

The Anarchist Library (Mirror)
Anti-Copyright



Direct Action

Émile Pouget

Émile Pouget
Direct Action

Retrieved from <https://web.archive.org/web/20090711011541/> via
original link at [http://www.anarchosyndicalism.net/archive/
display/200/index.php](http://www.anarchosyndicalism.net/archive/display/200/index.php)

usa.anarchistlibraries.net

Contents

What we mean by Direct Action	5
The Negation of Parliamentarism	5
Expropriatory Education	8
The revolution is the work of day-to-day action	10
The necessity of effort	11
The catastrophic miracle	12
The so-called “iron law”	13
A novel factor: the will of the worker!	14
Wages and the cost of living	16
Overwhelming evil is not the seed of rebellion!	18
Force and Violence	22
Minority versus majority	23
Ineluctable violence	24
Illusory palliatives	26

For the economic revolution that capitalist society carries within itself to unfold at last and result in achievements, and for backward lurches and savage backlash to be impossible, those beavering away at the great undertaking must know what they want and how they want it. They have to be conscious entities and not impulse-driven! Now, let there be no mistake about this, numerical strength is only truly efficacious from the revolutionary viewpoint if it is fertilised by the initiative of individuals, by their spontaneity. By itself, it is nothing more than an accumulation of indeterminate Women that might be compared to a pile of inert matter prey to the impulses reaching it from without.

Thus it turns out that Direct Action, whilst proclaiming that the use of force cannot be avoided, lays the groundwork for the ruination of the rule of force and violence, in order to supplant it with a society based on consciousness and free agreement. This because it is the popularisation, in the old society of authoritarianism and exploitation, of the creative notions that set the human being free: development of the individual, cultivation of the will and galvanisation for action.

And so we are brought to the conclusion that Direct Action, quite apart from its value as a boon to society, carries within itself a value as a moral fecundation, in that it refines and elevates those whom it impregnates, releasing them from the straitjacket of passivity and inciting them to radiate strength and beauty.

“Direct Action ... implies that the working class subscribes to notions of freedom and autonomy instead of genuflecting before the principle of authority. Now, it is thanks to this authority principle, the pivot of the modern world — democracy being its latest incarnation — that the human being, tied down by a thousand ropes, moral as well as material, is bereft of any opportunity to display will and initiative.”

What we mean by Direct Action

Direct Action is the symbol of revolutionary unionism in action. This formula is representative of the twofold battle against exploitation and oppression. It proclaims, with inherent clarity, the direction and orientation of the working class's endeavours in its relentless attack upon capitalism.

Direct Action is a notion of such clarity, of such self-evident transparency, that merely to speak the words defines and explains them. It means that the working class, in constant rebellion against the existing state of affairs, expects nothing from outside people, powers or forces, but rather creates its own conditions of struggle and looks to itself for its means of action. It means that, against the existing society which recognises only the citizen, rises the producer. And that that producer, having grasped that any social grouping models itself upon its system of production, intends to attack directly the capitalist mode of production in order to transform it, by eliminating the employer and thereby achieving sovereignty in the workshop — the essential condition for the enjoyment of real freedom.

The Negation of Parliamentarism

Direct Action thus implies that the working class subscribes to notions of freedom and autonomy instead of genuflecting before the

principle of authority. Now, it is thanks to this authority principle, the pivot of the modern world — Democracy being its latest incarnation — that the human being, tied down by a thousand ropes, moral as well as material, is denied any opportunity to display will and initiative.

From this negation of Parliamentarism, false, and hypocritical, and the ultimate form of the crystallisation of authority, arises the entire syndicalist method. Direct Action therefore arises as simply the fleshing out of the principle of freedom, its realisation in the masses; no longer in abstract, vague, indistinct forms, but rather as clear-cut, practical notions inspiring the rebelliousness that the times require: it is the destruction of the spirit of submissiveness and resignation that degrades individuals and turns them into willing slaves — and a blossoming of the spirit of revolt, the factor fertilising human societies.

This fundamental and complete rupture between capitalist society and the world of labour, as encapsulated in Direct Action, was articulated by the International Working Men's [sic] Association in its motto: "The emancipation of the workers will be carried out by the workers themselves." And it made a contribution towards making a reality of this divorce by attaching supreme importance to economic associations. But confused still was the influence it would attribute to them. However, the IWMA had an inkling that the work of social transformation has to begin at the bottom, and that political changes are merely a consequence of amendments made to the system of production. That is why it hailed the action of trades associations and, naturally, legitimised the procedure of expressing their vitality and influence, appropriate to the body in question — and which is nothing other than Direct Action.

