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Conquering a Nation with Bread¹

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¹ The fourth of a series of five articles on Industrial Democracy in Europe.

THE conquest of a nation through the stomach is the dream of the Party of Workers in Belgium. And the means employed is bread, the chief article of food in one of the most highly organized, the most densely populated, and in many ways the most poverty-stricken and ignorant country in western Europe. About bread and the misery of the peasant and the artisan a militant political party has been organized, which has grown in twenty-seven years from a mere handful of workers until it now has thirty-five members in the lower house of Parliament and seven Senators in the upper house, while the Councils of many cities are in its control, and over six hundred members of the legislative bodies of the towns and communes of the country accept its principles. The total vote of the party is half a million, in a country with a total population of but 7,161,000, and its leaders expect that after the election in 1910 it will control, or at least largely dictate, the policy of the party in power. All this has been brought about in a country where wages and incomes are pitifully low, where illiteracy is very high,² and the control of the government has been in the hands of the party of reaction for many years. The brain, the heart, and the will power of this movement is the "Maison du Peuple," the palace of the workingman in the capital of Belgium.

² Illiteracy is indicated by the candidates for the army. In 1902 there were 100 illiterates in Belgium out of 1,000 militiamen, as compared with one in Germany, Sweden, and Denmark, and as compared with 37 in England and 46 in France. Education is far from universal or compulsory. Nominally public, it is in the hands of the Catholic clergy. The manager of a large manufacturing plant in a village not far from Brussels told me that there was scarcely an employee in his factory who could read or write, while many employers executed their contracts with a mark instead of a signature.

Here in Brussels, in a prominent street, not far from the Palace of Justice, the Houses of Parliament, and the Bourse, is the clearing-house of social life, of education, of food, groceries, coal, and the necessities of life of the people; here is the center of countless political movements and labor organizations as well as of the Socialist International, with its millions of members and its rapidly advancing conquest of the workers of Europe.

The foundation of the Maison is the co-operative production of bread. The movement started in a cellar in 1882 with a capital of but \$120. It owned two hand ovens, had two employees and a dog to deliver its output to the fifty-four families who united in the cooperative movement. It obtained fifty sacks of flour on credit. Today it produces 10,175,000 loaves of bread a year, has 20,000 members, and is housed in a home of its own which cost \$240,000.

A quarter of a million dollars does not sound very big to us, accustomed to think in millions. But Belgium is a country in which a centime, a fifth of a cent, is the measure of value to the common people, where potatoes are the main article of food of a large part of the peasants and bread the universal diet of the millions who toil. To these people the wheat corner in Chicago increased the

cost of living more than the workers could have secured in wages in a great strike. And it affected them all. And while a single man was engaged in a tiger-like struggle in the wheat pit of Chicago the co-operative societies of Belgium were striving to find ways to escape an increase of two-fifths of a cent in the price of a loaf of bread. Strange anomaly! While private initiative, which we extol as a sacred right, brought starvation to hundreds of thousands, the spirit of co-operation, which is inspired by other motives than private gain, was bending its energies to protect a people from the unbridled license which it involved.

THE CONDITION OF THE WORKING CLASSES

Centimes really count in this country where men still work eleven and twelve hours a day and at the end of the week receive but three dollars in wages for their toil in industrial establishments; where children of not more than six years of age are found at work with their fathers in the building trades. Here the sweated home industry everywhere competes with the factory. Lace, embroidery, and glove making, the weaving of cotton and silk, are still carried on in the cottages of the peasants by men, while whole communities eke out the poorest kind of an existence on a small holding of rented land. Among these small tenants a single cow is too costly for the most ambitious dreams, while a single pig, a few sheep or chickens, are jealously cared for and everything that is produced is carried to the nearest village to be sold. Tens of thousands of people scarcely know the taste of meat, even when they produce it themselves. Yet this is a country which is cultivated like a garden. It is divided into small holdings, many of them less than an acre in extent. But they are not the holdings of peasant proprietors, such as prevail in France, in Holland, and in Denmark; they are the holdings of a rack-rented peasantry paying a large part of what they produce to a landlord, not unlike the tenants in Ireland.

