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The General Strike And The Revolution

Errico Malatesta

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The Method of Freedom: An Errico Malatesta Reader, edited by
Davide Turcato, translated by Paul Sharkey.

The Torch (London) 1, new series, no. 3 (August 1894). This is another little-known but remarkable article, not only for its content, but also for its context. The same issue of the *Torch* contained also an article by Émile Pouget—soon to become a leading figure of French revolutionary syndicalism—about the futility of political change. As syndicalism was about to rise, it is a telling sign of Malatesta’s foresight and influence that it was his article, not Pouget’s, the one to advocate the general strike as a revolutionary weapon. What makes this even more remarkable is that the first part of Malatesta’s article restates arguments that he had already made in the 1889 article “About a strike.”

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The tremendous commotion which some of the strikes of the past few years have produced in the social organization proves they may be something far more important than a mere means of resisting the demands of the masters and of obtaining advantages more or less transitory and illusory. The strike can and will probably be the starting point of the Social Revolution at least in great industrial countries like England and the United States. Anyhow it would be the best of all the many possible starting points which Socialists and Anarchists could wish for the Revolution.

The question often poses itself of how the Revolution will come about. How shall we be able to destroy this powerful organization of military and police which protects the Bourgeoisie. Where shall we find the strength and unity of action necessary for victory?

A great spontaneous insurrection with the avowed object of overthrowing the government and expropriating the Bourgeoisie is a very difficult, perhaps an impossible event, both on account of the mental condition of the masses and the powerful means of prevention and repression at the disposal of the governing classes.

Plots and conspiracies can only embrace a very limited number of individuals and are usually impotent to start a movement amongst the people of sufficient importance to give a chance of victory. Isolated movements, more or less spontaneous, are almost always stifled in blood before they have had time to acquire importance and become general.

One opportunity which might be used as a starting point for the Social Revolution would be a war, anyhow in the conquered country, or some political agitation of a section of the Bourgeoisie.

But war develops patriotic hatreds and may result in the people, wounded in their national pride, irritated by the insolence of foreign soldiers, and obliged besides to resist invasion, making common cause with the Bourgeoisie and forgetting their own grievances. And a political agitation presents the great danger of turning aside the people from the social question and making it fraternize with the Revolutionary section of the Bourgeoisie which will not fail to make show of the best intentions towards the Proletariat.

Besides wars and political agitations become daily more improbable for the Bourgeoisie would derive no great advantage from them and a growing fear of the Social Revolution and also because our propaganda and that of Socialists in general helps to make them impossible.

Thus, whilst ready to avail ourselves of any opportunity which may offer, and to use all means compatible with our principles and our object, we must seek elsewhere the means of starting amongst the masses the great movement which will sweep away the Bourgeois world, and the means which the events of the day point to is—the general strike.

A strike more or less general throughout one of the great industries such as the mining or railway, with the stoppage it would cause in dependent industries would draw into the struggle enormous masses of people and could with comparative ease be converted into a Revolution.

this ice was for the hospitals and immediately a large number of strikers turned up to unload the ship without raising the question of wages. They said that the sick, especially the sick in the hospitals, ought not to suffer through the strike.

This is a small fact but it proves the existence of human solidarity which if developed would give the labor movement a truly socialistic and Revolutionary aspect.

The grandest role the Anarchist could have in the worker's unions and in strikes would be to direct them in these lines.

The government would not be able, short of setting public opinion against it, to resort at once to an energetic military repression; the people would have time to get gradually drawn into the movement and understand the necessity for radical changes, and besides one of the chief advantages would be that the question would necessarily be in the realm of economics and its solution would affect the very basis of social organization.

But for a strike to have such results, the strikers must, as the result of previous propaganda and through the influence of a certain number of men amongst them, [be] conscious of the goal to be obtained, understand the full import of the movement and consider themselves as men struggling not for a small private interest but in the interest of the whole proletariat.