Direct Action is in fact the normal function of the unions and their reason for being; it would be a glaring nonsense for such associations to restrict themselves to bringing the waged together, in order to better adapt them to the fate reserved for them in bourgeois society — production for others. It is all too evident that, in

gauge the tenor of workers' thinking by this method. Moreover, revolutionary union organisations can use it, as the need arises (and this goes for those of them which, not being as yet completely free of the hold of capitalism, look to State intervention, as well as for those which are plainly revolutionary). And this has long been the case! Neither the one nor the other waited until any attempt was made to enshrine it as a system and for the attempt to be made to pass it off as a by-product of direct action.

It is therefore absurd to argue that the referendum runs counter to the revolutionary method — just as it would be absurd to argue that it is its inevitable complement. It is a mechanism for quantitative measurement and quite unsuited to qualitative assessment. Which is why it would be ill-advised to depend upon its being a lever capable of shifting capitalist society off its foundations. Even if it were to become more commonplace, its practice is not going to take the place of the initiatives required and indispensable vigour when an idea's time has come.

It is infantile to talk about referendum when what is at stake is revolutionary action such as the storming of the Bastille ... Had the Gardes françaises not defected to the people on 14 July 1789, had a conscious minority not set about attacking the fortress .. had an attempt been made first to determine by referendum the fate of that odious prison, the likelihood is that it would still be dominating the entrance to the faubourg Antoine ...

Our hypothesis with regard to the seizure of the Bastille is applicable to all revolutionary events: let them be put to the test of a hypothetical referendum and similar conclusions will be reached.

No! There is no suffrage-based or referendum-based panacea likely to take the place of recourse to revolutionary force. But we must be plainly specific on this point: such recourse to force does not imply that the masses are sleeping. Quite the opposite! And it is all the more effective, the more these masses are endowed with a more enlightened consciousness.

that had this force been able to exercise itself without encumbrance, following the line of least resistance, it might not have manifested itself in violent actions but displayed a peaceable, majestic, calm aspect of itself. Isn't the river that rolls to the sea with Olympian but irresistible sluggishness not made up of the very same liquid molecules that, tumbling torrentially through steep-sided valleys, barged aside the obstacles placed in their path? The same goes for the power of the people.

Illusory palliatives

But, given that the people do not resort to force just for the pleasure of it, it would be dangerous to hope to preempt such recourse through the use of palliatives along parliamentary and democratic lines. Thus there is no voting system — not referendum, nor any other procedure that would seek to divine the key to the people's wishes — thanks to which one might attempt to forestall revolutionary movements. Clinging to illusions of this sort would be tantamount to lapsing back into the unhappy experiences of the past, when the miraculous virtues attributed to universal suffrage were the focus of widespread hopes. True, it is more convenient to believe in the omnipotence of universal suffrage, or even of the referendum, than to see things as they really are: it spares one the need to act — but, on the downside, it brings economic liberation no nearer.

In the final analysis, we must always be brought back to this ineluctable conclusion: recourse to force!

However, the fact that some voting method, some referendum procedure, etc., is unlikely to sound the extent and intensity of revolutionary consciousness, should not be interpreted as finding against their relative worths. Referendum, say, may have its uses. In certain circumstances, recourse to it may well be the best policy. In instances posed with precision and clarity, it is convenient to

the unions, persons of no particularly clear cut social outlooks band together for the purposes of self-defence, in order to struggle first hand and as individuals. The community of interests attracts them there; they gravitate towards it instinctively. There, in that nursery of life, the work of fermentation, elaboration and education is made; the union raises the consciousness of workers blinkered still by the prejudices inculcated into them by the ruling class; it opens their eyes wide to the overriding necessity of struggle, of revolt; it prepares them for social battles by marshalling their concerted efforts. From such instruction, it follows that every individual must act without ever offloading on to others the task of acting in their place. It is in these gymnastics that the individual is imbued with a sense of her own worth, and in extolling such worth lies the fertilising power of Direct Action. It marshals human resourcefulness, tempers characters and focuses energies. It teaches self-confidence! And self-reliance! And self-mastery! And acting for oneself!

Now, if we compare the methods in use in democratic associations or groupings, we find that they have nothing in common with this constant tendency to raise consciousness, nor with this adaptation to action that permeates human being from the strangle-hold of passivity and listlessness wherein democratism tends to confine and paralyse her. It teaches her will-power, instead of mere obedience, and to embrace her sovereignty instead of conferring her part upon a representative. By so doing, it shifts the axis of social orientation, so that human energies, instead of being squandered upon harmful and depressing activity, derive from their legitimate expenditure the necessary sustenance for their continued development.

