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The Russian Famine

DESPATCHES in the press paint horrible pictures of famine conditions in Russia. It is beyond doubt that sections of that country have been badly affected by the drought which has also affected other sections of Europe, thus entailing serious crop failures. But experience of the kind of information on conditions in Soviet Russia furnished by the capitalist press in the past, causes us to accept with wariness the particularized incidents of the famine reported in despatches from such centres of hostility to the present regime in Russia as Paris, Warsaw, Helsingfors, etc. Experience has shown us that Moscow is a much more reliable source of factual information, good or bad, in its import, than any from those haunts of "our own special correspondent." In the meantime, we wait for details from where our confidence rests, Moscow. In a recent despatch from there Tchicherin, the Soviet Minister of Foreign Affairs, stresses the seriousness of famine conditions and appeals for assistance, but denies the truth of the stories of riotous disturbances and atrocities. He promises as soon as possible, full and detailed information on the conditions and needs of the population in the drought stricken areas.

Invariably, the despatches relating to the Russian famine and editorial comments thereon, cast reflection on the Soviet administration as being the major cause of the calamity. This is untrue and constitutes an ungenerous and base turning of the, under the circumstances, unpreventable, and thus involuntary misfortunes of the Russian people, into a partizan advantage. There are, of course, reasons for this action of the agents of the press. A few words on these reasons, as well as a brief review of the circumstances with which the workers' republic of Russia has had to contend during the period of its existence since 1917, will not be amiss.

The population of the world is, perforce, dependent on the capitalist news collecting agencies and the periodical press for the collection and distribution of news of affairs and events. The different units of that press organization represent capital investments, often huge ones, and are thus profit making institutions. The profits of publication of a periodical depend on its success as a vehicle for business and trade advertisements, which success is again determined by the extent of its circulation among the people. Returns from sales and subscriptions are now a matter of wholly secondary consequence. Besides being a vehicle for advertisements the function of the press, is supposedly to convey information and news of facts. When we consider that a newspaper or a magazine represents a capital investment dependent for its source of profits on the goodwill of its advertising clientele among the business elements, it is easy to imagine, and capable of proof by a study of the methods of the press, that facts and information adverse to particular business interests, or to the profit system as a whole, undergo a radical change by the time they reach the public, after being strained through the fine mesh of censorship voluntarily established by the press itself. Not alone does the mis-named public press resolve itself into a partizan organ for the suppression and distortion of facts and ideas adverse to the established order, but it is also a vast far-sounding megaphone propagandizing as occasion demands for some one or other particular capitalist interest, or group of interests, and always without ceasing, for the interest of the established order as a whole. Whenever and whatever his own occasions, or the occasions of his

group interests demand, when Northcliffe roars, all his thousand editors and press agents throughout the world roar in unison, purveying not facts, not information, but ideas, opinion. In the morning and in the evening, the world has ready-made opinion served up to it in the items of news of passing events, in comments, admonitions, and in the snobbish gossip concerning the activities of the parasitic group calling itself "society." It is opinion into which is wrought traditional sentiments, prejudices and habits of belief; consequently, it is opinion as easily assimilated as the mush at breakfast or the kipper at supper time.

