

to decline and gradually spent itself. And this week the cables announce that the strike has entirely fizzled out and work has been resumed, this result being attributed partly to the firm attitude adopted by the Government and partly to the lack of strike funds.

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If this recent outbreak were the first affair of the kind in Belgium, it would not be nearly so serious or so significant, but it is in fact only the latest development of a very old and deep-seated trouble. Precisely the same thing took place so long ago as 1886, when the artisans in the towns ceased work, engaged in violent riots, and gave themselves up to the destruction of property with an almost Nihilist recklessness, and with an utter indifference to any benefit that could come to themselves so long as they could wreak vengeance on those whom they regarded as their oppressors. Again in 1891 a huge suffrage 'demonstration' was organised at Brussels, and the Government showed considerable alarm on the occasion for the Army Reserves were called out and for days previously the railways were crowded with troops. The Government could hardly have made a greater display of military strength if an invading army had been on their borders. The demonstration, however, partly perhaps because of these precautions, was carried out in an entirely orderly and peaceable way. The movement, nevertheless, was all the time increasing rapidly in volume and intensity, and two years later an outbreak occurred identical in all respects, except as to its result, with that of the last two or three weeks. Then, as now, the workmen presented to the Chamber a demand for a revision of the Constitution with a view to the extension of the franchise, and when the Chamber rejected the proposal the Socialist leaders at once ordered a general 'halt of toil.' Belgium is the land of cities, and the workmen of the cities on this occasion became so fiercely excited as to make it evident that they would soon master the Town Guards, and the Government would then have been compelled to give in or to call out the troops and fight for their very existence. For once the Socialists scored an undoubted victory. The Government bent before the storm; the Chamber yielding to the fear of a great insurrection and its consequences, agreed to a revision of the Constitution, and when the revision was held an extension of the franchise, to which we shall refer later on, was carried by an overwhelming majority. After nearly nine years' experience of the enlarged franchise the Socialists are still dissatisfied, and, inspired no doubt by the memory of their triumph in 1893, they organised the violent and determined outbreak which has just been brought to a close.

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What, then, it may be asked, are the special grievances of the Socialists, and what is it precisely that they want? It must certainly be admitted that the artisans of Belgium—from whose ranks the Socialists are drawn—have undoubtedly a real grievance, though whether it can be remedied, in the present economic condition of the country, by a mere extension of electoral rights is entirely open to question. The grievance is that the Belgian workmen are among the worst-paid and most over-worked in Europe. For years past the wages have been very low, averaging on the whole less than 12s a week, and in some occupations only 10s. And the overworking is shameful. Twelve hours a day is considered everywhere a fair minimum, and in several trades fourteen hours are not uncommon. It is true that this state of things cannot be traced to the shortcomings or misdeeds of any political party, but is due largely, if not entirely to the pressure of competition and to the economic condition of the country. It is true, too, that the Clerical or Catholic party, which has been for many years in the ascendant, has done a very great deal by establishing workmen's hostels, mutual aid societies, farmers' leagues, etc., to mitigate the hardships of the laborers' lot. Still the fact remains that, on the whole, the artisans are underpaid, overworked, underfed, and badly housed, and they are naturally and not unreasonably discontented. What intensifies their discontent is the fact that they know, or think they know, a cure for all their ills and the longer they are in obtaining what they want the more keenly impatient they become. Their cure is universal suffrage. We in New Zealand, who have been so long accustomed to the most ample electoral rights and who have learnt by experience that their concession is by no means a

panacea for industrial ills, can perhaps hardly understand the magical charm which this proposal has for the Belgian workers. There is something almost pathetic in the unbounded trust they have placed in this remedy. Only give them all a vote, only admit everybody to the franchise on the same footing and somehow or other they would soon put matters right. In Belgium the franchise cannot be enlarged by any simpler process than the adoption of an amendment of the Constitution, and this can only be effected by a Bill passed by a Senate and a Chamber of Deputies specially elected for the purpose of revising the Constitution, and then only by a two-thirds majority in each House. The necessity for securing a two-thirds majority in both Houses, while it no doubt serves as an effective breakwater against sudden change at the same time creates a sort of desperate hopelessness which to some extent accounts for, if it does not justify, the force and violence of the Socialist attacks.

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The existing provisions as to the franchise in Belgium are original and peculiar. Prior to the outbreak in 1893, to which we have already referred, the franchise was absurdly narrow, and it is little more than the truth to say that under it the working classes were left absolutely unrepresented in Parliament. At the revision of the Constitution in 1893, a very considerable extension of the franchise was adopted, and the provisions now obtaining are as follow: Every citizen over twenty-five years of age has one vote. Every man over thirty-five or married, has two votes, the idea being that the young man represents only himself, but that the matured citizen represents himself and his family besides. Every man over twenty-five who possesses property up to a certain amount has also two votes. Finally, every man over twenty-five years of age who has taken a university degree or has received a diploma or certificate of higher instruction has three votes. No person can have more than three votes, and any one who refrains from voting at an election is guilty of a misdemeanor punishable by law. This is, as we have said, a very substantial advance on the former franchise provisions, but the law is still unsatisfactory to the Socialists. It still leaves, they contend, the overwhelming weight of the voting power in the hands of the highly educated or the well-to-do, and to that extent disfranchises the working poor. It is, as they say, 'universal suffrage hampered by fancy franchises,' and they still cling, and cling with passionate determination, to their old 'one man one vote' demand.

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The Socialist agitation undoubtedly places Belgian statesmen in a very difficult dilemma. The universal suffrage which the workmen desire will in the present temper of the people be a danger if granted and a danger if withheld. It will be a danger if it is granted because after all their struggles and sufferings the Socialists will be apt, in the first flush of victory, to use their newly-acquired power in order to effect a social and industrial upheaval which may have the most serious consequences and to none more than to the working classes themselves. It will be a danger if it is withheld because when a large and increasingly powerful class sees only one barrier interposed between it and prosperity it will go all lengths in order to remove that barrier. Although the danger has, for the present, been happily averted, we cannot feel that the existing legislation affords any permanent solution of the difficulty. The Socialists are in such deadly earnest, their movement has acquired so much momentum, that it cannot be long before fresh trouble will arise. It does not properly come within our province to prophesy on such matters, but we cannot help venturing the opinion that sooner or later the Belgian Parliament will find itself bound, as the lesser of two evils, to concede an absolutely unrestricted franchise, trusting to the sobering influence of responsibility to teach the Socialists the wisdom of being moderate and the absolute necessity of recognising that their principles can never be otherwise than gradually and partially applied.

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