Expropriatory Education

Fifty years ago, in the time around 1848, back in the days when republicans still believed in something, they admitted how much of an illusion, how much of a lie and how powerless the representative system was and they searched for ways to overcome its defects. Rittinghausen, too mesmerised by the political frippery which she supposed was crucial to human progress, reckoned that she had found a solution in the shape of “direct representation”. Proudhon, on the other hand, presaging revolutionary unionism, spoke of the coming economic federalism that would bypass, with all of life’s superiority, the sterile notions of the whole political set-up; the economic federalism being hatched from within the workers’ organisations implies the recuperation by trades bodies of certain useful functions, thanks to which the State conjures up illusions as to its *raison d’être*, and at the same time, the elimination of its noxious, restrictive and repression functions, thanks to which capitalist society is perpetuated.

But for this burgeoning of society to become a possibility, preparatory work must first have drawn together within the existing society those elements whose role it will be to make it happen. This is the task assumed by the working class. just as a building is built from the foundations up, so this internal undertaking which involves both the dismantling of the factors making up the old world and incubating the new edifice starts from the bottom up. No longer is it a matter of taking over the State, nor of tinkering with its cogs or changing its personnel: the point is to transform the mechanism of production, by doing away with the boss in workshop and factory, and replacing production for profit with production in common, for the benefit of all ... the logical consequence of which is the ruination of the State.

The work of expropriation has begun; step by step it is pursued by day to day struggles against the current master of production, the capitalist; her privileges are undermined and eaten away, the

it by necessity: they resolve upon it only after a lengthy series of experiences have demonstrated the impossibility of following the peaceable route and — even in those circumstances — their violence is merely a benign and humane retort to the excessive and barbaric violence from their masters.

Were the people violent by instinct, they would not endure the life of misery, privation and hard slog — studded with rascality and crime — which is the existence foisted upon them by the parasitical, exploitative minority, for another twenty four hours. Here we need have no recourse to philosophical explanation to demonstrate that Women are born “neither good nor bad”, and become one or the other according to their environment and circumstances. The matter can be resolved by everyday observation: it is beyond doubt that the people, sentimental and soft-hearted, display nothing of the endemic violence that characterises the ruling classes, and which is the mortar holding their rule together — legality being only the thin whitewash of hypocrisy designed to screen this deep-seated violence.

The people, held down by the education inculcated into them, saturated with prejudices, are obliged to make considerable effort to raise themselves to consciousness. Now, even when they pull it off, far from letting themselves be swept along by a justified wrath, they abide by the principle of least resistance: they seek out and stick to the path that looks to them the shortest and least fraught with difficulties. They are like waters following the slope to the sea, peaceable here and thundering there, according to whether they meet with few obstacles or many. To be sure, they are bound for the revolution, regardless of the impediments placed in their way by the privileged: but they proceed by the fits and starts and hesitations which are the products of their peaceable disposition and their wish to fight shy of extreme solutions. So, when the people’s force, smashing through the obstacles raised against it, sweeps over the old societies like a revolutionary hurricane, this is because it has been left no other outlet. Indeed, there is no denying

This potential for propaganda and action strives first to bring enlightenment to the unfortunates who, by acting as the defenders of the bourgeois class, perpetuate the depressing saga of slaves armed by their masters to fight against the rebels promising liberation. It would be impossible to focus too much effort on this preparatory task. In fact, we must get the full measure of the dampening potential represented by militarism. The people in arms are always pitted against their own, better armed, offspring. Now there is historical proof aplenty to show that all popular uprisings that have not enjoyed either neutrality or support from the people in great-coats — to wit, the army — have foundered. So our continual object must be to paralyse the unwitting strength afforded to rulers by a segment of the working class.

That done, there still remains the matter of breaking the power of the parasitical minority proper — and it would be a grave error to regard it as negligible.

This, in broad outline, is the task that falls to the conscious workers.

Ineluctable violence

As for anticipating the circumstances and timing of the decisive clash between the forces of the past and the forces of the future, that belongs to the realm of hypothesis. What we may be sure of, is that it will have been prefaced and prepared by more or less sudden sniping, clashes and contacts. And another thing of which we may be sure is that the forces of the past will not resign themselves to abdication, or bowing the knee. Now, it is precisely this blind resistance to progress which has, in the past, all too often marked the achievement of social progress with brutality and violence. And it cannot be emphasised too strongly: the responsibility for such violence does not lie with the Women looking to the future. For the people to decide on categorical revolt, they must be driven to

legitimacy of her leadership and mastery functions is denied, and the charge that she levies upon everyone's output on the pretext of recompense for capital investment, is considered theft. So, little by little, he is being bundled out of the workshop — until such time as he can be driven out entirely and forever.

