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The General Strike and the Insurrection in Italy

Errico Malatesta

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The Method of Freedom: An Errico Malatesta Reader, edited by
Davide Turcato, translated by Paul Sharkey.
Freedom (London) 28, no. 303 (July 1914). In the article,
written shortly after his escape from Italy and return to
London, Malatesta provides an account of the Red Week,
which broke out on 7 June 1914 in Ancona, where Malatesta
lived.

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The events which have taken place recently in Italy are of the greatest importance, not so much in themselves, but as an indication of the disposition of the Italian people and of what we can anticipate in the near future.

The immediate cause of the outbreak was a massacre of unarmed demonstrators by the gendarmes of the town of Ancona.

For over a year the revolutionary and Labour organisations of all political shades had been carrying on an agitation in favour of several victims of military despotism and for the abolition of *disciplinary battalions*, to which are sent all young soldiers known to hold anti-monarchical and anti-bourgeois opinions. The treatment is barbarous, and the unhappy young men are submitted to all kinds of moral and physical tortures.

As the meetings and demonstrations were held all over Italy, but on different dates, they seemed to make but little impression on the Government; and the Trades Council of Ancona proposed, therefore, to organise manifestations in the whole country on the same day, that day to be the date of the official celebration of the establishment of Italian unity and the

Monarchy. As on these occasions great military reviews are always held, the comrades thought that the Government would be obliged to postpone the review in order to hold the troops ready to preserve “order,” and the attention of the whole public would be drawn to the object of the demonstration.

The idea put forward by the Ancona comrades was everywhere received with enthusiasm by all the opposition parties. The Minister ordered the police to prevent any public demonstrations. Of course, that did not deter us. In fact, we had counted on the police prohibition to give more publicity to the demonstration and to instigate the masses to resistance.

To stop the people who were leaving a meeting-hall from going to the central square to demonstrate, the gendarmes fired on the unarmed crowd, killing three workers, and wounding twenty more. After this massacre, the gendarmes, frightened, rushed to the barracks for shelter, and the people were left masters of the town. Without anybody even mentioning the word, a general strike was soon complete, and the workers collected at the Trades Council to hold a meeting.

The Government tried to prevent the events of Ancona from being telegraphed to other parts of the country; but nevertheless by-and-by the news became known, and strikes broke out in all the towns of Italy. The two Federal Labour organisations of Italy, the General Confederation of Labour, which is reformist, and the Labour Union,¹ with revolutionary tendencies, proclaimed a general strike, and the same was done by the Railwaymen’s Union.

These strikes and demonstrations in several towns provoked new conflicts with the police, and new massacres. At once, without any common understanding, one place ignorant of what the other was doing, as communications were broken off, the movement assumed everywhere an insurrectional

character, and in many places the Republic, which meant for the people the autonomous Commune, was proclaimed.

All was going splendidly; the movement was developing, and the railway strike, spreading on all lines, paralysed the Government; the workers were beginning to take measures of practical Communism in view of reorganising social life on a new basis; when suddenly the Confederation of Labour, by an act which has been qualified as treachery, ordered the strike off, thereby throwing the workers into confusion and discouraging them.

The Government was not slow to profit by this condition, and began to restore “order.”

If it had not been for the betrayal of the Confederation, though we could not yet have made the revolution for lack of necessary preparation and understanding, the movement would certainly have assumed larger proportions and a much greater importance.

In every way these events have proved that the mass of the people hate the present order; that the workers are disposed to make use of all opportunities to overthrow the Government; and that when the fight is directed against the common enemy—that is to say, the Government and the bourgeoisie—all are brothers, though the names of Socialist, Anarchist, Syndicalist, or Republican may seem to divide them.

Now it is up to revolutionaries to profit by these good dispositions.

¹ In Italian: *Unione Sindacale Italiana* (USI).