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May 21, 2012



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Army's New Code of Chivalry

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From *Industrial Pioneer, an illustrated labor magazine*
Chicago: Industrial Workers of the World, December, 1925, pages 8–10

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Major General Amos A. Fries, the U.S. army's official poisoner, or as he is more politely entitled by those who believe in poisoning strikers and radicals, "Chief of the Chemical Warfare Service," writes to the public press of New York City to say, "If possible, consideration should be given to women and children (when gassing them with poison gas) so as to cause them no undue injury. Isn't that sensible, humane, and even gallant? Would you teach a policeman to use the same vicious blow with a club on the head of a child or a woman as he would on a desperate armed man? Again, we think there is but one answer to the question."

General Fries was defending himself against a certain amount of rather shocked criticism, evoked among a certain section of the bourgeois press, because of statements in his book of instructions to subordinate poisoners, officers and gentlemen of the U.S. Army, as to the best way to protect the profits of coal mine owners, factory owners, etc., by dispersing with clouds of deadly (or perhaps merely injurious) gasses, any mass picketing, or by the same means breaking up meetings held in rooms on the third stories of buildings, which previous information might have led the officer in charge of the protection of profits in that locality to believe were for the purpose of calling strikes, etc.

Some naive liberals somehow got the idea that it was barbarous and inhumane to gas crowds of women and children, especially miners' wives, and offspring, most probably, with the sort of poison clouds that rotted out the lungs of the soldiers in France.

They quoted from the general's text book on "Provisional Instructions for the Control of Mobs by Chemical Warfare," that statement about, if possible, not inflicting undue injury on women and children. They commented adversely upon it, and the general came right back at them; the general declares absolutely that it is "sensible, humane, and even gallant" to shoot the kids full of poison gas, just as sensible, humane and gallant as it is for a cop to slightly fracture their skulls, instead of trying to "tear their damn cans off," as is the custom when subduing male strikers — and, of course, nothing could be more gallant in the treatment of women and children than that.

In this article to the public, General Fries tells how:

“An officer of the Chemical Warfare Service, with tear gases, was sent to the Mingo mine fields some four years ago. It is to the credit of the War Department that he was sent there. Had any force been necessary, tear gases would have been used and any dangerous situations arising from excited, armed men’ would have been avoided without bloodshed or destruction of property. How can the words “barbarous” and “uncivilized” be applied to such materials? If preserving law and order by the mildest means ever known to man is to be considered barbarous, then how can civilization endure?”

Ah, how indeed? Remember Engels’ conclusion, based on long study of various ruling class utterances, that every ruling class, throughout history, has identified its interests with those of the whole world, has considered itself synonymous with culture, civilization, learning, and all things desirable. Each of them was certain that if it passed, the torch of progress, or of civilization or whatever they considered desirable, would be extinguished. It is a natural sort of a feeling, however false history has proved to be — in the case of General Fries, the official poisoner for American capitalism, we can understand how he, regarding as he does the proper development of the gentle art of gassing men for profit, should look with grave distrust on any group of men or any proposition, which proposes to stop him. Indeed at the close of his newspaper article he tells in the plainest of words what he regards as progress:

“I am quoting facts, not fancies. I am giving the truth and not propaganda. Our records are open to any man who will examine them. If he be honest he cannot but decide with us that the world needs gas more than any other one thing to preserve law and order with the least damage possible to human beings or to property.”

Probably his underlings are in substantial accord with him, and none of them, despite an occasional reference to “defending our beloved country from foreign aggression” have any doubt at all about whom they are going to gas. Another hearty believer in poison for women and children, one Henry Fry, a major in the Chemical Warfare Reserves, rushes into print, with a letter to a newspaper in New York, in which he says exactly what poison gas is good for. Remember in reading his explanation, that the bourgeoisie do not distinguish one sort of radical from another, and when he says “Communist” he is

meetings of workers, and maintaining the system of slavery which they call “civilization.”

as likely as not to mean “I.W.W.” Here are the concluding remarks from his little speech:

“With Communism seeking a foothold in America, both by its direct agencies and through the use of various side-line activities, the American people would be foolish to discard a weapon that may be badly needed against the Red menace.

“In instructing his officers how to use war gas for riot duty, General Fries is merely carrying out a routine detail of his office as Chief of the Chemical Warfare Service. Criticism of his instructions because he happens to be a gas officer are misleading. Every department has its own riot tactics, including the Regular Army, National Guard and, here at home, the New York Police Department. The New York police force has its gas section, which is instructed in the use of gas as, a riot weapon.

