Vote? What For?

Errico Malatesta

George: This beer's not too bad, is it?

Jack: Yes, it's alright, but what a price!

George: Shocking – especially when you remember what things used to cost. Still, you can't wonder with all these taxes. It costs you twice as much to live as it used to. They put up the price of some things, and say you can do without them. But you can't do without bread, and food, and clothes – you have to pay the rent all the same, and then there are the taxes on this and the rates – on our wages too! What a life! And it's our own fault! If we wanted to we could alter things. The working class has the remedy in its own hands.

Jack: Why, what's your remedy?

George: Easy enough! You've got a vote?

Jack: What's that got to do with it?

George: Have you, or haven't you?

Jack: Well, I'm entitled to a vote – but I never make use of it.

George: There you are! You've got a vote, but you just won't take the trouble to use it, and then you wonder why things are so bad. You deserve all you get, honestly! People like you are responsible for all the trouble in the world!

Jack: Alright, alright, keep your hair on! Just tell me what's the good of voting?

George: It's obvious. Who makes the laws? The M.P.'s. Elect good M.P.'s and you get good laws.

Jack: Good councillors and good M.P.'s? We've heard that for a long time. But you'd have to be deaf, dumb, and blind not to notice it's the same stooges that always get in. Oh, it's wonderful to hear them when they're after votes at election time. They pat you on the back, ask after the wife and kids, kiss the baby, promise you railways, bridges, work, cheap bread, less taxes, higher wages, protection – absolutely everything! And once they get in, they're no better than anyone else. Goodbye promises! The wife and kids may starve, there's no more or less work than before, the whole town can be falling to pieces for all they care. They've other things to think about than your troubles! Then a few years later they start the ballyhoo again. It doesn't matter what colour the party is: they're all the same. As soon as they're elected, they forget all about you. They're in their clubs and at their select dinners, and they don't even trouble to come and have a look at you until the next election.

George: That's correct! But why elect the rich? Don't you know that the rich only live on the work of the masses? So how do you expect them to worry about the masses? All they think of is getting as much out of the ordinary man as they can.

Jack: Now you're talking! But it's not only the rich. There's the other type, who want to get elected so they can become rich.

George: That's true. So don't let's vote for them. Let's elect workers, experienced friends of ours, as you might say, and then we won't be fooled.

Jack: Oh, we've got some of your "experienced friends" in now, and they're no different from our acknowledged enemies! Anyhow, what do you mean, "let's elect – let's elect." As if we – you and me – could do as we like!

George: But it's not only us two. If each one of us tried to convert other people and they would do the same, labour would have a majority, and we could elect whoever we liked. And that's when we could form a government of the workers, and then . . .

Jack: And then it would be a paradise – I mean for those who were in Parliament! You're arranging things a bit too quickly! Those in command always have the majority. The rich are always in power. Just imagine a poor worker, perhaps with an ill wife and four hungry kids, and you tell him to risk his job and get thrown out of his house to starve; just to give his vote to a candidate his master doesn't like. Just try and convince those poor devils who can be thrown out of work by their boss whenever he likes. They're never free; if they want to be free, they don't want to waste their time voting – just take what they need.

George: But if we didn't do that, no-one would vote. We couldn't go to the workers and ask them to vote for our party, and say at the same time that votes were useless.

Jack: That's just it! And on top of that you have to make election promises you know you can't keep. And then you have to stand in with the Government, and mix with the well-to-do, and all the rest of it. As soon as any of your men are elected they have to kow-tow to the people you admit are the opponents of the workers. So why the hell talk about propaganda when the first thing you do is to counteract propaganda?

George: But you must admit, it's an advantage to have our own men with a voice in affairs.

Jack: An advantage for themselves. And may be for some of their friends! But for the mass of the people? Tell it to the marines! You can see what happens as soon as the M.P.'s get elected. Socialists go over to the Tories; they become Independents and other brands of opportunists.

It's these rascals who hoodwink the whole of their followers – worse even than the church can do. As soon as socialists, who have perhaps been persecuted like criminals when they were out of office (like Ramsay MacDonald was) get appreciated and estimated by the rich, and shake hands with Royalty, they're won over. When they do run foul of the Government, it's always with kid gloves – they know they're all pals together. They all sit together smugly in the smoking-room the best of friends – you can't imagine them getting too rough even in the debating chamber – and you're the devil of a long way from seeing them having their heads bashed in by the police as they used to get in the old days.

George: Oh, you're too severe. We know men are only men, and we have to stand for some weaknesses. But the thing to do is to choose the best men, not always the same ones.