I do not know the antecedents of the men whom I met who are devoting themselves to the co-operative movement, and through co-operation to the conquest of the State for Socialism. But they are not the kind of men one is led to believe control the labor movement. Many of them are cultivated, scientific, and practical. They are afire with an enthusiasm that evidently commands love and respect. They have a vision of the society they would call into existence on earth as definite and as clear as the mental pictures of the future life that sent the Inquisition into the Netherlands and inspired William the Silent and his people to the defense of Protestantism.

The Maison du Peuple, from which their work is carried on, is an oasis in the midst of ignorance, reaction, and oppression. As the present Director, Alphonse Octros, said, "Through it the workers gain force and courage for the combat against social iniquities. They come to understand how to control themselves and to love and to aid one another by mutual effort." Its legal title is the Co-operative Society of Workers. Its motive is the production and sale of the necessities of life to the people at cost. It was born of the oppression of the working class. The establishment of the Maison du Peuple was the beginning of the present propaganda for the cooperative movement which has since spread all over Belgium.

THE GROWTH OF THE MOVEMENT

The movement grew rapidly. From 1882 to 1886 the production increased to 3,000 loaves a week. Then came the idea of bigger things. An unused synagogue was rented on the Place de Baviere. A cafe was opened. Headquarters were provided for the labor unions and affiliated organizations. There was a large hall for all kinds of meetings. The little co-operative bakery became a political and trades union movement. To the workers the new home seemed like a palace. By 1888 the production of bread had increased to 8,000 loaves a week. In 1889 it doubled again. Then a butcher shop was opened. Coal, butter, and all kinds of groceries were added. In 1891 free medical attendance was provided for the members, along with a free dispensary. This is one of the most valuable institutions of the movement. For the insignificant sum of one cent a week members command the services of any one of twenty-six excellent physicians employed by the Maison. There are specialists in the eye and ear, the throat, and the nose. There are also a free dental dispensary and a free pharmacy. In addition there is an arrangement for free legal services for those who are in trouble.

In 1899 the Maison du Peuple moved into its present home, on Joseph Stevens Street. The clubhouse cost \$240,000. It is four stories in height- Across the face of the structure are tablets bearing the names of Marx, Proudhon, Volders, and others. The building itself was erected for the purpose. It is a combination club-house, cafe, general store, and office building for the labor movement and Socialist and co-operative propaganda. On the lower floor is a cafe, with a seating capacity of eight hundred persons, where beers, light wines, coffee, and food are sold at a low cost. Beer costs two and a half cents a glass, wines from two to three cents, and coffee two cents. The use of spirits is discouraged, and temperance is promoted by the substitution of lighter drinks. On the same floor is a billiard hall. In the cafe one finds crowds of men and of women, by day as well as in the evening, playing cards, checkers, backgammon, and enjoying themselves in the way that Continental people do in their cafes. Here are to be found the daily papers. To the right as one enters is a general store where clothing and household utensils are sold. On the floor above are the offices of administration from which the affairs of the Cooperative Society as well as the work of the Socialist International and the local trades unions is carried on. Here are some fine paintings representative of social problems; here are the meeting-rooms for allied working-class movements; here are a good library filled with carefully chosen books, and offices for the propagation of the movement, both local and general. Upon the top floor is the Salle des Fetes, where Socialist and labor congresses meet. Here two or three times a week cinematograph entertainments of carefully selected subjects are given, while on Sunday evenings concerts and dramatic performances are given by members of the Maison or invited artists. I attended a concert given by the members of the Theatre des la Monnaie in May last. It was like the best symphony concerts of America. There was nothing that was frivolous. The audience was critical and appreciative. The concert lasted till nearly midnight. The hall was crowded with what looked like a middle-class audience of clerks, small business men, and artisans. There was little to suggest poverty. Possibly the charge of ten cents was prohibitive. There was a fine *camaraderie* between the audience and the performers. Many of the artists were Socialists, which seems to be not unusual in Belgium, for Socialism is the party which protests most strongly against the Catholic Church and its influence in politics.

In this hall, supported by a very small charge for admission, the cause of the workers is promoted by the presentation of serious plays, by lectures and concerts, while the cinematograph is used, not only to entertain, but to instruct by homely and trenchant mottoes which appeal to the children.