All of this, this burrowing from within, escalating and intensifying by the day, is Direct Action rampant. And when the working class, having grown in strength and consciousness, is ready to take possession and gets on with doing just that, that too will be Direct Action!

Once the expropriation of capital is underway, and when the railway companies find their shares — the “diplomas” of the financial aristocracy — rendered worthless, and when the parasitical retinue of rail directors and other magnates can no longer survive in idleness, the trains will continue to operate ... And this is because the railway workers will have taken things into their own hands; their revolutionary union having turned from a fighting group into a production association, will thereafter take charge of running operations — and not now with an eye to personal gain, nor yet for plain and simple corporative motives, but for the common good.

What will be done in the case of the railways will be replicated in every sphere of production.

But if this task of liquidating the old world of exploitation is to prosper, the working class has to be familiarised with the conditions for realisation of the new social order, and must have acquired the capacity and will to realise this for itself: it must rely, in facing up to the difficulties that will crop up, solely upon its own direct efforts, on the capabilities that it possesses within itself, rather than on the graciousness of “go-betweens”, providential Men, these new-style bishops. In the latter case, exploitation would not be eradicated and would persist under a different guise.

The revolution is the work of day-to-day action

Thus, to prepare the way, the restrictive notions, the dead formulae that stand for a persistent past, must be replaced with ideas that point us in the direction of indispensable demonstrations of will. Now, these new ideas cannot but derive from systematic implementation of direct action methods. Of this is, in fact, from the profound current of autonomy and human solidarity, intensified by practical action that erupts and fleshes out the idea of replacing the present social disorder with a form of organisation wherein labour alone has a place and every individual will be free to give expression to her personality and her faculties.

This task of laying the groundwork for the future is, thanks to Direct Action, in no way at odds with the day to day struggle. The tactical superiority of Direct Action resists precisely in its unparalleled plasticity: organisations actively engaged in the practice are not required to confine themselves to beatific waiting for the advent of social changes. They live in the present with all possible combativity, sacrificing neither the present to the future, nor the future to the present. It follows from this, from this capacity for facing up simultaneously to the demands of the moment and those of the future and from this compatibility in the two-pronged task to be carried forward, that the ideal for which they strive, far from being overshadowed or neglected, is thereby clarified, defined and made more discernible.

Which is why it is both inane and false to describe revolutionaries drawing their inspiration from Direct Action methods as “advocates of all-or-nothing”. True, they are advocates of wresting EVERYTHING from the bourgeoisie! But, until such time as they will have amassed sufficient strength to carry through this task of general expropriation, they do not rest upon their laurels and miss no chance to win partial improvements which, being achieved at

was nothing but a monstrous injustice. And that martyrdom goes on!

Minority versus majority

The labouring masses are always exploited and oppressed by a parasitical minority which, had it only its own resources to rely upon, could not preserve its rule for a single day, for one single hour! This minority draws its power from the bovine acquiescence of its victims: it is the latter — the source of all strength — who, in sacrificing themselves for the class that lives off their backs, create and perpetuate Capital and uphold the State.

Now, if this minority is to be unseated, it cannot be enough (today any more than in the past) to dissect the social falsehoods that serve as its principles, expose its iniquity or detail its crimes. Against brute force, an idea, reduced to its powers of persuasion alone, is beaten before it starts. The fact is that, no matter how beautiful it may be, an idea is only a soap-bubble unless sustained by force, unless rendered fertile by it.

So what will it take to stop the unwitting sacrifice of majorities to a sensual, rascally minority?

The establishment of a force capable of counter-balancing what the propertied and ruling class extracts from the people’s delusion and ignorance. It is up to conscious workers to make just such a force a reality: the problem consists, for those desirous of shrugging off the yoke fashioned for them by the majorities, of reacting against so much passivity and seeking one another out, coming to some accommodation, and reaching agreement.

This vital task of revolutionary coalescence and cohesion is carried out inside the revolutionary union organisation: there, a growing minority is formed and grows, its aim to acquire sufficient strength, first, to counter-balance and then to annihilate the forces of exploitation and oppression.

bourgeoisie, the piecemeal gains wrested from it, fan the flames of revolt: and we find, too, that just as life springs from life, so action inspires action.