Jack: At that rate you'll be mass-producing racketeers, if you keep changing the candidates! Haven't we got enough traitors? All those who pass through the mill are ground to flour! As soon as you send someone to office they turn traitor. They mix with the rich, and want to keep up with them. I'm willing to admit a man is a genuine socialist when he gives up his time and

his energy, his money and his ability, exposes himself to imprisonment and victimisation, just to fight corruption and capitalism. But these M.P.'s of yours are only professing socialists, running with the hare and hunting with the hounds, on par with the professing Christians, who preach loving kindness and are the worst swindlers of the lot!

George: Now you're going too far. Among the socialist leaders you insult, are men who have known what it is to go hungry, who have worked and suffered for the cause, who have given proof . . .

Jack: Get away with your proof! Even Hitler went hungry, and worked for his cause – have we got to respect him now he's become a scoundrel of the lowest order? Why, every whore was a virgin once!

It's this respect for leaders that has brought socialism down. Socialism should have been the hope of the people, and your leaders have made it a curse, as soon as you get Labour men in Government. Do you call that propaganda?

George: Still, if you're not satisfied with certain leaders, you can get rid of them. The voters can choose whom they like.

Jack: Can they? What choice has anyone ever got? You can vote for Tweedledum and if you don't like him you can have Tweedledee! Instead of throwing smoke in people's eyes about this voting business, you ought to destroy their confidence in the whole electoral set-up, whether for Parliament or the councils.

The most important causes of misery are first, private ownership, which prevents a man from working unless he submits to those who own the land and tools, and accepts their conditions: and secondly, Government, which protects the exploiters and takes part in exploitation.

George: Well, of course, you have to convince people that their interests are in voting for their own candidate in order to defy their bosses. We have to organise to prevent the exploiter from crushing the liberties of the people. . . .

Jack: Just in order to vote for Mr. Jones or Mr. Brown? Of course, we should organise, but not just to add one more member to Parliament. We want to organise to convince the people that we've been robbed of all the good things of the world; that we have the right to take the whole of our own products, and we can do it without taking orders from anyone.

George: Yes, but you must always have someone in charge, to get things organised.

Jack: Not at all!

George: But the people are too ignorant to run the whole affairs of life themselves.

Jack: Ignorant! If they weren't ignorant they would soon see through these people who want to run the whole affairs of life for them! If you only left them alone, and didn't mislead them, you can be sure the people would run affairs much better than these racketeers, who say they want to govern us for our own good, and then treat us like cattle. Besides – you say the people are too ignorant to have freedom. But you think they are cleaver enough to elect M.P.'s – and if they vote for your candidates you say they're full of wisdom!

Isn't it easier to look after your own business than get someone else to do it? If the M.P.'s wanted to defend our interests, they'd ask what we wanted, and how we wanted it, and not ask us to get them to act as they like – and betray us if and when they like.

George: Still, people can't do everything themselves. There must be someone to look after the public interest and politics.

Jack: What do you mean, "politics"? If you mean the art of fooling the people all the time, I can assure you that we don't mind doing without it. If you mean by "politics" the general interest

and welfare of everyone – we can look after that ourselves. We all know how to eat and drink and to amuse ourselves. I'm damned if I'll go to a specialist if I want to blow my nose, and then give him the right to squeeze it if I don't blow it the way he likes it: the shoemaker makes the shoes and the builders make the house; but nobody ever thought of giving shoemakers and builders the right to order us around and starve us out!

These men who want to get into Parliament for the sake of the public welfare – what do they do for the people? When were the Socialist M.P.'s and borough councillors ever better than anyone else? No, they're all the same breed!

George: So you attack the socialists too! You forget that they are so few in number. They have to have a majority. And besides, their hands are tied.

Jack: Then why do they accept office when their hands are tied? There's only one reason – they want to look after their own interests!

George: You're an anarchist, of course.

Jack: Yes, I am. So what?

George: Well, anarchism seems to me to be too advanced. I'm a socialist. You're right in a lot of things, but if I'd known you were an anarchist at first, I wouldn't have told you that we could get better conditions through Parliament, because I know that so long as there are poor, the laws will be made by the rich, and always to their own advantage.

Jack: Oh, I see – you know improvement won't come through Parliament, but you still tell people to vote. When you know I'm an anarchist, you know I won't believe that fairy-story about voting for progress, so you admit that you know yourself you're getting the people to vote for certain candidates will never bring what you promise them. I know you're not being paid to lie and deceive the masses – so what makes you do it then?

George: No, no! Hold your horses! If I tell the people to give their votes it's for the sake of propaganda. Don't you see how good it is to have some of our own men in Parliament? They can make propaganda better than anyone else – they can say things that we'd be run in for, and when they speak all the papers report it.

Jack: Oh, so it's for propaganda you turn election agent, is it? Some propaganda! Listen: First you tell the people to hope and expect everything from Parliament, that revolution isn't necessary, that all the worker has to do is slip a piece of paper in a box and then you'll do the rest. Then you admit that this won't really achieve anything, it's only propaganda. Isn't this propaganda exactly opposite to your own ideas?

