

# **Workers' Organisation**

Pëtr Kropotkin

10<sup>th</sup> and 24<sup>th</sup> December 1881

# Contents

Part I . . . . .	3
Part II . . . . .	6

## Part I

As bourgeois society becomes more and more chaotic, as States fall apart, and as one can sense a coming revolution in Europe, we perceive in the hearts of the workers of all countries an ever increasing desire to unite, to stand shoulder to shoulder, to organise. In France particularly, where all workers' organisations were crushed, dismantled and thrown to the four winds after the fall of the Commune, this desire is ever more visible. In almost every industrial town there is a movement to reach agreements and to unite; and even in the villages, according to reports from the most trusted observers, the workers are demanding nothing less than the development of institutions whose sole purpose is the defence of workers' rights.

The results that have been achieved in this area over the last three years have certainly been significant. However, if we look at the enormity of the task incumbent on the revolutionary socialist party, if we compare our meagre resources with those available to our adversaries, if we honestly face up to the work that we still have to do, in order that, in four or five years' time, on the day of the revolution, we can offer a real force capable of marching resolutely towards the demolition of the old social order—if we take that into account, we have to admit that the amount of work left to do is still immense and that we have scarcely begun the creation of a true workers' movement: the great working masses are still a long way removed from the workers' movement inaugurated three years ago. The collectivists, in spite of the fact that they give themselves the pretentious name "Workers' Party," are still not seeing the rush of workers to their organisation that they envisaged when they first launched their electoral campaign; and, as they lean more and more towards the Radical Party, they lose ground instead of gaining it. As for the anarchist groups, most of them are not yet in sustained daily contact with the majority of workers who, of course, are the only ones who can give the impetus to and implement the action necessary for any party, whether in the field of theoretical propaganda and ideas or in the field of concrete political action.

Well, let us leave these people to their illusions, if that is what they want. We prefer to face up to the task in all its enormity; and, instead of prematurely announcing our victory, we prefer to propose the following questions: what do we need to do to develop our organisations much further than at present? What do we need to do to extend our sphere of influence to the whole of the mass of workers, with the objective of creating a conscious and invincible force on the day of the revolution, in order to achieve the aspirations of the working class?

---

It appears to us that an essential point that has been ignored up till now but which needs to be explored before we go any further is this: for any organisation to be able to achieve wider development, to become a force, it is important for those at the forefront of the movement to be clear as to what is the final objective of the organisation they have created; and that, once this objective has been agreed upon—specify a proposed course of action in conformity with the ends. This prior reasoning is clearly an indispensable precondition if the organisation is going to have any chance of success, and essentially all of the organisations have, up to now, never proceeded differently. Take the Conservatives, the Bonapartists, the Opportunists, the Radicals, the political conspirators of previous eras—each one of their parties has a well-defined objective and their means of action are absolutely in accordance with this objective.

It would take too long to analyse here the goals and methods of each of the parties. Therefore, I will explore just one illustrative example here and let it stand as an example for all. Let us take, by way of example, the Radical or intransigent party.

Their goal is well defined: the Radicals tell us that they wish to abolish personal government and to install in France a democratic republic copied from the US model. Abolition of the Senate, a single chamber, elected by the simple means of universal suffrage; separation of Church and State; absolute freedom of the press, of speech and of association; regional autonomy; a national army. These are the most important features of their programme. "And will the worker be happier under this regime or not? And as a result, will he cease to be a wage-earner at the mercy of his boss?..." These questions do not really interest them; these things can be sorted out at a later date, they reply. The social question is reduced in importance to something that can be settled some time in the future by the democratic State. It is not a question for them of overturning existing institutions: it is simply a matter of modifying them; and a legislative assembly could, according to them, do this easily. All of their political programme can be implemented by means of decrees, and all that needs to happen—they say—is that power needs to be wrenched from the hands of those who currently hold it and passed into the hands of the Radical Party.

This is their goal. Whether it is achievable or not is another question; but what is important to us is to establish whether their means are in accordance with their ends. As advocates of political reform, they have constituted themselves as a political party and are working towards the conquest of power. Envisaging the realignment of the centre of governmental power towards a democratic future, with a view to getting as many Members as possible elected to the Chamber, in local councils and in all of the government institutions and to become the bigwigs in these positions of power. Since their enemy is the current administration, they organise against this administration, boldly declaring war on it and preparing for it to fall.

Property, in their eyes, is sacrosanct, and they do not wish to oppose it by any means: all their efforts are directed towards seizing power in government. If they appeal to the people and promise them economic reforms, it is only with the intention of overturning the current government and putting in its place a more democratic one.

