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Pëtr Kropotkin

Letter to Lenin (4 March 1920)

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From: The Conquest of Bread and Other Writings, Edited by
Marshall Shatz, Cambridge University Press

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4 March 1920

Dmitrov, 4 March 1920

Esteemed Vladimir Ilich,

Several employees of the postal-telegraph department have come to me with the request that I bring to your attention information about their truly desperate situation. As the problem concerns not only the commissariat of mail and telegraphs alone, but the general condition of everyday life in Russia, I hasten to fulfil their request.

You know, of course, that to live in the Dmitrov district on the salary received by these employees is *absolutely impossible*. It is impossible even to buy a bushel of potatoes with this [salary]; I know this from personal experience. In exchange they ask for soap and salt, of which there is none. Since [the price] of flour has gone up – if you manage to get any – it is impossible to buy eight pounds of grain and five pounds of wheat. In short, without receiving provisions, the employees are doomed to a very real famine.

Meanwhile, along with such prices, the meagre provisions which the postal and telegraph employees receive from the Moscow postal and telegraph supply centre (according to the decree of the 15 August 1918: eight pounds of wheat to an employee

or to employees, and five pounds of wheat to incapacitated members of a family) *have not been delivered for two months already*. The local supply centres cannot distribute their provisions, and the appeal of the employees (125 persons in the Dmitrov area) to Moscow remains unanswered. A month ago one of the employees wrote to you personally, but he has received no answer thus far.

I consider it a duty to testify that the situation of these employees is truly desperate. The majority are *literally starving*. This is obvious from their faces. Many are preparing to leave home without knowing where to go. And in the meantime, I will say openly that they carry out their work conscientiously; they have familiarized themselves with [their job] and to lose such workers would not be in the interest of local life in any way.

I will add only that whole categories of other Soviet employees can be found in the same desperate condition.

In concluding, I cannot avoid mentioning something about the general situation to you. Living in a great centre – in Moscow – it is impossible to know the true condition of the country. To know the truth about current experiences, one must live in the provinces, in close contact with daily life, with its needs and misfortunes, with the starving – adults and children – with running back and forth to offices in order to get permission to buy a cheap kerosene lamp, and so forth.

There is now one way out of these trials for us. It is necessary to hasten the transition to more normal conditions of life. We will not continue like this for long, and we are moving towards a bloody catastrophe. The locomotives of the Allies, the export of Russian grain, hemp, flax, hides, and other things that are indispensable to us will not help the population.

One thing is indisputable. Even if the dictatorship of the party were an appropriate means to bring about a blow to the capitalist system (which I strongly doubt), *it is nevertheless harmful for the creation of a new socialist system*. What are necessary and needed are local institutions, local forces; but there are none, anywhere. In-

stead of this, wherever one turns there are people who have never known anything of real life, who are committing the gravest errors which have been paid for with thousands of lives and the ravaging of entire districts.

Consider the supply of firewood, or that of last season's spring seed...

Without the participation of local forces, without an organization from below of the peasants and workers themselves, it is impossible to build a new life.

It would seem that the soviets should have served precisely this function of creating an organisation from below. But Russia has already become a Soviet Republic only in name. The influx and taking over of the people by the 'party', that's is, predominantly the newcomers (the ideological communists are more in the urban centres), has already destroyed the influences and constructive energy of this promising institution – the soviets. At present, it is the party committees, not the soviets, who rule in Russia. And their organization suffers from the defects of bureaucratic organisation.

To move away from the current disorder, Russia must return to the creative genius of local forces which, as I see it, can be a factor in the creation of a new life. And the sooner that the necessity of this is understood, the better. People will then be all the more likely to accept [new] social forms of life. If the present situation continues, the very word 'socialism' will turn into a curse. This is what happened to the conception of 'equality' in France for forty years after the rule of the Jacobins.

With comradely greetings,

P. Kropotkin