The cause of the workers has become the cause of the artist in Belgium. The wonderful productions of Meunier, like "The Dock Laborer," which has been purchased by the city of Antwerp and placed in front of the Fine Arts Museum, his "Ruddier," in the Royal Museum of Sculpture in Brussels, are masterpieces of the soul of art going out to those who toil. Meunier made the docker, the miner, the glass-worker, and the peasant the symbol of modern life, and bronze and plaster reproductions of his masterpieces confront one in the library of almost every social worker. At Ghent the workers erected a studio for van Biesbroeck and his son, and assure them an income so that they may devote themselves to the pursuit of art without concern for their livelihood. The work of the younger van Biesbroeck adorns the halls of the co-operative establishments of Belgium and preserves to future generations the condition of the workers of today, much as the great Flemish masters of the seventeenth century preserve to us the religious fervor of their times.

Art, music, and the drama—all these things form a part of the co-operative movement in Belgium. Not the cheap and the tawdry, not the vulgar and the low, such as is given to us by managers in America, on the plea that this is what the American people want, but the best, the highest, and the most worth while that their limited means permit them to produce. When one sees the eager, awakened look in the eyes of tire working classes, one is forced to wonder whether the theatrical managers in America who insist that we get what we really want do not really give us what they themselves want—what appeals to their uncultured if not vulgar ideals, assuming that what pleases them must be the universal taste of the people.

THE RESULTS OF CO-OPERATION

The Maison du Peuple has reduced the price of bread from seven and eight cents to six cents a loaf, while the private bakers have been forced to give honest weights and pure bread. At the end of every six months the Maison returns to the members in the form of dividends three centimes on each loaf of bread purchased and five centimes on each sack of coal. The savings on the domestic budget from this source for six months amount to from twenty to forty francs, according to the amount of the purchases. This dividend is sufficient to carry the worker over a period of idleness during the winter. The Maison also pays its employees a minimum wage of five francs a day for eight hours' work. It gives a week's vacation each year on full pay, six percent of the profits, and permits the employees to select eight men on the Board of Managers. It insures those who desire it against sickness and accident, and all day long women may be seen paying their assessments, which amount to from two to four dollars on entrance, with a monthly assessment of twenty cents for an insurance of fifty cents per day in case of sickness and a death benefit of fifty dollars. The mutual insurance scheme has 2,800 members, and in ten years' time

has paid out \$60,000 in benefits.

In sixteen years the sale of bread has amounted to seven million dollars, and the profits to almost exactly a million dollars. Mechanical ovens were introduced in 1892. By reason of this change the private bakers were forced to adopt mechanical ovens and meet the price of the cooperatives. During the recent rise in the price of flour the Maison kept down the cost of bread, and by so doing saved the consumers of Brussels the sum of \$500,000 a year.

The Maison now has six local clubs located in different parts of the city. It has thirty-nine establishments, including one large central store, twenty-six groceries, a coal-yard, many bakeries, etc. Its annual turnover is \$1,100,000, and its total capital invested amounts to \$800,000. The balance-sheet for the half-year ending December 31, 1908, shows how its profits are expended: \$7,500 was spent for medical gratuities; \$2,000 for free bread to members in need; \$5,250 for propaganda work, subsidies, aids, and labor unions; \$30,000 was distributed to bread purchasers, \$4,000 to grocery purchasers, and \$4,000 to other purchasers. The total profits for six months were \$60,000, or at the rate of \$120,000 a year. The total receipts were as follows: Bread, \$300,000; groceries, \$90,000; coal, \$50,000; novelties, etc., \$45,000; cate, \$28,000; butcher shop, \$43,000; and other sources, \$24,000.

THE DREAM OF THE CO-OPERATIVE

It is a regular dynamo, this home of the people, erected from the centimes of the poor and ceaselessly boring its way into the life of the people by means of a loaf of bread. For it first feeds, and then, through the stomach, it brings the people into social, political, and educational contact and companionship. From 1883 to 1906 the profits and benefits of co-operation have amounted to \$1,290,000. This sum has been paid back to the purchasers, has been used for medical services or for the promotion of propaganda work in the enlarging of the cooperative movement or the promotion of the political cause of the workers.