Force and Violence

Direct Action, the manifestation of the workers' strength and determination, shows itself in accordance with circumstance and setting, through acts that may well be very anodyne, just as they might as easily be very violent. It is simply a matter of what is required.

Thus, there is no specific form of Direct Action. Some people, with a very superficial grasp of things, explain it away in terms of an orgy of window breaking. Making do with such a definition — which brings joy to the hearts of the glaziers — would be to take a really narrow view of this exercise of proletarian might: it would be to reduce Direct Action to a more or less impulsive act, and that would be to ignore what it is in it that constitutes its greatest value and to forget that it is the symbolic enactment of workers' revolt.

Direct Action, is workers' might applied to creative purposes: it is the force that acts as midwife to a new law — enshrining social entitlement!

Force lies at the back of every movement and every action and, of necessity, it is the culmination of these. Life is the exercise of force and, beyond force, there is only oblivion. Nothing is made manifest, nothing is materialised in its absence.

The better to pull the wool over our eyes and keep us under their yoke, our class enemies have drummed it into us that immanent justice need not resort to force. Nonsensical exploiters of the people! In the absence of force, justice is nothing but tomfoolery and lies. The grievous martyrdom of the people down through the centuries bears witness to this: though theirs were just causes, force, in the service of the religious authorities and secular masters crushed and trampled the peoples: all in the name of some supposed justice that

some cost to capitalist privileges, represent a sort of partial expropriation and pave the way to more comprehensive demands.

From which it is plain that Direct Action is the plain and simple fleshing-out of the spirit of revolt: it fleshes out the class struggle, shifting it from the realm of theory and abstraction into the realm of practice and accomplishment. As a result, Direct Action is the class struggle lived on a daily basis, an ongoing attack upon capitalism.

Which is why it is so despised by the politicians — a breed apart — who had set themselves up as the “representatives” or “bishops” of democracy. Now, should the working class, scorning democracy, go a step further and look for some alternative path, on the terrain of economics, what is to become of the “go-betweens” who used to pose as the proletariat's spokesmen?

Which is why it is even more despised and reprimanded by the bourgeoisie! The latter sees its demise rudely accelerated by the fact that the working class, drawing strength and increasing confidence from Direct Action, and breaking definitely with the past, and relying upon its own resources to espouse an entirely new mentality, is on its way to constructing an entirely new environment.

The necessity of effort

It is such a commonplace that there has to be struggle against all the manner of obstacles placed in the way of mankind's development that it may seem paradoxical to have to extol the necessity of effort.

Besides action, in fact, what else is there but inertia, spinelessness and passive acceptance of slavery? In times of depression and inertia, Women are degraded to the status of beasts of burden, slaves trapped in hopeless toil; their minds are stultified, constipated and thoughtless; their prospects are limited; they cannot imagine the future, nor suppose that it will be any improvement upon the present.

But up pops action! They are shaken from their torpor, their decrepit brains start to work and a radiant energy transforms and transfigures the human masses.

Because action is the salt of life ... Or, to put it more plainly and simply, it is life itself! To live is to act .. To act is to be alive!

The catastrophic miracle

But these are banalities! Yet, the point has to be laboured, and the effort glorified, because stultifying education has washed over the older generation and planted debilitating notions in its ranks. The futility of effort has been elevated to the status of a theory and it has been given out that any revolutionary achievement would flow from the ineluctable course of events; catastrophe, it was proclaimed, would come to pass automatically. Just as soon as, in the ineluctable course of events, capitalist institutions would reach a point of maximum tension. Whereupon they would explode by themselves! Effort by woman in economic terms was proclaimed redundant, her action against the restrictive environment besetting her were affirmed futile. She was left but one hope: that she might infiltrate her own into the bourgeois parliaments and await the inevitable unleashing of catastrophe.

We were taught that this would come to pass mechanically and inescapably when the time was ripe; with concentration of capital being effected through the immanent laws of capitalist production itself, the number of the capitalist magnates, usurpers and monopolists was spiralling ever downwards .. so that a day would come when, thanks to the conquest of political power, the people's elected representatives would use law and decree to expropriate this handful of great capitalist barons.

What a perilous and stultifying illusion such passive waiting for the coming of the Messiah-revolution represents! And how many years or centuries will it take to capture political power? And

ships: there would still be, on the one side, the waged and the governed, and, on the other, the bosses and the leaders.

Obviously partial gains (no matter how important we may suppose these to be and even if they should largely whittle away at privileges) do not have the effect of altering economic relationships – the relations obtaining between boss and worker, between leader and led. Therefore the worker's subordination to Capital and the State endures. From which it follows that the social question looms as large as ever, and the "barricade" dividing the producers from the parasites living off them has not been shifted, much less flattened.

