

# Our Tactics

Errico Malatesta

11 November 1897

Rhetoric is an affliction hard to cure, and no mistake. And we are not talking about the sort of hypocritical rhetoric of the charlatans and bamboozlers, but the sort that honestly mirrors an exuberance of sentiment not tempered by a proper consideration of reality.

Some friends of ours, whom we hold in the highest esteem on account of their boundless devotion to the cause and the useful contribution they have made and are making to our common endeavors, are unhappy with us, on the grounds that... we are not revolutionary enough.

We readily admit as much. But is that stance on our part something we have freely chosen, or is it, rather, something forced upon us by circumstances? We are inclined to believe the latter, given that so many of the comrades who would have us do more and who are that much worthier than us, in practice do no more than we do.

You are out, they write us, to introduce *Anglicism* into Italy (we would not even dream of doing so and the reasons are set out below);<sup>1</sup> but, as a country, Italy is not cut out for legal resistance and slow-moving organizations. "Even if legal resistance could achieve anything of note, it would promptly *degenerate* into rebellions and upheavals, for the Italian people knows no middle way: it being the lamb or the tiger." What! A lamb if you must, but a tiger? We shall let it go, having no wish to offend tigers. For two or three dozen years we have been going around saying such things and each time we made to take to the streets or go out into the countryside, we were lucky if we could muster fifteen people!

Your paper-and-chatter agitation (they mean the one against *domicilio coatto*) is pointless; if the law does not get passed it will be because of backstairs parliamentary intrigues rather than because of any agenda of yours. "We cannot fathom how on earth the *domicilio coatto* issue could have become the stuff of backstairs parliamentary horse-trading, had the people not done a little protesting and some parliamentary parties not been made to realize that voting the law through might have been dangerous; it is certainly not out of any genuine love of liberty that the likes of Zanardelli and Rudini would have found fault with this freedom-killing project!"<sup>2</sup> But we agree

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<sup>1</sup> The charge refers to Malatesta's advocacy of direct action labor tactics, such as boycott and ca'canny, which had been used by the British labor movement for a long time and had been recently adopted by French syndicalists.

<sup>2</sup> Antonio di Rudini was the Italian prime minister. Giuseppe Zanardelli was the president of the chamber of deputies and, as of December 1897, the minister of justice in Rudini's new cabinet. *Domicilio coatto* (forced residence) had been in use for years in Italy. Its use was extended by exceptional laws, introduced by Prime Minister Francesco

entirely that the present campaign is a paltry affair and paltrier still the part we play in it; but what are we to do if others refuse and we are not strong enough to do more?

The need would be for noisy, impressive, threatening public demonstrations; if, they write us, demonstrations like the one the shopkeepers organized in Rome were to be mounted simultaneously in twenty or thirty Italian cities, then something might be achieved.<sup>3</sup> Agreed, but one would need to be in a position to do that – or otherwise, have the patience to work away and wait until one can pull it off.

If only the peasants of Molinella had...whatever you like, but the peasants did not, and none of our critics (among whom there are some who did have the material means) stepped in to do it for them.<sup>4</sup> And this is not to put them down, for we are convinced that, had they stepped in, they would have succeeded only in having themselves arrested as *agents provocateurs*. In order to reach out to strikers and harness the strike for the advantage of our propaganda and steer it in a direction we think best serves the workers' cause, one would need to have had some involvement in the preparations for the strike or at least have previously mounted propaganda in the area and won the people's sympathy; rather than showing up at the eleventh hour, knowing no one and known to none.

In short, the counsel received from our friends is what all of us have been doing, or trying to do, for many a long year, without getting anywhere; and if our reputation is still good and we still have the potential to do better, this is simply because we have always paid the price. We do not intend to travel, over and over for all eternity, roads that might be summed up like this: six months of quiet activity, followed by a few microscopic uprisings—or, more often, mere threats of uprisings—then arrests, flights abroad, interruption of propaganda, disintegration of the organization... Just to start the whole thing all over again two or three years further down the line.

We are now convinced (and it took some time!) that before one can do, one must have the strength to do; and if it takes time to build up that strength, we will have the patience to wait as long as it takes.

Got that?

Do not call upon us to employ violent language in the newspaper. We would then be systematically confiscated: our readers would receive the paper with entire columns blanked out, which would constitute the least violent and least persuasive of all languages, and then... Well, you yourselves would be the first to write us off as fools for not knowing how to avoid being impounded.

Do not bemoan the fact that nothing is being done and no one is being urged to do anything: instead, let us all work in unison to get ourselves to a position where we can achieve something of note.

And don't talk to us of *Anglicism*. If the word means anything, it means economic resistance as an end in itself, as practiced by the "old" trade unions, which, though out to improve the workers' conditions, embraced and respected the capitalist system and all bourgeois institutions.

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Crispi in 1894. In 1897, a new bill was proposed that meant to make *domicilio coatto* part of the permanent legislation, *de facto* introducing deportation for political reasons as an ordinary procedure.

<sup>3</sup> On 11 October 1897, a demonstration against taxes promoted by the Roman shopkeepers turned into a street riot, during which a young worker was killed and many people wounded by the police.

<sup>4</sup> Molinella, near Bologna, was a labor stronghold. Earlier that year, its paddy workers had won a labor dispute after a forty-day strike that had prompted the government to dispatch ten thousand soldiers to the area.

We, on the other hand, believe (and even the English are beginning to catch on to this) that workers' organizations and economic resistance and the whole gamut of more or less law-abiding ways of resisting, are merely avenues leading to the utter transformation of society. In the absence of such a transformation, not only can emancipation not be achieved, but neither will be any overall, lasting, significant improvement. And we believe, as we have stated time and again, that that transformation is not going to be achieved peacefully.

Once again, got that?

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