FREE SPEECH IN THE STREETS.

This 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" contains, like other numbers, come into the hands of many who are not Socialists, it is not unlikely 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 silk-stockin' 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 500 persons can be held without any interferences 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 (the meetings there had been 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 molested. It is worth while mentioning that a leading Radical of the neighbourhood on being appealed to for help in a demonstration which 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 not turn out at all times.

About the same time that we were interfered with at Stratford, the Social Democratic Federation was 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 stop 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, 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 unbearableness 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 interrupted. 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 prudivities. Our Radical friend above-mentioned, was clearly thinking of the Stratford case 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 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 temperamental, sectarian districts, at the fore, 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 cases 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 are other cases where the same argument, or some, is as bad. Only I have noted of late years a growing impatience on the part of the more luxurious portion of society for the amenities and comfort of the streets, where the foot-passengers, where the wheel traffic interferes with the calm of their luxury; or to put it in plainer language, a tendency on their part to arrogate petty tyranny in these matters. They would, if they could, clear the streets of everything that may injure their delicate susceptibilities, and sit there on the wrong side of the system which gives them their superior position.

They are ashamed of these coarsenesses, though they are not ashamed of their actual penances of those whom they force into them, and to live on their badges. Labour, though composed of coter-mongers, organographers, and lecturers of all kinds, and make them a sort of decent prison corridors, with people just trudging to and from the factory. It is impossible but that they feel should influence the police, who are their immediate servants; and I do not doubt that they trounce it, apart from the question of Socialist or non-Socialist.

There was one line no one has noticed the way in which street-corner meetings have been dealt with by them; namely that, they have, to say the least of it, 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 preposterous, and set 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, temperament, and other respectable meetings to flourish as they may; and moreover without any ulterior motive of the bias may do all this necessity, as, e.g. to let the gospel preacher have his full hour and then move him on, while the Socialist is arrested after ten minutes. Such things as this can be done, and can be done, before the public that it is not ambiguous 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 meant to interfere with such meetings, or that it should be strained in that direction against any bodies of men—religious, political, or social—of the same time we claim to be treated no worse than any of these. If, on the other hand, the police are ambitious to drag the relics of discipline and order, 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, they may let them attack us; 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 aesthetes and superfluous-sellers, or of 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 it is worth diverting their brains to thinking over some dogma which is really so dangerous as driving them back into brutality by constant repetition. 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 amongst them possible to quench the expression of great principles that are at work throughout all civilisation by petty police persecution, they will find that they themselves mistake. In short, the public has 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 be themselves and look at what is being done without prejudice against the Socialists because of their doctrines.

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