No matter how much the hours of work may be reduced, no matter how high wage rates may climb, no matter how "comfortable" the factory may become from the point of view of hygiene, etc. as long as the relationships of wage-payer to waged, governor to governed persist, there will be two classes, the one struggling against the other. And the contest will grow in degree and scale as the exploited and oppressed class, its strength and consciousness expanding, acquires a truer appreciation of its social worth; as a result, as it improves itself and educates itself and betters itself, it will bring ever more vigour to its undermining of the privileges of the opposing, parasite class.

And this will carry on until all hell breaks loose! Until the day when the working class, after having steeled itself for the final break, after having hardened itself through continual and ever more frequent skirmishes against its class foe, will be powerful enough to mount the crucial assault ... And that will be Direct Action taken to its ultimate: the General Strike!

Thus, to sum up, careful scrutiny of social phenomena allows us to set our faces against the fatalistic theory that proclaims the futility of effort, and against the tendency to suppose that better times can spring from bad ones run riot. Instead, a clear-sighted appreciation of these phenomena throws up the notion of a process of unfolding action: we find that the reverses suffered by the

of this bizarre theory that misery heaped upon misery and oppression heaped upon oppression sows the seeds of revolution. The very opposite is the case, is true! The weakling, at the mercy of fate, her life restricted and herself materially and morally a slave, will not dare to bridle under oppression: for fear of worse to come, she will draw in her horns and refuse to budge or make any effort and will wallow in her wretchedness. It is different with someone who achieves womanhood through struggle, someone who, having a less narrow life and a more open mind and having looked her exploiter in the face, knows that she is a match for her.

Which is why partial improvements do not have the effect of lulling the workers to sleep: instead they act as a reassurance and a spur to her in staking further claims and making further demands. The result of well-being — which is always a consequence of the display of proletarian might — whether the interested parties wrest it from the struggle, or the bourgeoisie deems it prudent and politic to make concessions, in order to take the edge off clashes which it foresees or fears — is to add to the dignity and consciousness of the working class and also — and above all else! — to increase and hone its appetite for the fight. As it shrugs off its physiological and intellectual poverty, the working class matures: it achieves a greater sensitivity, grows more alive to the exploitation it endures and its determination to break free of this is all the greater: it also gains a clearer perception of the irreconcilable contrast between its own interests and those of the capitalist class.

But, no matter how important one may suppose them to be, piecemeal improvements cannot take the place of the revolution, or stave it off: the expropriation of capital remains a necessity if liberation is to be feasible.

In fact, even supposing that capital's profiteering could be heavily handicapped and that the State's poisonous role could be partly done away with, it is unlikely that these handicaps could extinguish them entirely. None of it would have altered the relation-

even then, supposing that it has been captured, will the number of capitalist magnates have fallen sufficiently by that point? Even allowing that the expansion of trusts may have swallowed up the medium bourgeoisie, does it follow that they will have been thrust down into the ranks of the proletariat? Will they not, rather, have carved themselves out a place in the trusts and will the numbers of parasites living without producing a thing not be at least the same as they are today? If the answer is yes, can we not suppose that the beneficiaries of the old society will put up a fight against the expropriating laws and decrees?

An equal number of problems would be posed, before which the working class would be powerless and bewildered as to what to do, should it have made the mistake of remaining mesmerised by the hope of a revolution's coming to pass in the absence of any direct effort on its part.

The so-called “iron law”

Even as we were being bamboozled with this messianic faith in the Revolution, to stultify us even further and the better to persuade us that there was nothing that could be attempted, nothing to be done, and in order to plunge us even deeper into the mire of inaction, we were indoctrinated with the “iron law of wages”. We were taught that, under this relentless formula (primarily the work of Ferdinand Lassalle), in today's society any effort is a waste of time, any action futile, in that the economic repercussions soon restore the poverty ceiling through which the proletariat cannot break.

Under this iron law — which was then made into the keystone of socialism — it was proclaimed that “as a general rule, the average wage would be no more than what the worker strictly required for survival”. And it was said: “That figure is governed by capitalist pressure alone and this can even push it below the minimum necessary for the working woman's subsistence ... The only rule with

regard to wage levels is the plentiful or scarce supply of woman-power ...”

By way of evidence of the relentless operation of this law of wages, comparisons were made between the worker and a commodity: if there is a glut of potatoes on the market, they are cheap; if they are scarce, the price rises ... It is the same with the working woman, it was said: her wages fluctuate in accordance with the abundant or short of labour!