This political programme is very definitely not what we are working for. What is clear to us is that it is not possible to implement real social change without the regime of property undergoing a profound transformation. However, while having strong criticisms of this programme, we have to agree that the means of action proposed by this party are in accordance with its proposed goals: these are the goals, and that is the organisation proposing to achieve them!

---

What then is the objective of the workers' organisation? And what means of action and modes of organisation should they employ?

The objective for which the French workers wish to organise has only ever been vaguely articulated up until now. However, there are two main points about which there definitely remains no doubt. The workers' Congresses have managed to articulate them, after long discussions, and the resolutions of the Congresses on this subject repeatedly receive the approval of the workers. The two points are as follows: the first is common ownership as opposed to private property; and the second is affirmation that this change of regime regarding property can only be implemented by revolutionary means. The abolition of private property is the goal, and the social revolution

is the means. These are the two agreed points, eloquently summed up, adopted by those at the forefront of the workers' movement. The communist-anarchists have honed these points and have also developed a wider political programme: they believe in a more complete abolition of private property than that proposed by the collectivists, and they also include in their goals the abolition of the State and the spread of revolutionary propaganda. However, there is one thing upon which we all agree (or rather did agree before the appearance of the minimum programme) and that is that the goal of the workers' organisation should be the economic revolution, the socialrevolution.

A whole new world opens up in the light of these resolutions from the workers' Congresses. The French proletariat thus announces that it is not against one government or another that it declares war. It takes the question from a much wider and more rational perspective: it is against the holders of capital, be they blue, red or white, that they wish to declare war. It is not a political party that they seek to form either: it is a party of economic struggle. It is no longer democratic reform that they demand: it is a complete economic revolution, the social revolution. The enemy is no longer M. Gambetta nor M. Clemenceau; the enemy is capital, along with all the Gambettas and the Clemenceaus from today or in the future who seek to uphold it or to serve it. The enemy is the boss, the capitalist, the financier—all the parasites who live at the expense of the rest of us and whose wealth is created from the sweat and the blood of the worker. The enemy is the whole of bourgeois society and the goal is to overthrow it. It is not enough to simply overthrow a government. The problem is greater than that: it is necessary to seize all of the wealth of society, if necessary doing so over the corpse of the bourgeoisie, with the intention of returning all of society's wealth to those who produced it, the workers with their calloused hands, those who have never had enough.

This is the goal. And now that the goal has been established, the means of action are also obvious. The workers declaring war on capital? In order to bring it down completely? Yes. From today onwards, they must prepare themselves without wasting a single moment: they must engage in the struggle against capital. Of course, the Radical Party, for example, does not expect that the day of the revolution will simply fall from the sky, so that they can then declare war on the government that they wish to overthrow. They continue their struggle at all times, taking neither respite nor repose: they do not miss a single opportunity to fight this war, and if the opportunity to fight does not present itself, they create it, and they are right to do so, because it is only through a constant series of skirmishes, only by means of repeated acts of war, undertaken daily and at every opportunity that one can prepare for the decisive battle and the victory. We who have declared war on capital must do the same with the bourgeoisie if our declarations are not to constitute empty words. If we wish to prepare for the day of the battle [and] our victory over capital, we must, from this day onward begin to skirmish, to harass the enemy at every opportunity, to make them seethe and rage, to exhaust them with the struggle, to demoralise them. We must never lose sight of the main enemy: capitalism, exploitation. And we must never become put off by the enemy's distractions and diversions. The State will, of necessity, play its part in this war because, if it is in any way possible to declare war on the State without taking on capital at the same time, it is absolutely impossible to declare war on capital without striking out at the State at the same time.

What means of action should we employ in this war? If our goal is simply to declare this war, then we can simply create conflict—we have the means to do this: indeed, they are obvious. Each group of workers will find them where they are, appropriate to local circumstance, rising

from the very conditions created in each locality. Striking will of course be one of the means of agitation and action, and this will be discussed in a later article, but a thousand other tactics, as yet unthought-of and unexpressed in print, will also be available to us at the sites of conflict. The main thing is to carry the following idea forward:

The enemy on whom we declare war is capital, and it is against capital that we will direct all our efforts, taking care not to become distracted from our goal by the phony campaigns and arguments of the political parties. The great struggle that we are preparing for is essentially economic, and so it is on the economic terrain that we should focus our activities.

If we place ourselves on this terrain, we will see that the great mass of workers will come and join our ranks, and that they will assemble under the flag of the League of Workers. Thus we will become a powerful force which will, on the day of the revolution, impose its will upon exploiters of every sort.

