The Armed Nation

Errico Malatesta

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Here is the ideal that authoritarian socialists and republicans boast of... when they go so far as to yearn for the abolition of permanent armies. And initially it would seem to be acceptable even to lovers of freedom, given the elastic meaning of the word and the various ways in which it can be interpreted.

But they ordinarily make haste to cite the example of Switzerland, and this reveals and defines their thought: and induces us to reject the system of the armed nation as even more reactionary, if that is possible, than the military organizations prevalent today.

In practice, armed nation means that everyone is a soldier, everyone is at the disposal of the government, bound to the obligation of military service for most of his life.

It is the dream of the reactionaries — the militarization of certain categories of workers — extended to the entire population. A call to duty is issued and, lo and behold, the nerves are cut on a dangerous strike or a menacing popular riot: — what better weapon of repression could a government desire?

Under the regular conscription system, a soldier feels the violence he endures and serves reluctantly and therefore has the tendency to rebel, and on the other hand the civil population realizes that the army is organized to control them and could oppress them with impunity; whereas with the armed nation everyone believes he is free and only serves the common interests of the people — and the citizen-soldier is two of a kind with the voter, who believes he is being governed by the laws he himself made.

Switzerland is proof of what we say. In no other country is the government so safe from insurrections, and can with so much tranquility shoot strikers; in no other country are the subjects so sincerely convinced of being sovereign and are so ready to side with the police.

But, they will say to us, do you therefore want to remain defenseless, exposed to all prevarications? Certainly not. As it is necessary today for revolutionaries to procure the material means to resist the government's armed force, so it will be necessary for the people to be equipped with weapons of defense as long as there is the danger that others will want to use violence with weapons against them; but this has nothing in common with the system of military organization that is commonly called an armed nation. With the latter system the government can leave rifles at the homes of soldiers, or keep them in the barracks and only entrust them to the soldiers during periods of actual service, according to the public's state of mind; but with or without a rifle

at home, the soldier is always a soldier, obliged to show up when called and fight for the purpose which the government wants to make him fight for.

We instead want everyone to be free to bear arms or not. We want neither a government that commands, nor a military hierarchy that enforces the government's orders, nor anyone, in short, who has the right to obligate a citizen to take up arms and use them for a reason for which he is not willing to fight.

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