Against the relentless arguments of this absurd reasoning, no voice was raised: so the law of wages may be taken as right .. for as long as the working woman is content to be a commodity! For as long as, like a sack of potatoes. she remains passive and inert and endures the fluctuations of the market ... For as long as she bends her back and puts up with all of the bosses’ snubs, ... the law of wages functions.

But things take a different turn the moment that a glimmer of consciousness stirs this worker-potato into life. When, instead of dooming herself to inertia, spinelessness, resignation and passivity, the worker wakes up to her worth as a human being and the spirit of revolt washes over her: when she bestirs herself, energetic, wilful and active; when, instead of rubbing shoulders absently with her neighbours (like a potato alongside other potatoes) and comes into contact with them, reacts with them, and they in turn respond to her; once the labour bloc comes to life and bestirs itself .. then, the laughable equilibrium of the law of wages is undone.

A novel factor: the will of the worker!

A novel factor has appeared on the labour market: the will of the worker! And this factor, unknown when it comes to setting the price of a bushel of potatoes, has a bearing upon the setting of wages; its impact may be large or small, according to the degree of tension of the labour force, which is a product of the accord of

people rejoiced if they could detect any increase in “pauperisation”, the worsening of misery, employer arbitrariness, government oppression, and the like. To listen to these poor logicians, the Revolution just had to sprout from overwhelming evil! So every upsurge in misery and calamity, etc., struck them as good thing, hastening the fateful hour.

A crack-brained error! A nonsense! The only thing that abundance of evils — no matter what form these may assume — achieves is to wear down those who suffer them even more. And this is readily appreciated. Instead of bandying words, one need only look around and take it all in.

Which are the trades where revolutionary union activity is most pronounced? The ones where, not having to put in unduly long working hours, the comrades can, when their shift is finished, enjoy a social life, attend meetings, and take an interest in matters of common concern: the ones where wages are not slashed to such an extent that any deduction for dues or a newspaper subscription or the purchase of a book amounts to one loaf less upon the table.

By contrast, in the trades where the length and intensity of the work are excessive, once the worker leaves penal servitude to her boss behind her, she is physically and mentally “spent”; so her only ambition, before making her way home to eat and sleep, is to down a few mouthfuls of alcohol to buck herself up, lift her spirits and stiffen her resolve. It never enters her head to drop by the union, attend meetings, such is the toll taken upon her body by weariness and such is the difficulty her exhausted brain finds in working.

By the same token, what effort could one expect of the wretch fallen upon endemic impoverished circumstances, the ragamuffin ground down by lack of work and deprivation? Maybe, in a fit of rage, she will venture a gesture of revolt .. but that gesture will not bear repetition! Poverty has drained her of all will, of all spirit of revolt.

These observations — which any one of us is free to verify and of which we can find our own examples — amount to a rebuttal

And so the light of experience shows just how illusory and false this alleged “iron law of wages” is. “Law of iron,” is it? Pull the other one! It isn’t even a law of rubber!

The unfortunate thing is that the consequences of the penetration of the world of labour by that fateful formula have been more serious than mere flawed argument. Who can say how much suffering and disappointment it has engendered? For too long, alas, the working class has reclined and dozed upon this false pillow. There was a logical connection: the theory that effort was futile spawned inaction. Since the pointlessness of action, the futility of struggle, the impossibility of immediate improvement had been proclaimed, every vestige of revolt was stifled. Indeed, what was the point of fighting, once effort had been identified in advance as pointless and unproductive, when one knew that one was doomed to failure? Since struggle promised only blows — with no hope of even slight benefit — was it not the wiser course to remain calm?

And that was the argument that ruled the roost! The working class accommodated itself to an apathy that played right into the hands of the bourgeoisie. Thus, when, under pressure of circumstance, the workers were driven into a dispute, it was only with a heavy heart that the gauntlet was picked up: striking even came to be reputed as an evil to be endured if it could not be averted and one to which one resigned oneself with no illusion that any real improvement might issue from a favourable outcome.

Overwhelming evil is not the seed of rebellion!

Parallel to this crippling belief in the impossibility of breaking through the vicious circle of the “iron law of wages”, and by way of a warped deduction from this “law”, that trusting to the revolution’s coming to pass as events unfolded without assistance, without any intervening effort on the part of the workers, some

individual wills beating in unison — but, whether it be strong or weak, there is no denying it.

