Dear Comrades at *Ilota*

Enrico Malatesta

1 April 1883

Editor's Note: Translated from "Cari Compagni dell'*Ilota*," *Ilota* (Pistoia) 1, no. 9 (1 April 1883). The background to this letter was the defection from anarchism of Andrea Costa, one of the chief members of the Italian Federation, who in 1879 had started advocating the extension of socialist tactics to parliamentary ones. Costa had a significant following, especially in the Romagna region, and in November 1882 he had been elected to parliament. His tactics had sparked heated debates in part of the socialist press, and *Ilota* was one of the periodicals that considered those tactics legitimate. In a recent series of articles, the *Ilota* had thus called for the union and joint organization of all socialist forces, despite the tactical differences.

I have watched the efforts you have been making to step up the socialist party's organizing and I congratulate you upon them.9 Organization represents the very life and strength of a party and without it we would not even be able to effectively spread our program, let alone try to implement it.

But it strikes me that in offering a broad outline of the sort of organization we want, you have made a serious mistake that might generate either failure today or the certainty of our breaking up in the future.

Out of an excessive love of unity and concord, you would like to see us organized regardless of differences of opinion regarding aims and means, the only bond between us being the shared aspiration for some vague, indeterminate socialism.

If a party—especially a party of action—is to thrive, it needs to be aware of the goal it intends to reach and especially the means by which it intends to reach it. Otherwise, it is inescapably doomed to remain powerless and to peter out amidst internal differences.

I am certainly not referring to those secondary differences of opinion that are not indicative of definitive parting of the ways. For instance, there is the view that oral propaganda may be more effective than the printed word, or that the pamphlet is preferable to the newspaper, urban insurrection over armed bands, attacks upon property over attacks upon the person, the Irishman's dagger over the Russian's mine, or vice versa, without there being anything to inhibit membership of the same organization. These are matters to be resolved in different ways depending on

circumstances and means that are not mutually exclusive and upon which, in the worst scenario, a revolutionary can defer to majority opinion for the sake of the need for agreement.

But when it comes to programs that are, or are believed to be, incompatible, how can you ever amalgamate them and bring together folk who from the word "go" must bicker and fight with one another?

How, for instance, do you propose to organize me alongside a legalitarian, when I believe that driving the people towards the ballot box and getting them to hope that parliament can bring us reforms likely to make our task easier, already means betraying the cause of socialism? A legalitarian, at best, looks upon universal suffrage as a gain that can be a great boost to the socialist party; whereas I believe it is the best means the bourgeoisie has for oppressing and blithely exploiting the people. He sees universal suffrage as a first step in the direction of emancipation; I see it as the secret to getting the slave to fasten his own chains and a guarantee against revolt, getting the slave to believe he is the master.

So how would you see us united? While he will be campaigning to secure such voting rights and, when he gets them, to persuade the people to exercise them, I will be striving to prevent voting rights being *granted* or, if they are, to ensure that the ballot-boxes are empty and held in contempt.

I do not wish to dwell upon the reasons of either side here. No matter which of us is right, it makes no difference to the fact that, until such time as one side wins the other over, we cannot seriously hope to see them being useful members of the same organization. This is not the first time I have advanced this notion.

When the volte-face, which is now known by the slick euphemism "Costa's *evolution*," came about, Costa did all he could to hide the changes he was making to our shared program and strove to preserve the party's unity—despite the shattered unity around the program—by insisting that we were all basically in agreement. We alerted people to the danger, underlined the differences, and tried to save the revolutionary party, even at the price of seeing its ranks thinned.

We were overruled, and instead of there being, as there should be, two co-existing parties that would spur each other on, what we had instead was, primarily, disorganization, impotence, personality clashes, coolness, and a muddling of things and ideas. And wherever the party remained more or less united, as it did in Romagna, it was because of bamboozlement and deceptions and a change that was designed to arrive at an extreme lullaby socialism, and was swallowed by our comrades at an undetectable snail's pace, without their even being conscious of where they were being led. Luckily, we've seen signs that make us hopeful that, soon, the stalwart socialists of Romagna, who are and have always been revolutionaries, will come to their senses, see where they have been tricked, and feel all of the outrage and wonder that they would have felt years ago, had they been told then that "you are to have a representative who will sit in His Majesty's parliament on behalf of the *Romagna democratic coalition*, a colleague and friend to the bourgeoisie's representatives."

Now that enlightenment has finally arrived, do we want to travel once again the very trail that did the Italian socialist party so much damage, and call for a sinking of the deep-seated differences between us and build a unity founded upon a deceitful outward agreement?

That might suit someone eager for a seat in the benches of Montecitorio,[1] who therefore needs to do his best to muster a large body of voters, but it will not suit us who are out to make the revolution.

Without letting ourselves be deceived by beloved traditions ruined beyond recovery by treachery, in practice today there is less real difference between us and the action-oriented republicans—with whom we can travel at least the first stage along the road (namely, armed insurrection against the monarchy)—than there is between us and those who lull the socialists and harness socialism into serving the interests of whichever faction of the bourgeoisie finds it expedient to dress itself in red.

And Costa showed that he was perfectly well aware of the situation when he was shunned by the socialists in Naples and sought a recommendation from Bovio, happily sitting at a republican banquet alongside the Honourable Mr. Aporti.[2]

Let Costa do what he will: we shall not lift a finger to slow his political downfall since we regard him as doomed to sink to the bottom of the slippery slope.

But let us organize ourselves.

Yes, let us marshal all of our party's resources, but let us remember that, as far as we revolutionaries, we insurrectionists are concerned, those who uphold parliamentarianism are not welcome in our party.

It will, assuredly, be painful parting company with old comrades. It will affect me as much as anyone else, since among my adversaries there are dear friends who were, for a long time, my companions in prison, in exile, in poverty, and who will, I hope, be my companions on the barricades and share in our victory.

But whenever the talk turns to the interests of the revolution, all considerations of personality must be silenced. We reach out a hand to all who believe, in good faith, that they serve the revolution's interests and we cling to the hope that we may see them follow their hearts. But our party should be *our* party and our organization should be *our* organization. And that organization should be the International Working Men's Association, whose program, hatched over a long time, rings out today as COMMUNISM, ANARCHY and REVOLUTION.

So, comrades, let us close the ranks of that association, which its deserters, having tried in vain to kill it off, are busy proclaiming dead, because the association's existence is a standing rebuke to their behavior, and because the remorse of abandoning it may be pricking their conscience.

Yours, Enrico Malatesta[3]

[1] Montecitorio is the seat of the Italian Chamber of Deputies.

[2] Giovanni Bovio was a philosopher and republican politician, and Pirro Aporti was a senator of the extreme left.

[3] Though Malatesta's first name was Errico, many called him Enrico. Accordingly, articles and published letters often contained the latter spelling in his signature.

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The Method of Freedom: An Errico Malatesta Reader, edited by Davide Turcato, translated by Paul Sharkey.

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