles.

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

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