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The conference in London

Excerpt from the book “El Proletariado Militante”

Anselmo Lorenzo

1901

It was already evening when I disembarked on English soil. I exchanged a small sum of money for the most necessary expenses, and after an hour and a half I arrived at the Victoria station in London. I got off and got hold of a carriage, gave the coachman a note on which I had written the address of the “General Council’s” secretary for Spain, Engels. We went on through the wide, heavily busy and lighted streets with their many large shops.

At last we arrived at Regent’s Park, which was to be the final destination of my journey. The carriage stopped, a policeman came up and shined his light on us, then shined at the number of the house and knocked. Out came a woman who appeared to be a servant girl. They talked, said something to me in English, which I did not understand. I tried to say something in French, which they didn’t understand either. Then the carriage set off again and I let myself be taken towards an unknown destination with a silent wonder of how this would all end. After a short while we stopped in front of a house, the coachman knocked and out came an elderly man, who, standing in the doorway in the sharp light of the street lamp, resembled a patriarch in some great master’s painting. I ap-

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Translated from Swedish, originally published in “Här talar syndikalisterna” by SAC.

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proached shyly and respectfully and explained that I was the representative of the Spanish Regional Federation of the International. The man then took me in his arms and kissed me on the forehead, he addressed me with kind words in Spanish and invited me to enter his home. It was Karl Marx. His family had already gone to bed, and he himself, with exquisite graciousness, set out some food for me. It tasted delicious. Afterwards we drank tea and talked for a long time about the revolutionary ideas, about propaganda and organization. Marx appeared very pleased with what we accomplished in Spain, after I made a summary of the memorandum I had brought with me to present at the conference. When the subject was exhausted — or perhaps rather to be free to indulge in a favorite subject — my venerable interlocutor began to speak of Spanish literature, which he had studied in detail and in depth: I was amazed at what he said about our classical theater, whose history and changing fortunes he completely mastered. Calderon, Lope de Vega, Tirso, and other great masters, who, in his opinion, belonged not only to the Spanish drama, but to the European, were analyzed in a astute and, so far as I can understand, perfectly correct summary. In the presence of this great man, before the utterances of so much learning, I felt as if annihilated, and despite the great pleasure I experienced, I longed for my own quiet corner, where I would certainly miss out on a lot of experiences but avoid feeling that I was not in tune with the situation and the people. Even so, I made an almost heroic effort not to appear completely ignorant. I brought up the usual comparison between Shakespeare and Calderon and I recalled Cervantes. On all this Marx spoke with perfection and expressed his great admiration for the faithful hidalgo of La Mancha.

I must mention that the conversation was conducted in Spanish, which Marx spoke fluently and grammatically correct, as is often the case with educated foreigners, albeit with defective pronunciation.

Not before the wee hours did he follow me to a room where I was supposed to sleep and where, more than sleep, I devoted myself

to reviewing all the thousands of memories that whirled around in my head, ever since my life suddenly and unexpectedly took this direction. The next morning I was introduced to Marx's daughters and then to a lot of representatives and personalities who came there, and I had two little experiences which I want to relate, and which I remember with great pleasure. The older daughter who was almost picture-perfect — but it was a beauty that immediately filled me with astonishment because it bore no resemblance to anything I had seen up to that point in terms of female beauty — she could speak Spanish although, like her father, she pronounced badly, and she took me aside to read something to her, so she could hear a correct pronunciation. We went to the library, which was large and crammed with books, and from a cupboard reserved for Spanish literature she took out two volumes. One was Don Quixote, the other a collection of dramas by Calderon. From one I read Don Quixote's speech to the goatherds, and from the other those tirades of grand and sonorous verses from "Life is a Dream" which are recognized as gems of the Spanish language and sublime expressions of human thought. The explanation I attempted to emphasize the beauty of content and form was probably quite unnecessary, for my young fair partner possessed an exceedingly good education and feeling for poetry, which she showed by adding to my exposition many other good and true observations, as I never thought of it myself. The second experience was that when I expressed a desire to send off a telegram to Valencia informing about my happy arrival in London, which the comrades asked me to do in view of the danger which was thought to lurk in France, I was given Marx's youngest daughter as companion and guide. The obvious manner of lending a young lady for this service, though an unknown stranger—so absolutely contrary to the habits of the Spanish bourgeoisie—excited my admiration and greatly appealed to me. This girl—she was hardly more than a child, exceedingly beautiful though in a more human way than her sister, laughing and cheerful as a personification of youth and happiness—could not yet speak Spanish,

and though she spoke English and German as her mother tongues, she had not advanced in French, a language in which I can make myself understood, although my knowledge is not brilliant. So, we communicated with each other in bad French, and every time one or the other said something completely off, my companion burst out laughing and so did I: it was as if we had known each other all our lives.

Marx accompanied me to the “council” premises. At the door, with some members of the council, stood Bastelica, the Frenchman who had presided at the first session of the Congress of Barcelona. He received me very cordially, and introduced me to Engels, who was henceforth to be my host during my stay in London. Once inside the conference hall I met the Belgian delegates, among them Cesar de Paepe, some Frenchmen, the Swiss Henry Perret, and the Russian Utin, an ominous and unsympathetic figure, who seemed to have no other business at the conference than to foment hatred and poison the feelings. He seemed completely alien to the great ideal that filled those we represented, the workers of the International.

Of the week I spent at this conference, I have only unpleasant memories. The effect it had on my soul was devastating: I had expected to meet great thinkers, heroic defenders of the workers’ cause, enthusiastic spreaders of new ideas, forerunners of the society transformed by the revolution, where justice and happiness should prevail, and instead I found deep discord and mortal enmity between men who should stand united in their will and determination to reach a common goal.

