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DOCUMENTS

4th Commission : ALCOHOLISM

REPORT BY VANDERVELDE

We do not propose to describe in this report the immense evil which the consumption of alcohol inflicts on the working class, by absorbing a considerable portion of its resources, peopling the hospitals, prisons and lunatic asylums with alcoholic persons; at the same time injuring its powers of labour, its combative energy, and the collective value of the generations which it will beget.

In the present state of Socialist opinion, such a description would be needless. Nobody contends any longer that the Social-Democracy can dissociate itself from the problem of alcoholism; besides the very fact that the International Socialist Bureau has been unanimous in placing the question on the agenda of the Vienna Congress renders it unnecessary for us to lay further stress upon it.

But if we concur in recognizing the evil, divergencies of view show themselves on the means of combatting it, and no doubt we shall once more find at the Congress the " moderates " and the " total abstainers " at close quarters.

Our personal opinion is known already. In a treatise published in 1906 (1) replying to a speech delivered at the Congress of Mainz

(1) *Essais socialistes : l'Alcoolisme, la Religion, l'Art.* Paris : Alcan, 1906.

by our fellow-reporter, comrade Wurn, we took occasion to elaborate the point of view of those Socialists who are total abstainers..

We then took the liberty of sending it back, reserving to ourselves the bringing before the Congress of certain new facts and arguments in support of the following theses :-

1. Alcohol, ethylic alcohol, is a poison, like morphine or arsenic.
2. Apart from cases where it can be prescribed medically it would not be a question of distinguishing between its use and abuse : to take a little is to take a little of what is bad ; to take much is to do injury to oneself.
3. All drinks containing alcohol — wine, beer, cider — are more or less harmful. Their degree of harmfulness depends upon their alcoholic strength. Beers like lambic, stout, uitzet, contain from 6 to 9 per cent of alcohol ; wines from 10 to 20 per cent. In many countries alcoholisation by wines or beers causes more disasters than alcoholisation by spirits.
4. It is not true to say that, under the capitalist system, with its bad conditions of work and existence, the workers must inevitably consume alcohol. It is the poorest, on the contrary, who will have the strongest interest against the consumption of dear drinks, containing next to nothing of nutritive element, but on the contrary a dangerous poison.
5. It is true that the workers, badly fed, badly housed, badly treated from every point of view, are more inclined than others to seek forgetfulness of their sufferings and anxieties in alcoholic narcotics. Consequently improvements in the conditions of existence for the proletariat is one of the most efficacious means of fighting against alcoholism.
6. But by the side of this indirect action comes direct action, and experience shows that this direct action gives serious and lasting results, if it is lead by men who preach by example, men who are for the propǎganda of deed, and who, without wanting an excessive austerity for others abstain totally and strictly themselves from all

drinks containing alcohol, whether in wine, beer, or other fermented liquor.

7. We are personally inclined to believe that the form of organisation most suitable for the conduct of such direct action is that of the Independent Order of Good Templars, which, being politically neutral, leaves the most complete political liberty to its lodges. At this moment several among them are affiliated to the Socialist Party.

8. The Socialist Good Templars, and other groups of Socialist teetotalers, independently of their general action against alcoholism, should assign to themselves a special mission for organising the propaganda inside the Party itself, to act particularly upon young militants, to convince their comrades of this fact, that the depressing and paralysing action of alcohol reduces the fighting energy of the proletariat, and where it reaches a certain degree, it renders it incapable of all patient and sustained effort. We say nothing about the resources which money spent on alcohol takes away from the political and economic organisation of the workers.

It goes without saying that we do not ask the Congress to pronounce for or against these various theses by the vote of its majority. We recognise readily that many among them lend themselves to controversy. If men of science are agreed in recognising that massive doses of alcohol constitute a dangerous poison, they are not unanimous in admitting with Kraepelin, Smith, Forel, Laitinen, that even a moderate consumption of wine or beer is not only useless but harmful. The decision on that point must rest with further experimental researches and not with a vote of the Congress. But what we can ask, what we have the right to ask of the Socialist and Labour International is to pronounce distinctly in favour of direct action against alcoholism, and to examine the best means of rendering such action effective.

