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Anarchists and the Situation

Errico Malatesta

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The First of May having become a sort of annual review of the Labor forces, it is well on such an occasion for Anarchists to ask themselves what their action should be in view of the constantly changing position of the movement.

This year also the First of May has passed very quietly, without anything exciting (in a revolutionary sense) happening. And yet never before has the situation been so full of promise and encouragement as in this year.

It is especially France which, retaining the vantage conquered during the revolutions of the past century, gives a revolutionary character to the situation.

The workers show clearly that they have at length lost all confidence in Governmental parties, even when these call themselves Socialist. They begin to understand that for emancipation they can count only on themselves, on direct action against Capitalism and against the State. Labour resistance becomes daily more intense, solidarity develops, strikes follow each other with increasing energy and combativeness. Already for the politicians—so-called Labour or Socialist, who go forth to preach peace and arbitration, to promise beneficent laws, profiting by the occasion to climb into

some place as Deputy or Municipal Councillor—already for such there is no longer room on the field of strikes. Now, if "Socialists" wish to be elected, they must seek the support of some section of the bourgeoisie.

Conscious workers act—and already we begin to see blazing factories and fleeing masters. These are the first scenes of the great Revolution which will put towns and countryside in flames and produce a radical transformation in every social relation.

The peasants also emerge from their passivity and begin to throw off that prejudice against town-workers which has for so long been a power for reaction.

Again, the State employees who until recently boasted of their position as public functionaries, and held themselves aloof from the industrial proletariat—these commence to understand their true interests and to test their capacity for paralysing the State by disorganising its services. The postmen's strike and the meeting in the Paris Hippodrome, where thousands of State employees fraternised with workmen in private industries in the name of the Social Revolution to be accomplished, marked a decisive step forward along the road to emancipation. And whatever may be the immediate result (still uncertain at the moment I am writing) of the second postmen's strike, it is indisputable henceforth that the revolt has penetrated amongst the employees of the State, and is bound to grow.

On the other hand, the patriotic prejudice has been breached with success, and antimilitarism filtering through the ranks of the Army saps at the base a society which only maintains itself by the brutal strength of soldiers and police.

As in France, so more or less everywhere the spirit of revolt grows; direct action takes the place of a blind confidence in the elected and the protection of the law.

The Revolution is advancing.

Such are the Anarchistic ideas which force themselves even upon those who resist them. Anarchists, by their position as

The above, having been written for Englishmen, may strike some as fantastic. England has not reached this point yet; but she will reach it, and sooner than is expected.

To-day, even if it would, a civilised country cannot remain separated from other civilised countries; and the French and Continental movement will not be without influence on the proletariat of this side of the Channel.

Besides, English workers have the solid qualities of perseverance, the spirit of organisation, and personal independence, which will soon enable them to regain the time lost, once they escape from the noxious influence of politicians.

vanguard and their high ideals, have ever been unable to be more than a numerically small minority; they have been decried, calumniated, and persecuted in every way—and yet the new outlook of the whole contemporaneous social movement is due to the infiltration of their ideas.

Revolutionary Trade Unionism (Syndicalism), which sums up the new tendencies, is certainly not Anarchism; but the spirit that animates it is Anarchist, and all that it has of good is Anarchist.

But this is matter of history. What is important at present is to see what should now be our actual conduct when rendering to the revolutionary cause the services we are prepared to render.

It is evident that the dominant class will not permit the revolutionary tide to submerge them without making every possible effort to arrest it.

The methods which the Governments and the bourgeoisie can employ in order to check the revolutionary movement may be summed up under four heads—(1) persecutions, to smother the movement in the germ; (2) war, to evade the storm by provoking an outbreak of the atavistic savageness which still manifests itself in race and national hatreds; (3) corruption, in order to turn the movement aside from its emancipatory aims; (4) ferocious repression, the bloodshed which drains the best forces of a people and postpones the struggle for another fifty years.

The ordinary persecutions of police and magistracy have failed; and although Governments, owing to the anti-freedom instinct which forms the basis of their nature, do not renounce these, it is evident that they now only serve to render the conflict more bitter and violent.

War has become a little too dangerous, and could well precipitate rather than prevent the Revolution. War will not take place. In any case, we should simply have to intensify our antipatriotic

and antimilitarist propaganda to render war less probable and ever more dangerous to the Government which had recourse to it.

There remain, therefore, two principal dangers for us to guard against—corruption and repression.

Corruption has already completely succeeded with the Parliamentarian Socialists, in such wise that in every country where Socialism was somewhat of a real menace to the existing system there has arisen an aristocracy formed of Socialist Deputies or would-be Deputies, which has become one of the best forces at the disposition of the bourgeoisie to divert or strangle the popular movement.

The same course will be tried with Revolutionary Trade Unionism.

Revolutionary Trade Unionism is not safe from corruption and degeneration. Apart from the question of individuals, who are always subject to mistakes and weaknesses, Trade Unionism by its very nature is a movement which cannot remain stationary. It must advance, develop; and its development either will approach more and more to Anarchism and make the Revolution, or modify itself, assume a bureaucratic character, adapt itself to the claims of capitalism, and become a factor in social conservation. To endeavour to lead Trade Unionism in the latter direction is at present the effort of every intelligent Conservative.

Old-age pensions, arbitration, the official recognition of Trade Union delegates, collective contracts, profit-sharing, co-operative societies, the recognised right of Trade Unions to hold property and to appear in a law court, are some of the methods employed by the bourgeoisie to arrest revolutionary impulse, and to stifle the growing desire for full emancipation and liberty by the ephemeral and illusory concession of some immediate ameliorations, and especially by the formation of a self-satisfied bureaucracy which will absorb the most intelligent and active elements among the proletariat.

It is, in the first place, against this danger that we must direct our forces. We must take a more and more active part in the Trade

Union movement, strenuously oppose the formation in its midst of a bureaucracy of paid and permanent officials, propagate our tactics, fight against every idea of conciliation and compromise with the enemy, as well as against every tendency towards the pride and selfishness of individual Trade Unions. We must especially prevent the "workers secretaries" taking the place of Members of Parliament, and see that Direct Action does not in its turn become a lie like the so-called sovereignty of the people.

In this way we can enable Syndicalism to retain its revolutionary character and become an increasingly powerful instrument of emancipation.

But then we will be faced with a final crisis. Of itself, and driven by the alarmed bourgeoisie, the Government will wish to put an end to the movement. Repression will commence seriously, and the Army, not as yet sufficiently permeated with the antimilitarist propaganda to be inoffensive, will be called upon to play its murderous rôle.

Will the revolutionists be in a position to successfully face military repression? This is the question upon which all depends: according to which way it is answered, it will be triumphant revolution and the inauguration of a new civilisation or rampant reaction for twenty years and more.

We must, then, prepare ourselves for a struggle in arms.

How is it to be done?

It cannot be done in Trade Unions, nor in public groups open more or less to everybody. Neither can it be discussed in the newspapers. And yet it must be done.

Let Anarchists, and all who foresee the coming Revolution and would have it triumphant, ponder over the matter.