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Errico Malatesta
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18 October 1902

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In Relation to Strikes

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The United States, France, and Spain are the scene of important and more or less violent strikes. Because of a strike, in the past fortnight Geneva has seen civic life brought to a standstill, republican troops combing the street sabring the population, and the government arresting, expelling, and harassing.

The intervals between editions of our newspaper and distance from the places for which it is bound preclude us from chronicling the events that the comrades should be monitoring attentively through the daily newspapers. All we can do is draw attention to the lessons deriving from them.

The ever-growing frequency of strikes and the scale that these are achieving, now deeply disrupting the life of society and rattling the very foundations of the State, clearly show that simultaneous suspension of work as determined and implemented by the workers for whatever reason has now become a great training ground, and will very likely be the occasion from which will spring the final insurrection that will end Society's current, nonsensical and murderous make up.

Hence, it is of the utmost importance for us anarchists, who want to spark that insurrection, to place ourselves in a position where we can exercise a decisive influence upon the course of

these strikes and on the organization of labor from which the strikes derive. So the greatest and most pressing issue claiming our attention and requiring our consideration at the present moment is none other than the purpose by which we should be guided and the tactics that are to be espoused in our engagement with the workers' organization and strikes.

Of the workers' organization, more on another occasion: today we shall have something to say about strikes.

If economic forces were all that was involved in disputes between capitalists and proletarians, the strike would be doomed to inevitable defeat. In the battle between millions and pennies, between the propertied gambling with a part of their wealth and the workers who have no bread for tomorrow and are racked by the screams of their famished offspring, the latter are usually routed by the former. And even when due to some exceptionally favorable circumstance, a strike proves successful, its outcome, in terms of the wages that the worker gets and the purchasing power of those wages, proves to be an illusion. Having been, for a pretty long time without a wage and having braved often harrowing suffering, the successful striker sees his meagre earning boosted by a few pennies… but then realizes that the bosses recoup these from consumers, that the cost of things rises as wages rise and that, ultimately, even with more money, he cannot afford any more than he used to buy and is, consequently, as badly off as ever.

But there are moral and political forces at work that change the terms of the problem and lead, or may lead, to different outcomes.

Besides being an economic dispute, a strike is a moral revolt. The worker who goes on strike and risks famishment for himself and his loved ones in order to win some improvement in his conditions is no longer the docile and compliant slave

who endures oppression without a murmur as if it were some inescapable inevitability. He asserts his rights, or at any rate some of his rights, and demonstrates that he has realized that for the acknowledgment of those rights he should await neither the grace of God nor the beneficence of the mighty, but must look to his own strength in association with the strength of those in his same position. And this means that he gets better treatment, because, when all is said and done, collectively speaking, the bosses can only treat folk as badly as folk will allow. And meanwhile, the worker comes to desire a better standard of living and acquires a clear appreciation of the antagonism there is between his interests and the bosses' interests and of the need to do away with the master class so that labor can be emancipated.

That, in essence, is the only good that can come of strikes and so anarchists should take an interest in them from the point of view of the economics and try to steer them to victory, not through passive resistance sustained over as long a time as possible thanks to strike funds and subscriptions, but by espousing an aggressive attitude and having recourse to all possible means in order to show that the workers are serious about wanting what they want and will not allow it to be withheld with impunity.

Two phenomena, not new to be sure, but which are becoming increasingly serious and widespread, can be discerned in the current strikes.

One is the meddling of the State, in the form of gendarmes and soldiers, in clashes between capital and labor. Whether we are talking about feudal, monarchist Spain, or about France, Switzerland, or America—republican, democratic countries—always and everywhere the government massacres strikers.

Must we give up on every demand and submit unconditionally to the whims of the capitalists, or allow ourselves to be slaughtered eternally?

Let us leave the preaching of patience and calm to those who view the slaughter of the people as an opportunity for them to go fishing for a parliamentary seat… and issue an interpellation to the minister. We, who know the worth of deputies and their interpellations and who seek ultimately to revolutionize the world by means of agitation and revolts, should be pointing out to the workers how, these days, every strike is wide open to military repression and coax them to prepare themselves just as they would for an insurrection.

These days, strike funds are not the issue any more. With the mass strikes being mounted these days and the coalitions the bosses have learned to form, it would be extremely laughable of the workers to try to compete in monetary terms. The workers are starting to realize this and are showing a tendency to turn to different means. Governments are fully aware of the dangers of this trend and are placing their rifles and artillery at the bosses' disposal. The point is to counter those rifles and artillery with suitable weaponry: that is all.

The other phenomenon is that the *scabs* or "*yellows*," as they are called in France these days, are beginning to stand up brazenly to the organized workers and even to pit organization against organization. This is a very serious development because it triggers strife between one worker and another, which is wholly to the benefit of the bosses and generates hostility, begrudgery, and hatred that may yet prove a tremendous obstacle to the success of the proletarian revolution.

"Scabbing"—to wit, the existence of workers who feel and practise no solidarity with their fellow workers and who are on the bosses' side and work for cut-price wages and take the strikers' jobs—is a sadly necessary feature of a society that cannot provide work for all its members and reduces so many men to the condition of starving livestock who care nothing and

The objection will be made that this is all more easily said than done and we readily agree with that. We will be told that the people are not ready, not ripe for such things, and we agree. Had the people been ready, had the people been ripe, they would have done so without waiting for advice from us.