Worker cohesion thus conjures up against capitalist might, a might capable of standing up to it. The inequality between the two adversaries — which cannot be denied when the exploiter is confronted only by the working woman on her own — is attenuated in proportion with the degree of cohesion achieved by the labour bloc. From then on, proletarian resistance, be it latent or acute, is an everyday phenomenon: disputes between labour and capital quicken and become more acute. Labour does not always emerge victorious from these partial struggles: however, even when defeated, the workers in struggle still reap some benefit: resistance from them has obstructed pressure from the employers and often forced the employer to grant some of the demands put. In this case the character of high solidarity in revolutionary unionism is vindicated: the result of the struggle brings benefits to untrustworthy, less conscious brothers, and the strikers relish the moral delights of having fought for the welfare of all.

That labour’s cohesion leads to wage increases is acknowledged with quite good grace by the theoreticians of the “iron law”. The facts are so tangible that they would be hard put to it to offer a serious rebuttal. But they protest that, in parallel with the wage increases, there is an increase in the cost of living, so that there is no increase in the worker’s purchasing power and the benefits of her higher pay are thereby nullified.

There are circumstances in which we do find such repercussions: but the rise in living costs, in direct association with the rise in pay is not so constant that it can be taken as axiomatic. Moreover, when such rises occur, this is — in most instances — proof that the worker, after having struggled in her producer capacity against her boss, has neglected to look to her interests in her capacity as consumer. Very often it is the passivity of the purchaser vis-a-vis the trader, of the tenant vis a vis the landlord, etc., that allows the landlords, traders, etc., to claw back from added levies upon the

working woman as consumer the benefit of the improvements that she has extracted as producer.

Furthermore, the irrefutable proof that wage levels need not necessarily result in parallel increases in the cost of living is furnished by countries where working hours are short and wages high: Life there is less expensive and less restricted than in countries where working hours are long and wages low.

Wages and the cost of living

In England, the United States and Australia, the working day often lasts eight hours (nine at most), with weekends off, yet wages there are higher than among us. In spite of which life is easier there. First because, over six working days, or better yet, over five and a half (work grinding to a halt by the Saturday afternoon in most cases), the worker earns enough to support herself through the seven days of the week: then because, as a general rule, the cost of basic necessities is lower than in France, or at any rate more affordable, in terms of wage levels.¹

Such findings invalidate the “iron law”. Especially so as it cannot be argued that the high pay rates of the countries in question are merely the consequence of woman-power shortages. In the United States as well as in Australia, and in England too, unemployment bites deep. So it is plain that if working conditions in those coun-

¹ On the say so of superficial observers, many people unquestioningly swallow and repeat the story that “life is expensive” in the aforementioned countries. The truth of the matter is that luxury items are very expensive there: “society” living is very burdensome there: on the other hand, basic necessities are affordable. Moreover, don’t we know that, from, say, the United States, we get wheat, fruit, canned goods and manufactured products, etc., which (in spite of the additional costs imposed by transport costs and in spite of customs levies too) can compete with similar items on our market here? It must therefore be self-evident that in the United States those goods are not on sale at higher prices ... We could cite many other conclusive proofs. But the confines of a pamphlet make that impracticable.

tries are better, it is because in their establishment there is a factor at work other than plentiful or restricted supply of labour: the will of the workers! Such improved conditions are the results of workers’ efforts, of the determination of the worker to refuse to accept a vegetative, restricted life, and they were won through the struggle against Capital. However, no matter how violent the economic skirmishes that improved these conditions may have been, they have not created a revolutionary situation: they have not pitted labour against capital, in a face to face confrontation between enemies. The workers have not — at any rate not as a body — attained class consciousness: thus far their aspirations have been unduly modest, at the aspiration to accommodation with the existing society. But times change! The English, the Yanks and the rest are in the process of acquiring the class consciousness that they were lacking.

If we move on from examining high-wage, shorter-hours societies to look at our own peasant regions where, confident of finding an ignorant, compliant population, a number of industrialists have set up their factories, we find the opposite phenomenon: wages there are very low and working conditions unduly demanding. The reason is that since the will of the workers there is lethargic, it is capitalist pressure alone that determines the working conditions; the working woman, still ignorant of and unfamiliar with her own strength, is still reduced to the status of a “commodity”, so that she is prey to the unmitigated operation of the supposed “law of wages”. But should a spark of revolt bring to life the victim of exploitation, the situation will be changed! The dust of humanity, which is what the proletarian masses have been up to now, need only be compacted into a revolutionary union bloc and the pressures from the bosses will be countered by a force that may be weak and clumsy in its beginnings but which will soon increase in might and consciousness.