

Anarchists' Line Within The Trade Union Movement

Report to the International anarchist Congress in Paris in 1923

Errico Malatesta on behalf of the *Unione Anarchica Italiana*

1923

Charged with reporting on the trade union question at a time of crisis, when the old tactics need re-examining in the light of recent experiences so that they can be adapted to fresh circumstances, and when the arrest, exile, and harassment of so many of the active members of the *Unione* makes it hard to communicate with comrades and get an exact feel for their current thoughts and dispositions, I can only speak for myself here and on my own account—though I am convinced, on the basis of what I know of the movement, that what I am about to say will articulate the thoughts of the vast majority, and possibly the totality, of the anarchists that are members of the *Unione Anarchica Italiana*.¹

We have always recognized the great significance of the workers' movement and the need for anarchists to be an active driving force within it. And it has frequently been at the instigation of our comrades that the liveliest and most pugnacious labor groupings have been established.

We have always been of the opinion that trade unionism is, today, a means whereby the workers begin to understand their slave status and to crave emancipation and get used to solidarity with all the oppressed in the fight against the oppressors—and that it will, tomorrow, serve as the essential core vital to continuity in the life of society and to the reorganizing of production without bosses or parasites.

But we have always argued and often disagreed over the manner in which anarchist activity was to be pursued in dealings with the workers' organization.

Were we to enter the unions or else stay outside, albeit taking part in all of the agitations with an eye to making these as radical as possible and to taking the lead when there were things that needed doing and dangers to be braved?

And above all, once inside the unions, were we or were we not to take up leadership posts and thereby be part of the horse-trading, compromises, accommodations, dealing with the authorities and the bosses to which unions had to submit, according to the workers' own wishes on behalf

¹ The *Unione Anarchica Italiana* was the main Italian anarchist organization. It was founded at the Bologna congress of 1920, replacing the *Unione Comunista Anarchica Italiana* that had been founded the year before. The Paris congress, where Malatesta's report was meant to be presented, did not take place. The difficulties to which Malatesta refers are those determined by the rise to power of fascism, which occurred less than a year before.

of their short-term interests in day-to-day struggles, when revolution was not on the agenda but the securing of improvements or defence of gains already won were?

In the two years following the peace, and up until the eve of the reaction's triumph thanks to fascism, we found ourselves in a peculiar situation.

Revolution looked imminent, and actually all the material and spiritual conditions were in place to make it feasible and necessary.

But we anarchists fell well short of having the sort of strength needed to make the revolution using only our own methods and men; we needed the masses and, though they were ready for action, they were not anarchist. Moreover, even had one been possible, a revolution made without the participation of the masses could only have led to a brand new overlordship, which, even should it be wielded by anarchists, would always have been a negation of anarchism, would have corrupted the new overlords, and would have ended in restoration of the statist and capitalist order.

To have pulled out of the struggle and abstained on the basis that we were unable to do exactly what we might have wished, would have been tantamount to giving up on any present or future opportunity, any hope of steering the movement in the direction of our preference—and abandoning it not only this time but for good, since the masses would never be anarchist prior to a political and economic overhaul of society, and the same situation would be replicated every time that circumstances made an attempt at revolution feasible.

We therefore had to win the trust of the masses at any cost, equip ourselves to be able to push them on to the streets and, to that end, there seemed to be a purpose to our capturing positions of leadership within the workers' organizations. All the dangers of domestication and corruption were pushed into the background and, besides, the assumption was that they would not have time to come to pass.

The conclusion was therefore reached that everyone should be left free to sort himself out depending on his circumstances and however he saw fit, provided that he never forget that he was an anarchist and that he was guided at all times by the overriding interests of the anarchist cause.

But now, in the wake of recent experiences, and in view of the current situation, which allows for no temporary alliances but calls for a strict return to principles so that we may be that much better prepared and more deeply convinced in forthcoming developments, it strikes me that the right thing to do is to revisit this matter and see whether there is a case to be made for amending our tactics on this very highly important aspect of our activities.

I hope that Congress will scrutinize the issue with the attention that it deserves.

In my view, we need to get into the unions, because, from the outside, we look hostile to them; our criticisms are looked at askance and come the time to agitate we would be looked upon as trespassers and our assistance would be unwelcome.—I am talking, plainly, of real trade unions made up of workers freely associated for the purpose of defending their interests against the bosses and the government; and not about the fascist syndicates, which are often recruited at the point of the cudgel and the threat of starvation; they are an arm of government and an attempt to make the workers more deferential towards the demands of the bosses. We need to get into the unions and start driving them forwards so as to endow them with an ever more libertarian character and monitor, criticize, and combat any possible weaknesses or disloyalties on the part of the leadership.