If my faith had needed encouragement to keep alive, if I had not previously known the divisive and dissolving effects of ambition, vanity and envy, the London conference, instead of a confirmation of my ideas and hopes for the future, would have been an annihilating disappointment.

Fortunately, then as now, thirty years later, I was only a poor worker, who, without selfish motives, harbored a true enthusiasm

is mentioned by Victor Dave in his article “Michael Bakunin and Karl Marx”, published in L’Humanite Nouvelle for March 1900.

It is to be regretted that I lost this letter: when I was obliged to go to France, I left it with all my papers with my friend Manuel Cano, who afterwards died, and the deposited papers were wasted.

The strange thing about this document, according to the impression I retain, was that among the accusations Bakunin directed against Marx, the fact that Marx was a Jew stood out as a special cause of disgust. Such goes directly against our principles, which impose upon us brotherhood without regard to race or creed, and it had a terrible effect on me. As I am anxious to tell the truth, I bear this testimony, despite the respect and reputation which Bakunin’s memory in many respects deserves.

for the idea of the International, the only one which embraces all mankind and aims at the abolition of all oppression, and I possessed and possess that conviction that the legitimate aspiration of the people will take root and develop, will gain propagation and statute to finally — confirmed by science and sealed by revolution — win victory over all that opposes it, even if among the obstacles are those venerable idols, who once contributed to its rise but then put their acquired reputations at the service of nefarious afflictions.

We were not many workers — or if you prefer to specify the term — we were not many wage earners present at this meeting. Most of them were bourgeois (citizens of the middle class as the academy defines it), and it was these who had the leadership and voice here, so this gathering became nothing more than an extension of the “general council”, a confirmation of its plans, which in this way was supported by the Association formally giving its decision through the mediation of its representatives. It was like a parody of political parliamentarism and in all this I could not see anything great, anything redeeming, anything even consistent with the language used in the propaganda. It is safe to say that the whole meaning of this conference was limited to confirming the rule of one person present (Karl Marx) against the rule that another, absent, was supposed to want to exercise (Michael Bakunin). In order to carry out this intention, a criminal record had been drawn up against Bakunin and the “Democratic Socialist Alliance” supported by documents, statements and facts, the truth and authenticity of which no one could be convinced. It was also supported by testimony from one or another representative present, such as, for example, the Russian Utin, and what is worse, by the cowardly silence of some alliance members present, and worst of all, by the lame excuses that some others made. But if all this, though repugnant in itself, at least received an apparently correct treatment as far as the conference sessions were concerned, this was not the case in the committees: there hatred broke out in all its cruel shamelessness. I attended one evening at Marx’s house a meeting which had

the task of drawing up a draft resolution on the “alliance” question, and there I saw this man descend from the pedestal on which my admiration and respect had placed him and sink to the level of vulgarity. Even deeper did several of his followers sink as they fawned over him as if they were poor courtiers before their ruler.

The only thing appropriate, the only thing befitting a workers’ conference, the only thing distinctly socialist, I myself had the great honor to present at this conference: the memorandum on organization drawn up by the Valencia Conference. Many of the delegates from such industrialized countries as England, Germany and Belgium, where especially in the former country they are accustomed to economic struggle, were strongly impressed by this well-branched system of associations and federations with its propaganda committees and secretariats, its membership registers, its congresses, its strike funds and this whole life of thought and action, which, if properly practiced, could shortly bring about the social revolution and, moreover, make the future society work. Wasted effort: the “General Council” and the majority of delegates were not there for this: what interested them more than anything else was the leadership question. It was no longer a question of keeping a revolutionary force going, of organizing it, of establishing a line of action with a clear view of the set goal, no, it was a matter of placing a large number of people at the service of a leader. In my feelings and my thoughts I found myself alone. I noticed, perhaps presumptuously, that I was the only “Internationalist” present, and I felt unable to accomplish anything useful, and though I tried to express my disappointment and disgust, they listened to me as one listens to rain, and what I said aroused no interest, had no effect whatsoever.

In the compilation of the conference decisions, however, there is a passage that says: “The Conference fraternally thanks the members of the Spanish Federation for its work on international organization, which once again bears witness to its sacrificial commitment to the common struggle.”

After the end of the conference, a farewell lunch was given, at which much was said about the bloody persecution against the Commune and the festive speeches flowed over the phrases and prophecies that are usually used on such occasions. I myself was forced to take part in the phrase-making, at the instigation of some who thought that a Spaniard was something extra remarkable, but I did so unwillingly, and had expressed myself in Spanish, so it fell upon Engels to translate my words into English and French, and let them be applauded by English speakers and French speakers each in turn.

Yes, I had forgotten to mention this fact: the English delegates and “general councilors” understood only English and a special secretary procured for this purpose translated all the speeches into English. The representatives of foreign nations all spoke French, but as some of us did not understand English, another secretary translated the Englishmen’s speech into French.

I returned to Spain obsessed with the thought that the ideal was more distant than I thought and that many of its agitators were its enemies.

On arrival in Madrid I found that I had become a member of the new Regional Council elected in Valencia, and for this I reported on my mission and impressions in accordance with the rules of the organization.

In a private letter to my friends in Barcelona, I told them about the conference and wrote the following sentences:

“If what Marx said about Bakunin is true, then he is a scoundrel. If it is not true, then Marx is. There is no middle ground: so serious are the criticisms and accusations I have heard.”

Alerini or Farga conveyed these words to Bakunin, and the latter replied with a lengthy letter of defense, which Alerini gave me a little later, when I was living in Vitoria, where I had moved after resigning the post of secretary of the third “federal council” based in Valencia. This letter, and another later one which I never received,