But everything has to start somewhere. Today, and right from the outset, the American labor movement seems to have been made more for the benefit of its leaders than for the workers. Starting with the president who enjoys a ministerial salary and wields considerable political influence, and right down to the merest branch secretary, there is a whole hierarchy of employees who live off the movement and, having lost the habit of working and developed a taste for being regarded as important personages, fear nothing so much as they fear having to return to the mines and toil like common working men. This is the main reason why the entire movement boils down to a monotonous round inside a vicious circle. They deal with the government and threaten and make concessions and enter into compromises … but ultimately they take care that everything is done according to the law, quietly, and ending in blessed peace. That way they can hang on to the friendship or at any rate tolerance of the government and the bosses, their sway over the workers and their salaries.

If the workers could be persuaded to break free of all these parasites and look after their own affairs themselves, strikes would soon take on a different character. And with relentless active propaganda, propaganda by spoken word and example, what may look today like a utopia might soon become a fact.

The road may be long or may be short, depending on circumstances—what counts above all else is the direction in which one moves.

can care nothing except for the pursuit of a crust of bread. At the same time, it is largely the fault of the organized workers themselves, who purport to be conscious of their class interests. Eager to take the capitalists on within the confines of the law, they have sought to restrict the availability of jobs as much as possible, and so, whilst on the one hand they insist that the bosses should not hire non-union labor, on the other, as soon as their unions have felt strong enough, they have placed obstacles in the path of new members' joining their number, reduced the numbers of apprentices and gone to war on foreign labor… and have thereby been a mighty help to the growth of scabbery. Heedless of the needs of the jobless and unskilled, have they any real right to whine if the latter do not feel bound to them by bonds of solidarity and steal their jobs out from under them when the opportunity presents itself?

In the ranks of the enemy, there are certainly some of a slavish turn of mind; they are poor unfortunates who might attain human consciousness and dignity only by means of material comfort and fraternal treatment. But there are those, too, who feel repugnance at what they are doing and do it only out of harsh necessity. We can still remember what one American scab told a reporter a few years back: "That mine is a thuggish and odious part, I know," he said, "but there you have it! I haven't been able to find regular employment for years. I can't get into the factories because I am not a member of the union and they won't have me in the union because I am out of work and can't pay the entrance fee. The strike has opened up my chances of working. I know that once the strike is over there will be no more job for me, but then I knew it would not have been there even had I stood four-square by the strikers. My kids were starving to death and I had to send them out and go myself to pick through the garbage cans for leftovers; and my wife held me to blame for our wretchedness. A chance to eat came along and I grabbed it. Did I do wrong? I don't know; in the meantime I eat and I can see smiles on the faces of my kids

who knew only how to cry! Now the strikers are threatening me and might attack me at any moment. I go armed and may well kill somebody. It's ghastly! … but I cannot let myself be killed without fighting back. Like it or not, my sense of duty towards my kids stops me from doing so."

Who would dare to condemn that man in the name of labor solidarity, of which he has borne all the brunt without ever having tasted any of the benefits?

Yet it is only natural and human for strikers to feel angry with those who turn up to take their jobs, but we who are guided by loftier principles must temper that anger with a dose of logic and justice. Why attack scabs, who are our brothers, albeit a little more ignorant and a lot more unfortunate than us, rather than the bosses who are the source of both of our misfortunes? In any event, no matter which comes under attack, the police step in and we have to toe the line or fight back. Better to attack the real enemy, therefore.

If the current trend towards big and fairly general strikes is to deliver the beneficial revolutionary effects with which it is laden, rather than petering out gradually due to weariness and loss of heart, giving way to long years of monotonous calm, the workers have to get it into their heads that the strike should not be an end in itself but rather a tool for transforming society. And the task of getting this across to them falls to the anarchists.

Let us take the example of the coalminers' strike in America.

This tragicomedy has been going on for years now. The workers ask for improvements, and the bosses, who have large stocks of coal to fall back on, refuse them. The workers go on strike and suffer and leave the public—the poorer, coal-less part of the public—to suffer. Meanwhile the bosses sell off their stocks at higher prices. Once those stocks are approaching the

point of exhaustion, negotiations and compromises set in and the workers are granted some of what they were asking for. Then, gradually, as the stocks are rebuilt, the bosses snatch back the concessions they made until the workers put new demands … and it starts all over again.

Likewise, this time around. By the time of writing, the dispute will probably have been settled. The miners' long months of suffering, of wretchedness and distress and the countless deaths caused among the poorer classes of Americans by lack of coal will have served only as yet another act in the usual farce.

But what great consequences might ensue from the situation if only the strikers' mentality and that of their leaders were different!

The miners' strike can get nowhere unless the railwaymen simultaneously refuse to carry the coal that the bosses are holding in reserve. In America, the railwaymen are organized just as the miners are and are federated with them; and if there was no rail strike, this was because the leaders could not be sure where going down that road might lead them and were afraid of seeing their economic and political standing compromised.

The impoverished population of the big American cities, to whom coal shortage matters as much as bread shortage does to us, were irritated and full of menace. If the miners and railwaymen had by common consent set about working the mines and shipping the coal themselves on the people's behalf, organizing distribution free of charge along the route and receiving whatever folk might have been willing to give them in return, the populace would have vigorously backed the strikers' bold initiative.

The government would assuredly have stepped in … come of that what might. But the world's great revolutions were made with more paltry causes and means and much more modest principles!