The rich will always defend these two institutions desperately, whatever the cost. Deceit and lies have always been used – and they don't stop at the jail, the gallows and machine-guns! Elections are no use against that. We don't want a change of masters, but a complete revolution, making an absolute break with the past. We must have a genuine commonwealth; where everyone is certain of food, clothing and shelter. The landowners must be ejected by the farmworkers, so they can work the land for themselves and everyone else. The workers must kick out their bosses and organise production for the common good. They must get together and refuse to tolerate any government whatever. Agreement must be made in every district between everyone in the same job. The workers must run the places of work, and every district must be linked up in a common bond of industrial unity – and it will certainly succeed when everyone's interests depend on it. We won't fight amongst ourselves any longer or tolerate war between workers of different nations. War and competition will disappear. Machinery won't turn people out of work, but will help work, make it more agreeable, and productive, and less wearisome.

There'll be no more untilled land, we won't just produce a tenth of what we need, as we do now. On the contrary, we shall employ all known methods in order to increase the quantity of food, and the quality of products. The whole of society will be one union of producers and consumers.

George: All this is very well, but it's very difficult to bring about. Your ideal is magnificent, but there's one drawback: how are you going to put it into practice? I agree that revolution is the only salvation, whatever we do, but as it's impossible now we must make the best of what we can – and that's electioneering. It's propaganda after all.

Jack: You've the nerve to call it propaganda? Haven't you noticed what your propaganda leads to? You've deserted our socialist programme, joined the ranks of the worst exploiters of the workers, gone in with the political imposters who make a noise to gain power! You bring trouble within the socialist ranks, and your headquarters fights its own rank-and-file while it fraternises with the Tories. You've forgotten all about revolution – you're only thinking of electing Jones and Brown and when you talk about change, you've no intentions of doing anything drastic. Oh, the road to Westminster doesn't lead to the social revolution! All you've done with your propaganda is to tempt some people who might have been decent socialists to go to Parliament and turn M.P.'s. You've created the parliamentary illusion that blinds any sight of revolution. You've discredited socialism, as everyone looks on the socialist party as a part of the government they suspect and despise. It's the end of everyone who looks to getting in power.

George: Well, what do you want us to do? Why don't you come in and help us, instead of remaining outside and criticising?

Jack: Now I haven't yet spoken of what we anarchists are doing. But I'll tell you this; that you socialists are one of our big obstacles. Our activities have been paralysed for years because of your propaganda for parliamentarianism, and you're deluding the workers to trust those who have betrayed them. We have to waste time counteracting your propaganda, when we could be pushing forward to a social revolutionary change. I hope more and more people get disgusted with trusting your party! It's only that way we'll ever get a revolutionary feeling.

George: Well, hurry up and make your revolution! And you can be sure the mass of our people will be on your side if it ever came to a revolution, the rank-and-file, anyhow.

Jack: Oh, I see – "make the revolution and we'll join you." If you believe in revolution, why not help us make it?

George: To tell you the truth, if I thought revolution was in any way practicable *now*, I wouldn't mind going over to you. I admit this election business makes me sick, and I'd like to let some of our leaders go to hell, but I honestly can't see where we could do anything about revolution to-day.

Jack: All you want to know is what you want, and put energy into it, and you'll soon find what could be done! First of all we have to propagate real socialism, and instead of spinning yarns about trusting politicians, and voting for people, getting people to despise the parliamentary racket, and the whole political machine. Let the rich do the electing by themselves – while the whole public despises them for it. When the workers lose faith in the ballot-box swindle, they'll see the necessity for the social revolution.

Let's go to the election meetings, if you like, and expose the lies and pretences of the various candidates. Let's make propaganda, not among the rich in Westminster, but among the workers' organisations and in the factories, and create new groups, and explain to everyone how the workers can emancipate themselves. Let's take an active part in strikes and create a gulf between the

wageslaves and the bosses! Let's be on the spot whenever there's a struggle between the people and their rulers, and give the movement of struggle a conscience. Let's get among the masses suffering injustice, forced discipline, privations, no matter where it is, and create a movement that's going to struggle against the ruling class.

Once we have the movement going, ideas come by themselves. Let's always be in the midst of the masses, and let them understand what they should be after. They themselves must struggle for freedom: it can't be done for them, and we must be in their midst. And while we do all this, let's approach people who feel like we do, and who slowly and steadily begin to understand and accept our ideas – with those we must unite, and prepare the elements for general and decisive action, for the emancipation of the working classes.

George: Let's shake hands on that: They can go to hell with their elections! I want to learn more of anarchism!

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Errico Malatesta
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