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Count on No One But Yourselves

Letter from Bakunin to Albert Richard

Mikhail Bakunin

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Dear friend and brother,

Circumstances beyond my control prevent me from coming to take part in your great Assembly of March 13. But I would not want to let it pass without expressing my thoughts and wishes to my brothers in France.

If I could attend that impressive gathering, here is what I would say to the French workers, with all the barbaric frankness that characterizes the Russian socialist democrats.

Workers, no longer count on anyone but yourselves. Do not demoralize and paralyze your rising power in foolish alliances with bourgeois radicalism. The bourgeoisie no longer has anything to give you. Politically and morally, it is dead, and of all its historical magnificence, it has only preserved a single power, that of a wealth founded on the exploitation of your labor. Formerly, it was great, it was bold, it was powerful in thought and will. It had a world to overturn and a new world to create, the world of modern civilization.

It overturned the feudal world with the strength of your arms, and it has built its new world on your shoulders. It naturally hopes that you will never cease to serve as caryatids for that world. It wants its preservation, and you want, you must want its overthrow and destruction. What does it have in common with you?

Will you push naïveté to the point of believing that the bourgeoisie would ever consent to willingly strip itself of that which constitutes its prosperity, its liberty and its very existence, as a class economically separated from the economically enslaved mass of the proletariat? Doubtless not. You know that no dominant class has ever done justice against itself, that it has always been necessary to help it. Wasn't that famous night of August 4, for which we have granted too much honor to the French nobility, the inevitable consequence of the general uprising of the peasants who burned the parchments of the nobility, and with those parchments the castles?

You know very well that rather than concede to you the conditions of a serious economic equality, the only conditions you could accept, they will push themselves back a thousand times under the protection of a parliamentary lie, and if necessary under that of a new military dictatorship.

So then what could you expect from bourgeois republicanism? What would you gain by allying yourself with it? Nothing – and you would lose everything, for you could not ally yourself with it without abandoning the holy cause, the only great cause today: that of the complete emancipation of the proletariat.

It is time for you to proclaim a complete rupture. Your salvation is only at this price.

Does this mean that you should reject all individuals born and raised in the bourgeois class, but who, convinced of the justice of your cause, come to you to serve and to help you triumph? Not at all. Receive them as friends, as equals, as brothers, provided that their will is sincere and that they have given

you both theoretical and practical guarantees of the sincerity of their convictions. In theory, they should proclaim loudly and without any hesitation all the principles, conditions and consequences of a serious social and economic equality for all individuals. In practice, they must have firmly and permanently severed their relationship of interest, feeling and vanity with the bourgeois world, which is condemned to die.

You bear within you today all the elements of the power that must renew the world. But the elements of the power are still not the power. To constitute a real force, they must be organized; and in order for that organization to be consistent in its basis and purpose, it must receive within it no foreign elements. So you must hold back everything that belongs to civilization, to the legal, political and social organization of the bourgeoisie. Even when bourgeois politics is red as blood and burning like hot iron, if it does not accept as its direct and immediate aim the destruction of legal property and the political State – the two forts on which all bourgeois domination rests – its triumph could only be fatal to the cause of the proletariat.

Moreover, the bourgeoisie, which has come to the last degree of intellectual and moral impotence, is today incapable of making a revolution by itself. The people alone want it, and have the power to do it. So what is desired by this advance party of the bourgeoisie, represented by the liberals or exclusively political democrats? It wants to seize the direction of the popular movement to once again turn it to his advantage – or as they say themselves, to save the bases of what they call civilization, the very foundations of bourgeois domination.

Do the workers want to play the roles of dupes one more time? No. But in order not to be dupes what should they do? Abstain from all participation in bourgeois radicalism and organize outside of it the forces of the proletariat. The basis of that organization is entirely given: It is the workshops and the federation of the workshops; the creation of funds for resistance, instruments of struggle against the bourgeoisie, and their fed-

eration not just nationally, but internationally; the creation of *chambres de travail* [trades councils or regional labor federations/centers, eds.] as in Belgium.

And when the hour of the revolution sounds, the liquidation of the State and of bourgeois society, including all legal relations. Anarchy, that is to say the true, the open popular revolution: legal and political anarchy, and economic organization, from top to bottom and from the circumference to the center, of the triumphant world of the workers.

And in order to save the revolution, to lead it to a good end, even in the midst of that anarchy, the action of a collective, invisible dictatorship,¹ not invested with any power, but [with something] that much more effective and powerful – the natural action of all the energetic and sincere socialist revolutionaries, spread over the surface of the country, of all the countries, but powerfully united by a common thought and will.

That, my dear friend, is, in my opinion, the only program which by its bold application will lead not to new deceptions, but to the final triumph of the proletariat.

¹ This unfortunate phrase, which Bakunin uses in various writings, is often misunderstood. Elsewhere, Bakunin notes that it would hold no power of coercion or official status, but rather “influences the people exclusively through the natural, personal influence of its members, who have not the slightest power, ... to direct the spontaneous revolutionary movement of the people towards ... the organization of popular liberty. ... This secret dictatorship would ... carry out a broadly based popular propaganda ... and by the power of this propaganda and also by organization among the people themselves join together separate popular forces into a mighty strength capable of demolishing the State.” — *Mikhail Bakunin: Selected Writings, 1934*

As Sam Dolgoff notes: “This passage is part of a letter repudiating in the strongest terms the State and the authoritarian statism of the ‘Robespierres, the Dantons, and the Saint-Justs of the revolution,’ it is reasonable to conclude that Bakunin used the word ‘dictatorship’ to denote preponderant influence or guidance exercised largely by example ... In line with this conclusion, Bakunin used the words ‘invisible’ and ‘collective’ to denote the underground movement exerting this influence in an organized manner.” [Bakunin on Anarchism, p. 182]