A great strike before it can be converted into a Revolution causes real suffering to the mass of the people who are unwilling to undergo it in the interests of the strikers unless it sees at the end of the struggle some advantage for all. Besides there are always so many men whom hunger drives to replace the strikers that this tends to create antagonism between the militant section of the proletariat and those who would be most immediately benefited by the Revolution, such as the unemployed. The strikers must understand this and conduct themselves so as to draw along with them the whole population including the blacklegs.

A few facts selected from those which characterise recent strikes in the United States and which we extract from Stead's book *Chicago Today* will throw light on the situation.¹

In April 1894 a strike broke out in the bituminous coal trade which spread to sixteen states. The strikers blocked the rail lines and were so energetic that for some time they controlled the whole

¹ William Thomas Stead was an English newspaper editor and a pioneer of investigative journalism. In 1893 he went to Chicago and launched a journalistic investigation of the city's social issues. His 1894 books, *Chicago Today: The Labour War in America* and *If Christ Came to Chicago*, were based on his experiences in that city.

coal trade. The sympathy or hostility of the public depended on the use they made of this power: they only took into account the special interests of their trade:

Permission was refused to the town of Demoinis to obtain the coal necessary to keep the city waterworks going.

The Illinois Lunatic Asylum at Kantakee in which were 1100 inmates ran short of coal. To save the miserable lunatics from perishing of cold the strikers at first permitted them to have some coal but, on second thoughts, strike policy triumphed over humane considerations and the permission given on the 21st was rescinded on the 29th. Per contra permission was given to McBride, the president of the strikers and also a brewer, to obtain coal for his breweries where he had 5000 dollars worth of beer which would have spoiled if no coal could have been procured.

In the recent strike and boycott of the Pullman cars the strikers, helped by many sympathisers, had quite paralysed the railway traffic, and had at their mercy for a whole week the provisioning of Chicago.

In consequence the fruits and vegetables were rotting in the cars, and it has been calculated that the farmers lost £6000 per day as long as the strike lasted. Meat and fish rotted and the loads of ice melted away.

And in Chicago they were short of meat, vegetables, and coal, ice rose from 12s. a ton to 40s., beer ran short, except for corn, of which, fortunately there were large reserves, Chicago passed through days of want as painful as those Paris suffered during the siege. They began to fear that they would run short of water for Chicago pumps up all its water and the fuel for working the pumps had run low.

Trains full of women and children were sometimes blocked for days and in one case at least a whole hundred of suffering passengers were compelled to lie blistering in the midsummer sun with scanty food and no water. The strikers refused to allow their miserable hostages this necessary of life for thirty hours at a stretch.

Again the strikers used the worst violence against the blacklegs, who, after all, are but the slaves of misery. Here, for instance, is what a blackleg told a journalist:

I have been a railroader eight years. When business got slack last winter I was knocked off, and I have not worked five weeks altogether since the first of the year. I have a wife and three children depending on me and for six months we have been living from hand to mouth. When the agent who hired me to come to Chicago asked me if I would go, I told him I would see my wife first. I went home and found her in tears at the dreary outlook. My children were actually in want of bread and it didn't take me long to make up my mind to come to Chicago. I am a Union man at heart, but when wife and children are in danger of starving I feel it my duty to work for them, even should I be killed in the endeavour. There are lots of men here who feel the same way.

Why are the strikers so pitiless towards their brothers in misfortune whom they might have converted into brothers in arms, when we hear of no acts of personal violence against the big pots of the Railway and of Pullman City?

Clearly it was impossible for the strike to succeed, much less to turn into a Revolution when conducted on such lines. Indeed the reaction started in Chicago and if the troops had been powerless to destroy the strikers they would have been crushed by the populace.

When one is master of a situation one must take on oneself the responsibilities of that situation, otherwise one cannot hope to succeed.

Since the provisioning of Chicago depended on the strikers they should have undertaken it. And the mere attempt to provision a town in the interests of the population instead of in that of the capitalists and tradesmen, even if unsuccessful would have been the greatest stride forward in the right direction yet made by the Social Revolution.

At the time of the London Dock Strike in 89 when all work was suspended a ship loaded with ice arrived. The rumour spread that