

Let Us Go To The People

Errico Malatesta

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Editor's Note

In 1893, the Fasci movement had spread over Sicily—“*fasci*” being the plural for “*fascio*” (bundle), a term that symbolized the strength of union and bore no relation but etymological with the later Fascist movement. It was a movement of peasants, miners, and workers that started with economic demands but escalated into a revolt, with strikes, attacks on city halls, destruction of custom-houses, and refusal to pay taxes. Dozens of workers were massacred by the armed forces. On 4 January 1894, the state of siege was declared in Sicily and a harsh repression ensued. In response, demonstrations took place in various Italian cities, peaking with an uprising that occurred in the anarchist stronghold of Carrara, where the state of siege was eventually declared, too. Malatesta had strongly supported the Fasci movement all along, and, at the beginning of 1894, he left his London exile to clandestinely enter Italy. The present article, written while Malatesta was still in Italy, draws a balance of the agitations on behalf of the Italian anarchist movement. The periodical where the article appeared was ironically named after the penal code article concerning the “association of malefactors,” which was standardly used against anarchists.

Andiamo fra il popolo

Let us own up right away: anarchists have not shown themselves equal to the circumstances.

Setting to one side the Carrara uprising, which was proof of their courage and commitment to the cause, but also of the shortcomings in their organization, anarchists would scarcely have rated a mention in relation to the popular unrest in Sicily and elsewhere around Italy.

After all the ranting about revolution, the revolution was upon us and we found ourselves bewildered and remained all but inert.

It may be a painful admission, but to say nothing and cover it up would be tantamount to a betrayal of the cause and to sticking with the errors that have brought us to this pass.

It is time for a re-think!

As we see it, the main reason for our shortcomings is the isolation into which we have primarily fallen.

For a gamut of reasons it would take us too long to go into here, following the break-up of the International, anarchists lost touch with the masses and were gradually whittled down to tiny groups solely preoccupied with endless discussions and, alas! tearing one another to shreds or, at best, waging a little warfare against the legalitarian socialists.

On a number of occasions, an effort was made to rectify this situation, with varying degrees of success. But just when it looked as if we might resume serious, broad-based endeavors, up popped a few comrades who, due to a wrong-headed intransigence, made a virtue of isolation and—aided and abetted by the laziness and timidity of so many others, who found such “theory” a handy excuse for doing nothing and taking no risks—successfully steered us back into impotence.

Thanks to the handiwork of those comrades—many of whom (we are pleased to acknowledge) are driven by the best of intentions—propaganda work and organizing have been rendered impossible.

You want to join a workers' association? Be damned! That association has a president, statutes, and does not swear by the anarchist message. Any good anarchist should avoid it like the plague.

You want to establish a workers' association to get them used to solidarity in the fight against the bosses? Treachery! A good anarchist should only ever enter into association with anarchist believers, meaning that he should always keep to the company of the same comrades, and if he must found associations, all he can do is bestow different names upon a group made up of the same people every time.

You are out to organize and support strikes? Bamboozlement, palliatives!

Trying your hand at demonstrations and popular campaigns? Tomfoolery!

In short, the only thing one is allowed to do by way of propaganda is the odd talk, unattended by the public unless it is drawn in by the speaker's exceptional gifts of oratory; some printed matter, always read by the same circle of folk; and man-to-man propaganda, if you can find somebody prepared to hear you out. That, plus a lot of palaver about revolution—a revolution that, preached in this way, ends up like the Catholics' paradise, a promise for the hereafter, one that lulls you into a blessed inertia as long as you believe, and leaves you sceptical and selfish, once the faith evaporates.

And in the meantime the people around us stir and follow other persuasions; and the legalitarian socialists get the better of us and often meet with success, even in countries such as Italy, where socialism was first proclaimed and popularized by us and where we boast far from inglorious traditions of struggle and sacrifice borne with consistency and pride.

This is a lethal tactic, tantamount to suicide. The revolution is not made behind closed doors. Isolated individuals and groups can carry out a little propaganda; audacious *coups de main*, bombings and such like, if done astutely (which is not always the case) can draw public attention to the woes of the workers and to our ideas, may earn us the cachet of people's avengers, and may rid us of some mighty hindrance, but the revolution comes only once the people have taken to the streets. And if we want to make it we have to win over the crowd, as much of a crowd as we can.

Besides these isolationist tactics run counter to our principles and to the purpose we set ourselves.

Revolution, of the sort we have in mind, should be the start of active, direct, genuine participation by the masses, which is to say, by everybody, in the organizing and running of the life of society. If, by some freak, the revolution could be made by ourselves alone, it would not be an anarchist revolution, since we would then be the masters and the people being disorganized and thus powerless and thoughtless, would await their instructions from us. In which case the whole of anarchy will be reduced to a hollow declaration of principles, whereas, in practice, there would still be a tiny faction making use of the blind strength of the unthinking masses, harnessed in order to impose the faction's own ideas—and that is the very essence of authority.

