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Pëtr Kropotkin
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7th September 1889

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What a strike is

Pëtr Kropotkin

7th September 1889

We search our recent memories in vain for a single strike that was as important as the one that broke out in the docks of London and is still on going.

There have been more numerous strikes, there have been more violent ones. But none had the same meaning for the revolutionary socialist idea.

Firstly, the socialist movement was born within better-paid trades and has grouped the elite workers, the latter have always looked down on the rough trades. Men from the Fourth-Estate like to talk about "the unconscious masses, incapable of organising themselves, demoralised by poverty".

We know that we have maintained the opposite view. And now these dock workers, who can neither go to socialist meetings nor read our literature, but who feel oppression and hate it more sincerely than well-read workers, come to confirm the core idea of those who know the people and respect it.

The most complete solidarity rules amongst the dock workers. And, for them, striking is far harder than for mechanics or carpenters.

All that was needed was that Tillet, a very young man and of weak health, devoted himself for two years to work on the

beginnings of an organisation within the dock workers – while socialists doubted he could ever succeed in his task – so that all thousand branches of the workers related to the loading of ships cease work with a moving solidarity.

They knew well that for them, strike means hunger; but they didn't hesitate.

It's hunger with all its horrors. It's terrible to see haggard men, already exhausted by lack of food, dragging their feet after a twenty kilometre walk, to Hyde Park and back, collapsing, fainting at the doors of cheap restaurants where the crowd was pushing to receive provision coupons and bowls of soup.

An immense organisation, spontaneous, was born from the centre of these rough workers, often referred to as the herd even by socialists.

Hundreds of leaflets are distributed every day. Sums of 10 to 30,000 Francs in aid – in great part pennies coming from collections – are counted, written down, distributed. Restaurants are improvised, filled with food, etc. And, except Tillet, Burns, Mann and Champion – already experienced – everything is done by dock workers who quite simply came to offer their help. Quite a vast organisation, absolutely spontaneous.

It's the picture of a people organising itself during the Revolution, all the better for having less leaders.

It is useless to add that if this mass of 150,000 striking men didn't feel that currently the Bourgeoisie is united and strong, it would walk as a single man against the West-End wealthy. Conversations of groups on the street state it only too well.

But the strike has also a greater impact.

It has confirmed the strength of organisation of a mass of 150,000 men coming from every corner of England, not knowing each other, too poor to be militant socialists. But it has also demonstrated, in a way that produces a shiver down the back

of the bourgeois, the extent a great city is at the mercy of two or three hundred thousand workers.

All the trade of England has already been disrupted by this strike. London Bridge, this universal trade centre, is mute. Ships coming from the four corners of the globe, go away from it as if it were a poisoned city and go towards other English ports. Cargoes – mountains – of fresh meat, fruits, food of all sorts, coming each day, rot on board ships guarded by troops. Wheat doesn't come in to fill the shops empty each day. And if coal merchants hadn't hastened to grant everything that the coal loaders were asking, London would stay without fuel for its million daily lit homes. It would stay in the dark if the gasmen had left work, as they had suggested, even though they had emerged victorious in a strike that took place last month. London would stay without any means of communication if Burns hadn't commanded the tram drivers to stay at their work.

The strike spread like an oil leak. A hundred factories of all sorts, some very large, others small, no longer getting the flour, lime, kaolin, oilseeds, etc., etc. that are delivered to them on a daily basis, have extinguished their fires, throwing onto the streets every day new contingents of strikers.

It was the general strike, the stopping of all life in this universal commercial centre, imposed by the strike of *three or four branches of work that hold the key to the buffet*.

There are articles in the newspapers sensing terror. Never have the bourgeois felt how much they are the subjects of the workers. Never have the workers felt how much they are the masters of society. We had written it, we had said it. But the *deed* has more impact than the printed word! The *deed* has proved this strength of the workers.

Yes, they are the masters. And the day when those anarchists who exhaust themselves in empty discussions will do like Tillet, but with firmer and more revolutionary ideas – the day when they will *work* within the workers to prepare the

stopping of work in the trades that supply all the others, they will have done more to prepare the social, economic Revolution, that all the writers, journalists, and orators of the socialist party.

We have often spoken about the general strike. We now see that in order to achieve it, it is not necessary that all workers cease work on the same day. It is necessary to block the supply channels to the Bourgeoisie and to its factories.