The attitude of the capitalist press towards Russian conditions in the recent past has been characterized by an unscrupulous and partizan use of actual, though largely unavoidable, evils, and an unscrupulous invention of imaginary ones, not in order to enlist sympathy for the masses in Russia, but to discredit the Soviet regime in that country. No editorial heartstrings were wrung when the entire population of Russia was segregated, cut off from the resources of civilization by the economic blockade declared by the Allied powers, which blockade, super-imposed upon that one which was a natural outcome of war conditions commencing in 1914, has isolated Russia for nigh on seven years from a civilization, one of whose chief characteristics is the technological one of specialization of function in productive activities among nations as well as individuals. Thus the existence of any people is absolutely dependent on intercourse and exchange of products with the rest of the world. Coldly, calculatingly, our most noble and Christian editors speculated and prophesied as to how long a people could stand the strain of want imposed by the policies of the leading powers (leading to where?) of civilization. The Russia of pre-war days under the reactionary rule of bureaucratic Czarism, it is well known, was a backward corruptly managed and desperately poverty-stricken nation. To this politically and economically diseased inheritance out of the past, add the disastrous effect of the war in completely wrecking such economic organization as there had been. Add also the counter-revolutionary activities, both internal and external, foes within, and foes without invading over every frontier, aided and abetted by the great nations with left-over munitions from the great war, with military forces, with finances, together with that barbarous economic blockade which denied the Russians even medical supplies, that last poor boon of diseased and wound shattered humanity. Nevertheless, hostile prophesies and the more tangible, hostile efforts to overthrow the Workers' Soviet Republic have failed dismally. And now comes this last nature borne calamity of drought and failure of crops. The editors and correspondents are again hopeful of counter-revolution. They suggest that the Soviet administration is at fault. They suggest that it has not organizing ability even to distribute supplies if they could obtain them. To which, the history of its triumph over unparalleled problems during this last few years gives the lie.

Have the editors no unsolved problems in their own countries, no skeleton in the closet, a meditation upon which should shatter complacency and make for self-abasement and fellow-feeling to the Russian people deeply in trouble? That bloody holocaust in Europe, in which millions, the flower of manhood, were swept out of existence? The force of facts now comes to light, drives towards a general

consensus of opinion of a common responsibility for that unredeeming catastrophe, and that the myth of a guilty nation no longer suffices as an explanation! And since: What of the social situation for the working masses in your own countries where capital reigns dominant and the class you speak for has all power, either for good or ill, boasting claimants of a monopoly of organizing intelligence, preachers of homilies to Soviet Russia! Is there here an abundant and even distribution of social wellbeing? The facts of the situation say otherwise!

At the height of the busy season of the year in the United States there are now over four million wage earners out of work, many with dependents. The conditions in Canada are proportionately the same or, as this country is an economic annex of the States they are probably worse. Materially, for masses of the people, their position is a desperate one, and morally, despicable and debauching, for they are rapidly becoming habituated to pauperism through a system of doles, as were the discharged slaves and workless proletarians of Ancient Rome.

Yet here in north America, nature is not niggardly but bounteous. The climate conditions have been normal, even better than that, taking the country as a whole. Here are not invading armies, or contending forces of warring domestic factions to disturb the peaceful carrying on of industrial activities. Even the late war, remote from us, fostered and developed our industrial organization instead of destroying it, as it did in Russia and some other countries within the war zone. Here is no declared economic blockade. To this North American community the avenues to all the resources of modern civilization are free and open. Here is no inheritance out of the past of abnormally retarded economic development, or of crippled economic powers. Instead, it is universally recognized that this community stands at the peak of human endeavor in productive power. Here there is abundance of modern material equipment for productive purposes, much of it standing idle; Russia is almost without it. Here there is an industrial population, skilled in the arts of modern production. Russia's population is largely untrained and unskilled in modern ways of production. Russia suffers from a shortage of things for reasons herein stated. With us there is an abundance of things, of skill and knowledge, of material means of production and natural resources, yet there is also suffering here. Great numbers of the people are approaching destitution and desperation, and the outlook for next winter is a black one for the North American community. With like conditions present in every capitalist country in the world, (two and a half millions out of work in England) yet possessing such superior advantages over the people of Russia, how can our editors boast of our accomplishments and sneer at Russia's in the face of the manifest failure of our own industrial system as a going concern, to supply a better standard of well-being than it does to the community as a whole? Is their capitalist mentality logic-tight, impervious to the bombardment of facts in their own social situation which are a reproach to the age we live in? Belief in their sincerity we extend to the misinformed, uncritical, readers of the press who still see the social situation through the glamour of traditional preconceptions. But not to the editors: they handle the facts, and by the legerdemain of their craft, turn them into unrealities.

Russia had its famines prior to a working class administration gaining power in that country. Another article in this issue, "Russia's Famine," furnishes evidence of that.

C. S.