“The Bolshevist, the Communist and the radicals generally — ranging from light crimson down to delicate pink — would like to see chemical warfare eliminated, but it is here to stay and the day may come when it will prove to be the salvation of the United States.”

Then when we turn to the book itself, the instructions for proper and efficient gassing, which started the stench, we see that though the word “mob” is used throughout, the obvious implication is that except in the case of armed mobs, practically revolutionary armies, the word “mob” means any aggregation of working men, mass picketing, or gathered in a meeting near the company property for the purpose of hearing speakers, perhaps, or maybe assembled in, a hall, in a building — for provision is made for throwing gas through third story windows.

Chemical Warfare Service officers are taught in the poison gas book, on page 6, that there are three types of “mobs”:

“(a) A more or less well-disciplined organization of men in numbers from 500 up to a few thousand, fairly well armed and having some semblance of discipline.

“(b) Small organizations of men with a few arms, poorly organized and with very little discipline.”

The women and children come in the next “mob”:

“(c) Mobs that will be composed not only of men, but of women, boys and sometimes small children, unorganized but excited and irresponsible.”

“The gas cloud,” runs the book, under the heading “Mob Psychology in Gas,” “being heavier than air, will generally cling near the surface of the ground, ordinarily rising not over 30 feet. It will fill cellars, hallways, mine shafts and extend in every direction in which a breeze is blowing.

“A mob understands that the fire of machine guns or rifles cannot reach around the corners of a building or through a street barricade, but with gas the mob understands that when a cloud is turned loose this cloud will cover all areas. . .

“The first appearance of the faint white smoke of a gas cloud will cause a stampede even in the most determined mob. . . If possible, consideration should be given to women and children, so as to cause them no undue injury.”

“Ordinarily,” says the book, “the members of a mob will not run into the cloud, but will run with the cloud in an endeavor to escape being encircled. Members who attempt to enter houses, cellars, side alleyways, will only find that the gas has preceded them.”

“Probably the quickest way to appreciate the power which the presence of gas has upon a body of men is to picture the fear which a human being has of having his breathing interfered with by smothering or choking and the instinctive dread this same human being has of losing his vision. A sneezing or vomiting war gas will interfere with breathing and a tear gas will practically close the eyes of a man. . . The cloud is invisible, and though it usually can be detected by its odor this detection often comes too late to prevent the gas taking effect.”

“Their efforts to escape,” so the book tells officers, “will exceed those made by a mob to escape from the flow of machine-gun bullets. Instead of stopping when corners are turned, the members of the mob will continue to run, carrying with them on their skin and in their clothing sufficient gas to make them believe they are still within the atmosphere of gas or that the cloud may overtake them again at any time.

“Barricaded groups of men in buildings may not be frightened by a gas cloud until the actual odor and effect are on them. A cloud caused by a grenade shot into a third-story window will slowly enter the halls, roll down the stairs and gas the lower two floors. In case of special drafts the grenades shot into the windows of the lower two floors will prevent any room escaping the gas itself. Under such circumstances the occupants will abandon the house by the nearest available exit. Certain individuals will complain of the effects of a tear-gas cloud. It is impossible to injure seriously anyone with tear gas in field concentrations.”

It is impossible to permanently blind or kill anyone with tear gas used in field concentrations — that is, such concentrations as would prevail from a few bombs thrown in the open — but throwing grenades into a closed building is different, and young officers are especially informed during the course of their instruction that they can kill all the men they want with tear gas, to say nothing of the more powerful Lewisite or mustard gas, if they increase the concentration, by using it in greater quantity, or by using it in a confined space. Besides the tear gas, phosphorus may be employed to create a thick white suffocating smoke, and to stick to the hide of any unlucky one who happens to be spattered with it, and there burn to the bone. One gas, “bromobenzylcyanide,” can be turned loose in a street, and will make that street impassable for a solid week, or will make any valley or plain in the open country impassable for three days. Gas can be sprinkled on the crowd, it can be shot at the crowd in rifle grenades or from Stokes mortars, it can be taken out to windward of the crowd and turned loose out of cylinders, to form a cloud and drift down on them, it may be burned out of “candles,” and it may be poured out of airplanes.

It is used always, all the time for the preservation of profits, and to make effective picketing difficult. It has already been used against the I.W.W., and without doubt it will be used again. It behooves us to seriously think of possibilities for circumventing this new weapon of the capitalist class. Meanwhile, we will tell the world, in the very words of the poison gas experts, that the army, and their branch of it especially, exists for the purpose of crushing strikes, breaking up