For a long time, indeed, opinions have not been definite in this respect. Numbers of Socialists fear that an anti-alcoholic propaganda will only turn militants of the proletariat aside from more urgent and essential tasks. It was not very long ago when in Germany, for example, the Congresses at Hanover and Mainz gave expression to the opinion that anti-alcoholism, like religion, should remain a pri-

vate matter. To-day, happily the contrary opinion tends more and more to prevail, and everything goes to show that the Congress of Vienna will be almost unanimous in adopting a resolution analogous to that which was voted in Germany ten years ago at the Social-Democratic Congress at Bremen :

« Granting the immense evil that alcohol does to the working class, to the point of becoming a serious obstacle to the realisation of our ends, it is absolutely necessary to fight against the abuse of alcohol among the workers. It consequently calls upon all the militants, and above all the Party press, to draw the attention of the workers to the dangers of alcoholism much more than in the past. »

It will not be enough, however, to proclaim purely and simply the necessity of direct action against alcoholism on the part of the Socialist Party. It will still be necessary to look for the means of organising such action so that it shall have the maximum of useful effect.

Our anti-alcoholic propaganda must use other arguments and methods than those of the bourgeois teetotal leagues. We have not the religious preoccupations of the « Blue Cross » or the « Old Order of Good Templars. » We are not inspired solely by hygienic and moral considerations, as are most of the temperance leagues. We intend to preach war against alcohol by making an appeal to the conscience of the proletarian class, by showing it all that it dissipates of its resources and forces in drinking, all that it will gain by not drinking ; and thus it is into the workmen's groups, the co-operative societies, the friendly societies, and the trade unions that we propose to carry our efforts.

In our opinion, our anti-alcoholic groups, whilst having relations with the entire teetotal movement, should be groups of Socialists and workers.

On the other hand they should be total abstinence groups for reasons which we have set out elsewhere and indicated in the present report.

We have experience, moreover, in this respect.

At the outset we have generally found it more reasonable simply to preach moderation, to establish temperance societies which will urge their members to avoid the abuse of alcohol, though not proscribing the use of strong drinks.

Some years ago, for example, we founded our first league at Brussels under these conditions—the « Socialist League against Alcoholism. » Its success was but slight, and it was not long before it fell to pieces, like most of its fellows, because nothing is more dangerously elastic than moderation, or any willingness to compromise with alcoholism ; therefore it is necessary to carry personal example into our propaganda.

But, on the other hand, without being deterred by obstacles which appeared insurmountable in a country where it is not water but beer which constitutes the fourth element, we have established first one, then several, lodges of Socialist Good Templars. At first the difficulties were exceedingly great. For some time the number of members was ridiculous. But the *propaganda of deed* has at last made an impression. The future is henceforth assured. Generally speaking, too, all those who have studied the anti-alcoholic movement in different countries have, by the evidence of facts, been brought round to recognise that much more satisfactory results will be obtained from propaganda by abstinence than by moderation.

On this matter most assuredly we do not pretend to impose our preference upon others, or to discourage the efforts of those who have a different conception to ours of the methods to be employed in the fight against alcoholism.

Even where they may recognise the superiority of total abstinence groups, many of our comrades are repugnant to adopting the ritual and pledges of the Good Templars.

But here, again, we must appeal to experience.

When we established the League of the Order of Good Templars, « Egalite N° 1, » at Brussels, many of our friends came to us and said : « We are willing to abstain from alcoholic drinks, but we do not want to enter the Order of the Good Templars. »

And when we put their scruples before Forel, the Grand Chief of the Order, he said to us : « It is very simple. Establish a Socialist abstinence group by the side of our lodge. But I predict that, within six months, the group will no longer exist, while a considerable number of the members will be affiliated to the lodge. »

It was as Forel had said. The abstinence group, not having sufficient bond among its members, soon died a natural death. The fraternity of the lodge, on the other hand, survived all difficulties.

Personally, then, whilst admitting to the full that experience in Belgium, France, and Switzerland cannot be of equal value for

other countries, we are nevertheless inclined to believe that the form of organisation best suited to influence direct action against alcoholism is that of the Independent Order (Neutral) of Good Templars. We therefore think it well to give certain indications of its main principles.

The Independent Order differs from the Ancient Order, from which it is a secession. It is founded upon a basis of absolute political, philosophical and religious neutrality. In the struggle against alcoholism it can thus gather together men of all opinions and convictions. But if, so far as the Order is concerned, it is neutral, its lodges have full and entire liberty of action from the three points of view which we have indicated.

Thus it is, for example, that the « Egalite N° 1 » Lodge has its office at the Maison du Peuple, that it is affiliated to the Labour Party, and participates actively in the general Socialist propaganda.

It is known, on the other hand, that to become a member of the Order of Good Templars, it is necessary to make a double pledge :

1. To banish personal, even occasional, consumption of all intoxicating drinks, save when medically prescribed—wine, cider, beer, alcohol of all kinds, and to proscribe also all usage of stupefying poisons such as morphine, opium, hashish, cocaine, ether, etc.

