

The First Work of the Revolution

Charlotte Wilson

August 1887

Whatever turn, pacific or warlike, events may take when the time has come for a thorough modification of present conditions, those who will take an active part in the movement will find two different courses open to them; and upon their choice will depend the success or the failure of the attempt.

Deeply imbued with the teachings of Political Economy, which has devoted its chief attention to the best means of increasing the intensity of the present capitalist production; accustomed to reason under the open or unspoken presumption that the economical life of a Society cannot but be organized on some kind of wage-system, –most social reformers have built up their schemes of reform on the supposition that our endeavors must be merely directed towards some improvement of the present system of wage-payment, and it is usually supposed that this improvement would result from the State, or the Municipality, taking industry under their management, and eliminating the present owners of land and capital.

In the opinion of these persons the Social Revolution, after having proclaimed the rights of the nation to its soil, mines, machinery, and means of communication, and after having expropriated the present owners of these necessities of production, ought to organize industry so as to guarantee to the worker " the full value of his labor;" and thus to prevent anybody from pocketing for himself the surplus-value. added by the laborer to the cotton and wool which he transforms into stuffs, to the coal which he brings to the surface of the earth, or to the metals he transforms into tools or machines. But, as far as we understand the social reformers belonging to this school, they consider it quite possible provisionally to maintain existing industry as it is, both as to the kinds of produce it brings to market, and the territorial distribution of the various workshops and manufactures. As to how the very first needs of the producer—those of food, of shelter, of clothing, and so on—should be satisfied, we must recognize that these grave questions are rather driven into the back-ground in the schemes of all social reformers of the Collectivist and previous schools.

Well, it seems to us Communist-Anarchists, that if the Social Revolution should really follow this course, it would be doomed beforehand to be defeated, and to be crushed in the blood of the working classes.

We have already said that the, abolition of private ownership of land, mines, machinery, and productive capital altogether, surely will be the distinctive feature of any movement worthy of the name of Socialist; and we have said, moreover, that no Parliament, no Government can do

this. The expropriation can be carried out only by local initiative, by local action, by being not only written on paper, but accomplished *de facto*.

But suppose it is done; that is, suppose the nation has loudly proclaimed that the soil, the houses thereupon and the mines beneath, the factories and railways, are the property of the nation, and suppose that even the idea is so ripe that no serious objections are raised against it—what next?

It is not enough to proclaim, "These factories are ours," and to put on them the inscription, "National Property." They will become ours when we really bring them into action, when we use them and set their machinery at work. But how will that be done?

We are answered, "The State will do that, and it will pay wages, either in money or in 'labor notes.' But it seems to us that those who answer the question in this way, are merely paying a tribute to the false and portentous pseudo-science which middle-class people have elaborated under the name of Political Economy. Their point of view is altogether wrong; because, instead of basing our reasonings on the present production we ought to base them on consumption. Production is, for us, the mere servant of consumption; it must mold itself on the wants of the consumer, not dictate to him conditions.

Suppose we have entered a revolutionary period, with or without civil war—it does not matter,—a period when old institutions are falling into ruins and new ones are growing in their place. The movement may be limited to one State, or spread over the world,—it will have nevertheless the same consequence: an immediate slackening of individual enterprise all over Europe. Capital will conceal itself, and hundreds of capitalists will prefer to abandon their undertakings and go to watering-places rather than to risk their unfixed capital in industrial production. And we know how a restriction of production in any one branch of industry affects many others, and these in their turn spread wider and wider the area of depression.

Already, at this moment, millions of those who have created all riches suffer from want of what must be considered as *necessaries* for the life of a civilized man. Already hundreds of thousands are in want of even food and shelter. Let the slightest commotion be felt in the industrial world, and it will take the shape of a general stoppage of work. Let the first attempt at expropriation be made, and the capitalist production of our days will at once come to a stop, and millions and millions of "unemployed" will join the ranks of those who are already unemployed now.

More than that. Our production cannot continue to go on as it does. The very first advance towards a Socialist society will imply a thorough reorganization of industry as *to what we have to produce*. Socialism implies, not only a reorganization as to the division of profits: its economical meaning is much deeper. It implies also a transformation of industry so that it may be adapted to the needs of the consumer, not to those of the profit-maker. Many a branch of our present industry must disappear, or limit its production; many a new one must develop. We are now producing to a great extent for export. But the export trade will be the first to be reduced as soon as attempts at Social Revolution are made anywhere in Europe. The British weaver, for instance, does not stand in direct exchange with the Hindu - there is between them a series of middle-men both in this country and in India, and in a time of industrial disturbance such middle-men would cease their orders. The industry of this country being calculated for an immense export trade, must undergo a deep modification to adjust it to the needs of the inhabitants of these isles.

All that *can* be, and *will* be reorganized in time—not by the State, of course (why, then, not say by Providence?), but by the workers themselves. But, in the meantime, the worker, who has not even so much wealth as will enable him to live for a fortnight, cannot wait for the gradual

reorganization of industry. Having no employment, he would meanwhile lose even those wages which formerly permitted him to keep body and soul together.

The great problem of how to supply the wants of the millions will thus start up at once in all its immensity. And the necessity of finding an immediate solution for it is the reason why we consider that a step in the direction of communism will be imposed on the revolted society—not in the future, but as soon as it applies its crowbar to the first stones of the capitalist edifice.

It is because none of the three revolutions through which France has passed during the last hundred years grasped this necessity that each of them was crushed in the blood of its best defenders. By forgetting that the workmen who can earn no wages during a revolutionary period, cannot continue to be defenders of the revolution, the leaders of those enterprises reduced the working classes to the most terrible misery, and finally compelled them to accept any dictator, any Emperor who guaranteed them work and wages, whatever were the conditions of work and however low the rate of wages.

Therefore we differ from all other Socialist schools in the manner in which we look at the next social movements. We hold that the satisfaction of the wants of all must be *the first consideration of the revolutionists*; that in the very first twenty-four hours after a Socialist movement has broken out in a city, there must not be one single family in want of food; not one single man or woman reduced to sleep under a bridge or in the meadows. Our first object must be to care for providing this food and this shelter for those who are most in need of them, for those precisely who have been the outcasts of the old society.

Is it possible? Are we able immediately to provide everybody with food, shelter, and clothes? None of those who know the richness of our modern society will doubt the possibility. We have plenty; and we have plenty of food in our stores to satisfy their first wants.

And if we thus consider the satisfaction of everybody's first wants as the first duty of each social movement, we shall soon find out the best means of reorganizing our production so as to supply everybody with, at least, the first necessities of life.

We shall return again and again to this subject in subsequent numbers of *Freedom*; but the preliminary point upon which we wish especially to insist is, that unless Socialists are prepared openly and avowedly to profess that the satisfaction of the needs of each individual must lie their very first aim; unless they have prepared public opinion to establish itself firmly at this standpoint, the people in their next attempt to free themselves will once more suffer a defeat.

The Anarchist Library (Mirror)
Anti-Copyright



Charlotte Wilson
The First Work of the Revolution
August 1887

<https://www.revoltlib.com/anarchism/the-first-work-of-the-revolution/view.php>

usa.anarchistlibraries.net