Just imagine that tomorrow, by means of some *coup de main*, we were able to rout the government by ourselves, without involving the masses and that we were able to retain control of the situation. The masses, who would have played no part in the struggle and would not have sampled the potency of their strength would applaud the winners and remain inert as they wait for us to bestow upon them all of the well-being we promise them.

What would we do then? Either we would take on a de facto dictatorship, which would amount to our conceding that our anti-governmentalist ideas are impracticable and our confessing that,

as anarchists, we have failed; or we would make *through cowardice the great refusal*,¹ we would back off declaring our abomination for command and leave it to our adversaries to take over the reins.

That is what happened, for very different reasons, to the Spanish anarchists back in the rising of 1873.² Due to freak circumstances, they found themselves masters of the situation in several towns, like Sanlúcar de Barrameda and Córdoba. The people made no move of their own and waited for someone to tell them what to do; the anarchists declined to take charge because that conflicted with their principles... whereupon in came, first the republican backlash and then the monarchist reaction, which reinstated the old regime, this time aggravated by massive persecution, arrests, and massacres.

Let us go to people: that is our only salvation. But let us not go to them with the smug arrogance of people who claim to hold the infallible truth and, from their alleged infallibility, look down their noses at those who do not subscribe to their ideas. Let us go out and become brothers with the workers, struggle with them, and sacrifice ourselves alongside them. If we are to earn the right and opportunity to demand of the people the sort of commitment and spirit of sacrifice required in the great days of decisive battle ahead, we need to have proved ourselves in the people's eyes, and shown that we are second to none when it comes to courage and self-sacrifice in its small, day-to-day struggles. Let us enter all the workers' associations, establish as many as we can, weave ever larger federations, support and organize strikes, and spread everywhere and by every means the spirit of cooperation and solidarity between workers, the spirit of resistance and struggle.

And let us beware of becoming disgusted just because the workers often do not understand or embrace all of our ideals and retain an attachment to the old ways and old prejudices.

In the making of the revolution, we cannot and refuse to wait for the masses to become full-fledged anarchist socialists. We know that, for as long as the current economic and political arrangement of society lasts, the vast majority of the population is doomed to ignorance and brutishness and has a capacity only for fairly blind rebellions. We need to dismantle that arrangement, making the revolution as best we can, with whatever resources we can muster in real life.

Much less can we wait for the workers to turn into anarchists before we set about organizing them. How could they, if left to their own devices, wrestling with the sense of powerlessness that comes from their isolation?

As anarchists we should organize among ourselves, among folk who are perfectly persuaded and perfectly in agreement; and, around us, in broad, open associations, we should organize as many of the workers as we can, accepting them for what they are and striving to nudge them into whatever progress we can.

As workers, we should always be primarily beside our companions in weariness and wretchedness.

¹ This is a passage from Dante Alighieri's *Divine Comedy* (Inferno, III, 60) about Celestine V, who resigned the papacy in 1294.

² The reference is to the federalist movement known as "cantonalism," which broke out after the proclamation of the first republic. After president Pi y Margall pledged to lead the country toward a decentralized administration, many large cities in the south of Spain took their independence for granted and declared themselves free cantons. Though the International as an organization had passed a resolution that condemned all political activity, anarchists became involved in certain independent activities.

Let us remember that the people of Paris started out demanding bread of the king in the midst of applause and tender-hearted tears and, within two years, having—as was only to be expected—been treated to his lead rather than bread, they lopped off his head. And only recently the people of Sicily were on the verge of making a revolution, despite applauding the king and all his kin.

Those anarchists who opposed and sneered at the “fasci” movement just because it was not organized the way we might have preferred—in that the fasci were often called after “Mary the Immaculate”, or because they had a bust of Marx rather than of Bakunin on display in their halls, etc.—have proven that they had neither revolutionary sense nor spirit.

We have no mercy—far from it!—for those who taint everything with the parliamentary poison and boil everything down to a question of candidacy and who (acting in good faith or in bad, it matters not which) would like to turn the masses into a floating flock. But does preaching dispersion and leaving all of the proletariat’s organized forces in their hands not amount to playing along with such would-be deputies and, worse still, playing the game of the bourgeoisie and government?

Let us take stock. These are solemn times. We have come to one of those watershed moments in human history when an entirely new era is ushered in. The success and orientation of the coming revolution depend on us, who have inscribed upon our banners the redemptive and inseparable words “socialism” and “anarchy.”

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