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FREE SPEECH IN THE STREETS.

THE police-war against the open-air speaking of the Socialists is being carried on with much vigour this year, and cannot fail even at this stage of it to be noticed by the general public. As this number of the *Commonweal* may, like other numbers, come into the hands of many who are not Socialists, it is not untimely to say a few words on this subject; especially since it is one of great importance to us and not unimportant to people generally, even in these days of Dilke-Crawford trials and the coming Tory Government.

For the information of those who have not followed the course of the attacks made on us, I should premise that we were first interfered with at Stratford for speaking on a triangular piece of ground, where a meeting of 600 persons can be held without in any way interfering with the traffic, either foot or vehicular, and where the houses on one side at least are practically out of earshot of the speaking, certainly on days when there is any wheel traffic (our meetings there were held on Saturdays). One of our speakers was arrested there last year, but on his proving before the magistrate that there was no real obstruction to either foot-passengers or vehicles, the charge was dismissed, and we held other meetings there without being meddled with. It is worth while mentioning that a leading Radical of the neighbourhood on being appealed to for help in a demonstration which it has been proposed to organise apropos of this station, declined on the grounds that it had drawbacks as a meeting-place (every place has except the parks) and that there was a place farther on that we could use without interference; but it turns out that the place in question is private property, a piece of ground awaiting building operations, and from it, therefore, we could be turned off at any time.

About the same time that we were interfered with at Stratford, the Social Democratic Federation were attacked at Kilburn.

At Bell Street, Edgware Road, our speakers and those of the Social Democratic Federation had been in the habit of addressing the public on Sundays for eighteen months without any interference on the part of the police; but on Sunday July 4 one of our speakers was arrested, and the two following Sundays two more, together with one of the Federation.

This spot is certainly not so defensible as the piece of waste at Stratford, being a street merely; but there is very little traffic in it on a Sunday, and all Socialist speakers have sedulously kept the footways clear. Whatever inconvenience, therefore, there has been to the public in our meetings, must have been to the occupiers of dwelling-houses in the street; but for eighteen months no complaint has been made. That the inhabitants should suddenly wake up to the unbearable-ness of our meetings without any promptings from without, looks a little like a miracle, which perhaps the police authorities can explain. On the whole, it must be said of Bell Street that it is somewhat more inconvenient, though but a little more, than Dod Street, where last year public feeling compelled the police to yield.

At the Harrow Road our speakers were "moved on" some weeks ago and a better place suggested to them by the police; but they were not left in peace there. On July 3 a speaker of ours was summoned for addressing a meeting there and since then meetings have been interdicted. This station is much the same sort of place as the piece of ground at Stratford.

Now we do not claim to be allowed to hold *demonstrations* on these or such-like places, but only our ordinary weekly meetings, held for instruction in our doctrines and discussion of them; these from the nature of them cannot be very large, the same kind of people (often I should hope the same people) week after week; persons who attracted at first by seeing *something* going on, listen, and find it worth while to come again; on the whole, in fact, serious people with some political proclivities. Our Radical friend above-mentioned, was clearly thinking of the Stratford station as a place for holding an excited political meeting on a subject specially interesting at the time; in short, an actual demonstration; whereas our meetings are educational in their character.

It must be remembered, too, that apart from our wishing to extend the field of our operations, and to get at people that might be shy of

entering a lecture-room, we *cannot* always get a lecture-room for either love or money. We are strictly boycotted. This was the case in Stratford, and in the district of Bell Street also; at the latter place our Branch being turned out of several rooms after a lecture or two simply on the grounds of our being Socialists. In such districts, therefore, if we are not allowed to speak in the open-air we are gagged, and this although, at the latter place at least, the whole of the population in the streets are enthusiastically in our favour.

As to the causes which have impelled the police against us, I believe that they are complex. There is the natural wish to keep the streets as clear as may be: no one can have a word to say against that, except that there may be cases where the greater advantage may override the less. Only I have noted of late years a growing impatience on the part of the more luxurious portion of society of the amusements and habits of the workers, when they in any way interfere with the calm of their luxury; or to put it in plainer language, a tendency on their part to arrogant petty tyranny in these matters. They would, if they could, clear the streets of everything that may injure their delicate susceptibilities, although all this roughness and squalid stir is but the wrong side of the system which gives them their superior position. They are ashamed of these coarsenesses, though they are not ashamed to be the perpetual pensioners of those whom they force into them, and to live on their unpaid labour. They would clear the streets of costermongers, organs, processions, and lecturers of all kinds, and make them a sort of decent prison corridors, with people just trudging to and from their work. It is impossible but that this feeling should influence the police, who are their immediate servants; and I do not doubt that they truckle to it, apart from the question of Socialist or non-Socialist.

At the same time no one who has noticed the way in which street-corner meetings have been dealt with by them can doubt that they have, to say the least of it, shown a strong bias against Socialists, in spite of all plausible arguments to the contrary. It is quite clear that if they are allowed to indulge in this prepossession, and to act up to the letter of the law in one case while they let it alone in another, they can clear the streets of Socialists while leaving the religious, temperance, and other *respectable* meetings to flourish as they may; and moreover a very little exercise of the bias may do all that is necessary, as, *e.g.*, to let the gospel preacher have his full hour and *then* move him on, while the Socialist is accosted after ten minutes. Such things as this can be done, and so plausibly put before the public that it is humbugged into believing the police to be merely the champions of free circulation in the streets, while in reality they are lending themselves to mere party purposes.

What we Socialists ask for is not to be interfered with in cases where the holding of a meeting is no real inconvenience to the neighbourhood. We do not believe that the existing law was intended to interfere with such meetings, or that it should be strained in that direction against any bodies of men—religious, temperance, secularist, or others; at the same time we claim to be treated no worse than any of these. If, on the one hand, the police are ambitious to draw the reins of discipline tighter, and to turn London into a model city in such matters, do not let them attack the others through us, because we are a new sect and therefore accounted dangerous. On the other hand, if the authorities consider it necessary to suppress the preaching of our doctrines as dangerous, do not let them sneak behind a mere police order for the regulation of traffic, but attack us in front for our spoken or written utterances which are before the public everywhere. The public can then choose whether they like to see prosecutions for opinion going on in England at the end of the nineteenth century.

For the rest, we appeal to all reasonable people, not to allow the streets to be deprived of all life or pleasure at the dictation of wealthy pedants and pleasure-seekers. The workers have not too many intellectual pleasures. Their homes are dull and narrow at the best; for many the streets are their only drawing-room. It may be questionable whether setting their brains to thinking over "dangerous" doctrines is really so dangerous as driving them back into brutality by constant repression. It is perhaps worth while to sacrifice some of the decorum of the streets for the sake of some extra education in these days of political ferment. On the other hand, if there are any who think it possible to quench the expression of great principles that are at work throughout all civilisation by petty police persecution, they will find themselves mistaken. In short, the public have to make up their mind whether the police shall be their servants or their masters. In order that they may escape the danger of the latter event they must bestir themselves and look at what is being done without prejudice against the Socialists because of their doctrines.

WM. MORRIS.