

Socialism and Strikes

An Address delivered before the Propaganda Committee of the Socialist League

Frank Kitz

October 12, 1889

Comrades, — It has been thought advisable at this period of agitation amongst the workers, to say a few words as to the attitude which we of the International Revolutionary Socialist Party should assume towards Strikes and the Labour Struggle generally. Some amongst us would seize every opportunity afforded by labour troubles to organise the hitherto unorganised portion of the workers, to wring even partial concessions in the hope of shorter hours and better pay from their masters, and justify this line of action on the ground that organisation in itself is good and raises the mass; also that it will tend to lead to higher results after the first demands have been won. On the other hand, a number of our comrades are opposed to joining in a demand for palliatives, and assert that such a line of agitation is liable, to obscure the higher ideal, viz., the complete overthrow of the wage system, and to cause our speakers to temporise and form questionable alliances for the sake of gaining minor points. And if we review the situation as we find it to-day, after one of the most singular strikes of modern times, there is some ground for the fears of the last-mentioned section.

We have seen a replication of the proletariat and aristocrat even in the proletarian upheaval. The men who did the pioneer propagandist work amongst the masses at the East-end and other parts of the metropolis, did it at a time when, the word Socialist meant to subject him to whom it was applied to hatred and execration, and not plaudits. They laid, under the folds of the red flag the foundation for that change of ideas and conversion, the first fruits of which was the revolt of labour in East London.

Now we have seen a strange spectacle. A bishop, endowed with thousands per annum, as the exponent of the doctrines of the Nazarene who knew not where to lay his head, a prince of the church of another sect, a chief magistrate of at once the richest and poorest city on earth, suddenly develop an interest in the docker, and the Conflict between him and his oppressors is brought to an end. The docker is said to have won, and perhaps he believes it. And still stranger spectacle, a commissioner of police, under whose orders numbers of workmen have been bludgeoned, suddenly withholds his aid to capital and stands on one side ; the capitalist press, choking with suppressed rage, half curses the principal figures in the strike for the terrible shock the strike has given them, and the force with which the truth of the axiom, "that labour and not money is the source of all wealth," has been driven home. Their utter impotency in face of this stupendous movement on the part of an hitherto despised class has exasperated them,

and yet they can find breath to praise the “moderation”, tact, and generalship of the leaders, and strangely enough the police commissioner shares this praise with the “leaders.” It is related of a traveller in a strange land, ignorant of both its language and currency, that he detected when he was being robbed by the smiles of those with whom he had to deal. It has been said, that the revolutionary Socialists of London, when [illegible] the presence of disappointed middle-class parliamentary candidates and would-be candidates, who [illegible] rending the air, — that these men, gathering their inspiration from pure enthusiasm and honest conviction, went into the byways and highways of this huge city and spoke their gospel without fear, established their presses and scattered their literature broadcast; that subsequently, when from a handful they grew into a power, these men, obscure and without ostentation, still exercised a potent influence in the revolutionary movement. Time has wrought many changes in the movement, but a few of the pioneers remain ; and I appeal to the young men of our party when I ask : Will they help to push forward by steady and persistent agitation the principles of international revolutionary Socialism, symbolised by the red flag, and by self-education and sacrifice spread them ? If so, then I ask them not to allow the results of revolutionary agitation to be turned to account by designing men for the purpose of defeating the revolution. We have seen during the late labour agitation the red flag rigorously excluded from having a place in the processions, and speakers who were likely to draw a moral from the strike in favour of the overthrow of the whole cursed system which breeds the misery of the workers were bidden to stand aside. Why ? What is the price of the compact which has caused this exclusion? When and where was it agreed upon, and what are its’ main purpose and results?

The price of the compact is that the capitalist may be attacked in the towns. Some concessions may be wrung from him, and urban life made tolerable to a larger number than at present. Even Lord R. Churchill is in favour of parish-built barracks, “suitable to the class who would inhabit them” ; and why ? Because the capitalist, by his overreaching greed, has jeopardised the whole position of privilege and power. He is the hasty clumsy thief who betrays the whole gang, and the landlord portion of the gang are willing that the capitalist shall lose a little that they may not lose all. A section of advanced Tories — for the “old order changeth “ — more prescient than the fossils who would still pursue the methods of Castlereagh and Sidmouth, see in the condition of East London and similar districts of our large towns the glimmering light of a social revolution; and they would go the length of making a Jonah of the capitalist to save the ship of State with its aristocratic places and emoluments. And hence we see a group of men who once were under the red flag, hastening to avow their severance from it and its associations, and acting the part of saviours of society amid the plaudits of a corrupt press and class. “To what base uses may we not come, Horatio,” when we cheer the bludgeoners of Trafalgar Square !

I wish it to be clearly understood that I am not joining in or echoing the pitiful complaints that have emanated from another quarter upon the same matter. For whilst I have no quarrel with the rank and file of the S.D.F., except for their subserviency and lack of independence, and the ready manner in which they lend themselves to spread the slander of their leader (having had some personal experience of the cowardly unctuous methods by which the machinery, of the S.D.F. can be used to spread slanderous tales, headed “Dear comrade” and finished “Yours fraternally”), I do not wonder at the secession of robust men from a circle whose methods of propaganda closely resemble the efforts made by cheap-jacks or the vendors of the latest soap to draw attention to their wares. In their hands the red flag has been associated with schemes of the model dwelling and parish soup kitchen order.

Looking back over the past years, and knowing something of the origin of the “only Socialist organisation in Great Britain,” and being fully aware how time and outside educational influences has mellowed and refined the undoubtedly strong Jingo-Tory flavour it once possessed, and knowing also the close connection which existed between one at its head now and another who is supposed to be behind the secessionists, one can only come to the conclusion that a game has been played in which the most astute has won.

Extremes meet, and after all there exists a close connection between the phalansterie and the model industrial dwellings which certain Tory Democrats would see established, in order to bolster the present system and give it a renewed lease. But every lover of freedom must view with apprehension the remotest possibility of their realisation, and — saying to either “A plague upon both your houses!” — we will pass on to the consideration of the position which, in my opinion, Leaguers should take up in the future. I hold that by organising the disorganised workers, and by strikes and combinations leading them to revolt against their taskmasters, and still on to the Universal Strike that shall put an end to the wage system itself, we are doing distinctly revolutionary work.

Passing from the crowded cities and towns out into the broad fields, amidst the overworked and insufficiently fed agricultural labourers, lays our sphere of action. The peasantry have been made the stepping stones, upon which men like Arch have climbed to St. Stephens. The Liberal and Tory would give a few small patches of land as a sop, the one as an electioneering dodge, the other as a Conservative measure, and basing his calculations upon the known selfishness of a small endowed class, would make them a barrier to the fulfilment of the wider aspirations of the landless, whether of town or country. Our provincial comrades should sally, into the villages and fields with the cry of “Back to the Land ! The Land for the People !” Our peasantry have sturdy revolutionary traditions, and can be stirred anew to action by earnest, hearty, and breezy watchwords ; a vigorous uncompromising agitation upon the Irish pattern but with higher aims, the enfranchisement of all, and not, as in Ireland, for a small farmer class, would bear speedy fruit. The urban workman would be freed from the fear of competition on the part of his agricultural comrade, and would be induced to assist him in his efforts towards freedom. By education, agitation, and organisation, we should then complete . the circle closing in upon both landlord and capitalist, and effectually defeat any attempt to avert the Revolution.

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