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Can a General Strike Be Successful?

Max Nettlau

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Anarchism should receive the greatest attention just now when the insufficiency of Syndicalism becomes more patent. So many things happen which ought to set our friends thinking. Too many things are taken for granted which require continuous fresh examination, *e.g.*, the General Strike, in light of recent French experience. Will an *effective* strike of the kind be possible before immense masses are filled with indignation and enthusiasm to such a degree that they might, and would just as well straightaway make a revolution and not stop at a passive strike? I think that either nothing serious will happen or a revolution will be the outcome. Strikes, the immediate stopping of work and business, are the obvious accompaniments of all revolutionary outbursts, but are, it seems to me, not nearly of such decisive effect as revolutionary action is and will be.

I mean this. Each trade comprises men of most different opinions and character. To make this mixed crowd, or the greater part of them, act almost unanimously to strike for a general purpose (not for a trade dispute only, which easily creates *trade* unanimity)—

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this seems to me more difficult and a longer way than that the revolutionary disposed and like-minded men of *all* trades should meet and unite and act in common for some purpose which is revolutionary action. It seems more logical that these energetic and spirited elements of *all* trades should be roused to common action than that the dull majority of *one* and *each* trade should strike for a purpose with which many have no touch and no sympathy, or have these in an insufficient degree.

Extremely few trades are really important to society or cannot be replaced to *some* degree by military or private effort or dispensed with for a time. Even Pataud's electricians can but annoy some theatres, hotels, restaurants, etc.; there are other ways of lighting up. The postal distress was met by private organizations (the Chambers of Commerce, couriers, etc.) The telegraph is replaced to some extent in France by military wireless telegraphy. Railways could be opposed by immense numbers of motor cars. Ships could be manned by sailors from the Navy, as just now in Marseilles. Bakers—there are military bakers and small owners and their sons.

I think that society is organizing for resistance, and that the time when it could have been successfully rushed by a general strike of some substantiality *is already gone*—five or ten years ago might have been the right moment. To-day people are familiarized with the idea, and are mentally and materially prepared for it.

My conclusion from all this is, that whilst many small reforms (the shifting of burdens from the shoulders of the strong to those of the weak) are continually obtained by the usual Trade Union and Syndicalist methods, nothing of importance can be won by larger masses without revolutionary struggles as of old. Anarchists have more reason than ever to hold their ideas, before the people, who, by so many object-lessons, are more than ever prepared for their views, only these views must be brought up to date, which is not always the case.