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EDITORIAL

LEO TOLSTOY.

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“**T**HE greatest living Russian” is the title that Count Leo Tolstoy bore for many a year, and was lovingly called to the day of his death. In a sense, he was. Considering that the constituency which bestowed the title lay mainly outside of Russia, and was composed of members of all civilized nationalities, the title may be amended to read “the greatest living man of all countries.” And so he was—in a sense.

All Ages have required two distinct greatnesses—the Positive greatness, and the Negative: the former, through its greatness, to construct a new civilization; the latter, likewise through its greatness, to serve as a warning against and illustrate the futility of the opposite course in the endeavor to escape existing social evils. Surely the present Age stood in need of the two types. Tolstoy filled the call for the second.

At all critical social junctures the peoples, as the choruses of the ancient Greek tragedies, divide temperamentally into two ranks—a Progressive and Aggressive rank, and one Retrogressive and Retiring: one rank, inspired by the spirit that inspired Walt Whitman’s lines, feels itself “pioneer” and, accordingly, has for its device “all the past we leave behind us”; the other, inspired by the spirit that inspired monasticism, turns its back upon the battlefield and its face to the past. While the former has the fascination of Action, the latter has the equally powerful attraction of Rest. Tolstoy was the central, giant figure of the Gospel of Rest in Retrogression.

Gone beyond the ken of man are the days of patriarchal simplicity. Those were the days of isolated mankind. These are the days of a worldwide mankind, complexly connected and held to together. Arrant is the superstition regarding the days of yore having been the Golden Age of Man. It is a superstition that may

furnish themes for poetry, it never can be the basis for social reconstruction. The olden days, despite their beauties, many of which are imaginary, were the days of hopeless Want. Mankind has cast off that slough. The days it heads for are days of Plenty—days that the progress in the mechanism of production now makes possible. Tolstoy would lead us back with a homily; Socialism urges man forward with the Archangel's war cry against the Dragon.

Well for our generation and the social crisis our generation is traversing that the apostle of a social program that is Negative and Retrospective was the giant, noble figure of a Tolstoy. A mediocre, ignoble figure could not, by its failure, have illustrated the visionariness of such a program as effectively as a Tolstoy has done—and thereby helped to channel human thought into the channel of Progress, of Aggression, of Action.

There are failures that are fruitful, and, as such, deserving, if not of the laurel, yet surely of the lily. Such was Tolstoy, as man and as program.

Transcribed and edited by Robert Bills for the official website of the Socialist Labor Party of America.
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