There is something that is sublime in the faith and the dreams of these men who for more than a quarter of a century have been laboring to awaken the workers of Belgium to combined effort in their own interest. "And the end of all this," I asked Camille Hausmans, the Secretary of the International Socialist Organization, as we stood in the office of the Director-General of the Maison du Peuple; "what is it that you plan to do with all this machinery?" "We aim to become the John D. Rockefeller of Brussels, and then of all Belgium," he smilingly replied. "And then?" I asked. "Then we aim to secure a monopoly of all other things, and finally, of course, to bring about the Socialist commonwealth."

The little group of co-operatives who were standing around smiled approval, as though this were a commonplace and the outcome were as assured as the rising of the morrow's sun. There was so much confidence, so much courage, so much sweetness, and so much calm, businesslike intelligence about it all. They meant what they said, and they were working for the control of Belgium with all the assurance in the world. The growth of the movement is some reason for their assurance. Co-operation has spread far beyond the boundaries of Brussels. Every town has

its Maison du Peuple. In Ghent the workers secretly secured possession of a fine old house in an aristocratic quarter of the city. They called the home "Our House." Other cities have adopted different names, such as "Progress," "Equality," "Union," "Fraternity," and the like. But all of them require their members to sign the following pledge before they can enter the co-operative organization: "The Maison du Peuple is a Socialist co-operative. Co-operatives by their signatures to the books of the society give their adhesion to the Belgian working party to which they are affiliated." The total membership of all of the locals is 134,694. The total sales of all the local organizations amounted to eight million dollars in 1908, and the profits to one million dollars. The total capital invested was \$2,850,000.

CO-OPERATIVE FEDERATION

In 1900 almost all of these societies were federated into a central body for the purpose of producing and buying in common. The federation did not have a sou when it started, but the sales for the first year amounted to \$154,000. By 1908 the sales had grown to \$600,000. Cooperative manufacturing plants now exist for the production of cotton, linen, hosiery, tobacco, baskets, and boots and shoes. There are iron foundries, printing and carpentering establishments. There are breweries and stone-quarrying co-operatives. The advantages of this central organization, as set forth in the articles of organization, are: First, cheapness in the making of purchases; second, exact measure and good quality of goods; third, the saving to the workers of all that is produced and the elimination of the middleman; fourth, the encouragement of libraries, education, conferences, and the like; fifth, better conditions of employment for the men, and a partial control over the administration. Thus the whole nation is being united about the production, exchange, and consumption of wealth. Thousands of men are being trained in the management of productive enterprises and in practical politics. Ideals are being created and the practical business of administration and of legislation is being learned in the City Councils and in Parliament.

THE POLITICAL PROGRAMME OF THE PARTY OF WORKERS

There is nothing that is revolutionary, nothing that is immoral, nothing that is even very radical about the aims of these Socialists. For the Party of Workers in Belgium is an opportunist party. It leaves its locals free to work with liberals, Radicals, or even with the Conservative Catholic party when the emergency makes it advisable to do so, although it prefers that the locals should keep themselves free from all alliances. The immediate programme, so far as the nation as a whole is concerned, would commend itself to the most conservative American. It includes, as the first step, the abolition of the system of plural voting, by which the property classes have two, three, and even four votes, according to the amount of their wealth, and the substitution of the principle of one man and one vote. Second, the introduction of universal public education, which shall be compulsory, for, while education is nominally public, the Conservative or Church party has placed the administration of the law in the hands of clerical teachers, who have limited it as much as possible. The third step in the programme is the revision of the system of taxation so that it will be modern, for Belgium still levies its national taxes on a system that prevailed in

France prior to the Revolution. It still has the window-tax, and many other mediaeval survivals. These proposals, with legislation providing for some sort of insurance against industrial accidents and for old age pensions, is the programme of the Socialist party, which plans, to work with the Radicals and the Liberals in the Parliament to be elected in May, 1910.

In the cities the programme is equally moderate. It is always the next step. It includes the payment of a fair wage in all public work, the municipalization of the tramways, electric lighting, water and gas supplies, and the feeding of school children. These, with the housing of the working classes, which is already under way in Brussels, where two and one-quarter millions are being spent on a project of this kind, as well as the taxation of the unearned increment of land, which has made such rapid progress in Germany, is the local programme of Socialism. Not that the members of the party accept this as final. They have their eyes upon the working class State. But they are Fabians rather than absolutists, and more than any place else in Europe seem to appreciate the fact that Socialism involves training, education, experience, and a sense of solidarity and unity before it can hope to come into its own.