And as for our pursuit or acceptance of leadership positions, I reckon that generally speaking in times of calm, these would be better avoided. I think, however, that the harm and the danger resides not so much in the holding of a position of leadership—something that might even prove useful, indeed, vital, in certain circumstances—as in clinging to such posts. As I see it, the leadership line-up should be refreshed as often as possible, both in order to train the greatest possible number of workers into administrative duties, and to prevent the task of organizer from turning into a trade and prompting those who ply it to carry their preoccupation with not losing their jobs over into the workers' struggles.

All of this not just for the current interests of the struggle and of educating the workers, but also and chiefly with an eye to the rolling out of the revolution once it has started.

Anarchists are rightly opposed to authoritarian communism, which implies a government that, aiming to direct the whole life of the society and place the organization of production and the distribution of wealth under the control of its officials, cannot help but produce the most outrageous tyranny and leave all of society's live forces paralyzed.

The syndicalists, seemingly in agreement with the anarchists in their aversion to statist centralization, want to dispense with government by replacing it with syndicates; and they say that it is the latter that should assume ownership of wealth, requisitioning foodstuffs, distributing them, organizing production and exchange. And I would see no problems there, as long as the syndicates throw their doors wide open to the entire population and leave dissenters a free hand and let them claim their portion.

But such expropriation and such distribution cannot, in practice, be carried out by fits and starts, even by unionised masses, without there being a resultant squandering of resources and the sacrificing of the weak to those stronger and more brutal; much less could the relations between different areas be handled en masse or trade between the various producer bodies. So provision would have to be made through decisions made at popular assemblies and left to spontaneously volunteering or properly delegated groups and individuals to implement.

Now, if there is a select number of persons regarded as a result of their seniority as union leaders, if there are permanent secretaries and official organizers, then as a matter of course, they are the ones that will be put in charge of organizing the revolution and they will have a tendency to see trespassers and mavericks in those who might be inclined to take initiatives independently of them and will be out to impose their own will—albeit with the best of intentions—maybe by force.

Whereupon *syndicalist rule* would promptly turn into the same lie and the same tyranny into which the so-called *dictatorship of the proletariat* has turned.

The remedy against this danger, and the means by which the revolution can be made truly liberating, reside in the nurturing of a large number of persons capable of showing initiative and practical accomplishments, in getting the masses used to not surrendering the cause of all into the hands of the few, and, where delegation may be necessary, keeping delegation tied to specific tasks and then for a limited time only. And the union, if organized and run along genuinely libertarian lines, is a highly effective means of generating such a situation and ethos.

Allow me to add to everything that I have said on the subject of worker organization a few words on the subject of organizing anarchists, as the *Unione Anarchica Italiana* sees it.

The *Unione Anarchica Italiana* is a federation of autonomous groups united by mutual assistance in propaganda and in the implementation of a freely accepted programme. From time to time it holds congresses and between one congress and the next is represented by a *Corresponding Commission* appointed by the congress; its personnel and location change every time. The deliberations of its congresses are binding only upon those groups that agree with them after learning about them; for which reason, the form of representation, whatever it may be, is of no importance in that it cannot give rise to unfairness and bullying. Each group or individual federation of groups sends whatever delegates it can, no matter what the size of its membership and there is no problem with this, because the congress does not make laws binding on everyone but serves as an indicator of varying opinions; the prevailing opinion is articulated in resolutions that are then put to the groups and which carry no more weight than advice or suggestions.

The Corresponding Commission helps facilitate relations between groups, to raise support from others for the initiatives of each and to make agreed action easier. But it wields no authority and is not equipped to impose its own wishes.

Each group and each individual can correspond, as they see fit, directly with the rest without going through the channels of the Corresponding Commission; each of them is at liberty to publish whatever they please, to launch whatever initiatives they can, in short, to do whatever they please on behalf of the common cause. The only bond being the general program, acceptance of which is an essential pre-requisite for entry into the *Unione*.

These principles are accepted by all members of the *Unione*, in that they make up the compact by which they are united. And any who, out of ignorance or for ulterior motives, tries to suggest that the *Unione Anarchica Italiana* is an authoritarian organization, is at odds with the truth.

The *Unione* seeks no monopoly in the field of anarchist organizing. Each anarchist is free to remain isolated or join other organizations.

The *Unione* is happy with any anarchist activity pursued within or without its own ranks and is prepared to give aid to all and receive aid from all, provided this is in relation to matters that are not inconsistent with its programme.

On behalf of the Unione Anarchica Italiana
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The Method of Freedom: An Errico Malatesta Reader, edited by Davide Turcato, translated by
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