2. Neither to buy, manufacture or sell, or offer any drink containing alcohol, and to do nothing which may countenance the production of or commerce in intoxicating drinks.

These pledges—which can be taken for a time or for life—will doubtless appear rigorous to many of those who read this report. We are certainly not naive enough to believe that the mass of Socialist workers belong to these groups, or groups founded on analogous principles. But we are profoundly convinced that the militants of the Socialist Parties, the leaders of the working class organisations, will render an inestimable service to our cause if, by their example, they will show that it is possible and advantageous to dispense entirely with alcohol, even in the form of fermented drinks.

We shall certainly not make ourselves ridiculous by pretending that a little beer or wine can appreciably hurt those who consume

it, even daily. In the course of our existence as Socialists we undoubtedly do many things infinitely more prejudicial to our health—if only in passing interminable evenings in the midst of a thick smoke, in the poisoned atmosphere of meeting places.

To speak frankly, we do not see, from the individual point of view, a striking difference between the very moderate use of beer or wine, and complete abstention from alcoholic drinks.

If, therefore, we recommend total abstinence it is less in the interest of those who abstain than of those who abuse—less from the object of individual hygiene than from social propaganda.

It will not do, indeed, that the workers whom we counsel not to drink alcohol in the form of brandy should be able to say that it is only too easy to give them such advice, when we ourselves do not abstain from alcohol in the form of beer, burgundy or champagne.

We know well—the editorial staff of the « Vorwärts » recalls it slightlyingly—that for many of our comrades it is a sacrifice to tie themselves down, after a long day's work, not to drink anything other than tea, seltzer water or lemonade.

But what is this trifling sacrifice in comparison with the undeniable advantages of a propaganda of deed which is thus able to strike their imaginations ?

Moreover, the « moderate drinker » who completely gives up alcohol finds a personal advantage from a few months, even a few weeks, of abstinence. No one will deny, indeed, that alcohol, no matter how small the doses, and even when inoffensive to manual workers, exercises a noxious influence, a paralysing action on the cerebral centres, and on intellectual work.

Let us be tolerant, then, for others, but let us know how to be rigorous for ourselves. Let us undertake to establish groups of Socialist abstainers among the proletarian mass, and above all among the rising generation, who shall form living examples for their companions, and who, by the increase in their powers of work, their organising activity, their revolutionary energy, will demonstrate all that the entire working class will gain in dignity and power, when it succeeds in escaping from the tyranny of alcohol.

It goes without saying that our preference for the total abstinence groups does not go the extent of excluding or disdainig the co-operation of other groups which, without partaking of our thoroughness, are nevertheless with us in our fight against the abuse of alcoholic

drinks. We believe, on the contrary, that the labour organisations and the Socialist Parties should take an active part in this struggle, by extending and perfecting the action of the abstinent minorities ; by offering their journals for anti-alcoholic propaganda ; by calling the attention of their members by circulars and pamphlets to the dangers of strong drinks ; by suppressing the sale of spirits on labour and Socialist premises ; by encouraging those who frequent such premises to take tea, lemonade, and wines or beers without alcohol ; and by supporting with all their energies such legislative efforts as will tend to restrict, or, as in certain countries, to prohibit, the production and sale of alcoholic liquors.

On these grounds we lay the following resolution before the Congress :-

RESOLUTION :

Granting the immense evil which alcoholic inflicts on the working class by the ruination of its physical and moral health, the weakening of its combative energy, and the absorption each year of sums equal at least to those which are raised by the War Budget ;

The Congress considers that, even in the interest of the progress of the labour and Socialist movement, it is absolutely necessary that the affiliated parties should organise direct action against alcoholism, thus acting entirely in the interests of the working class :

1. By urging the militants, and particularly the labour and Socialists journals, to call the attention of the workers to the danger of alcoholism more than has been done in the past ;

2. By trying to obtain the suppression of all traffic in strong drinks, or at least of spirits, on premises under the control of the affiliated organisations and parties ;

3. By promoting the establishment of groups, whose special mission shall be to organise propaganda against alcoholism in working class centres ;

4. By encouraging the militants and groups which are against alcohol to undertake a most energetic propaganda of deed by themselves practising abstinence from alcoholic drinks ;

5. By attacking alcohol in all its capitalist forms on legislative ground :

The measures to be taken for this purpose, from the limitation of the number of licences to complete prohibition, will naturally vary in different countries, and will depend on the results already obtained by teetotal propaganda. But everywhere the labour and Socialist parties must put themselves in the front rank of those who wish the workers to be freed from the domination of the producers and retailers of alcohol.

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