## **Part II**

In the last issue, *Le Révolté* showed that a party which proposes a social revolution as its goal, and which seeks to seize capital from the hands of its current holders must, of necessity, and from this day onwards, position itself at the centre of the struggle against capital. If it wishes that the next revolution should take place against the regime of property and that the watchword of the next call to arms should necessarily be one calling for the expropriation of society's wealth from the capitalists, the struggle must, on all fronts, be a struggle against the capitalists.

Some object that the great majority of workers are not sufficiently aware of the situation imposed upon them by the holders of capital: "The workers have not yet understood," they say, "that the true enemy of the worker, of the whole of society, of progress, and of liberty is the capitalist; and the workers allow themselves to be drawn too easily by the bourgeoisie into fighting miserable battles whose focus is solely upon bourgeois politics." But if this is true—if it is true that the worker all too often drops his prey in order to chase shadows; if it is true that all too often he expends his energies against those who, of course, are also his enemies, but he does not realise that he actually needs to bring the capitalist to his knees—then we too are guilty of chasing shadows, since we have failed to identify the workers' true enemies. The formation of a new political party is not the way to bring the economic question out into the open. If the great majority of workers is not sufficiently aware of the importance of the economic question (a fact about which we anarchists remain in no doubt), then relegating this question itself to the background is definitely not going to highlight its importance in the eyes of the workers. If this misconception exists, we must work against it, not preserve and perpetuate it.

---

Putting this objection to one side, we must now discuss the diverse characteristics of the struggle against capitalism. Our readers of course realise that such a discussion should not take place in a newspaper. It is actually on the ground, among those groups themselves, with full knowledge of local circumstances and spurred on by changing conditions that the question of practical action should be discussed. In *The Spirit of Revolt*, we showed how the peasants in the last century and the revolutionary bourgeoisie managed to develop a current of ideas directed against the nobility and the royals. In our articles on the Agrarian League in Ireland, we showed how

the Irish people have managed to organise themselves to fight on a daily basis a relentless and merciless war against the ruling class. Taking inspiration from this, we must find the means to fight against the boss and the capitalist in ways appropriate to each locality. What may work perfectly in Ireland may not work in France, and what may give great results in one country may fail in another. Moreover, it is not through following the advice of a newspaper that groups of activists will manage to find the best ways to fight. It is by posing questions in the light of local circumstances for each group; it is by discussing in depth; it is by taking inspiration from events which, at any given moment, may excite local interest, and by looking closely at their own situation that they will find the methods of action most appropriate for their own locality.

However, there remains one tactic in the revolutionary struggle about which *Le Révolté* is willing to give its opinion. This is not because this is a superior method, much less the only valid tactic. But it is a weapon that workers wield in different contexts, wherever they may be, and it is a weapon that can be drawn at any time, according to circumstance. This weapon is the strike!

It is, however, even more necessary to speak of it today because, for some time now, the ideologues and the false friends of the workers have campaigned covertly against the use of the strike, with a view to turning the working class away from this form of struggle and railroading them down a more “political” path. The result of this has been that recently strikes have broken out all over France, and those who have inscribed upon their banners that the emancipation of the workers must be achieved by the workers themselves are now maintaining a healthy distance between themselves and the struggle being undertaken by their brothers and sisters; they are also maintaining for themselves a distance from the subsequent privations suffered by the workers, be these in the form of the sabres of the gendarmes, the knives of the foremen or the sentences of the judges.

It is fashionable these days to say that the strike is not a way to emancipate the worker, so we should not bother with it. Well, let us just have a closer look at this objection.

Of course, going on strike is not, in itself, a means of emancipation. It is [only] by revolution, by expropriating society’s wealth and putting it at the disposal of everyone, that the workers will break their chains. But does it follow that they should wait with folded arms until the day of the revolution? In order to be able to make revolution, the mass of workers must organise themselves, and resistance and the strike are excellent means by which workers can organise. Indeed, they have a great advantage over the tactics that are being proposed at the moment (workers’ representatives, constitution of a workers’ political party, etc.) which do not actually derail the movement but serve to keep it perpetually in thrall to its principal enemy, the capitalist. The strike and resistance funds provide the means to organise not only the socialist converts (these seek each other out and organise themselves anyway) but especially those who are not yet converted, even though they really should be.

Indeed, strikes break out all over the place. However, isolated and abandoned to their own fate, they fail all too often. What the workers who go on strike really need to do is to organise themselves, to communicate among themselves, and they will welcome with open arms anyone who comes and offers help to build the organisation that they lack. The task is immense: there is so much work to do for every man and woman devoted to the workers’ cause, and the results of this organisational work will of course prove enormously satisfying to all those who put their weight behind the movement. What is required is to build resistance associations for each trade in each town, to create resistance funds and fight against the exploiters, to unify [solidariser] the workers’ organisations of each town and trade and to put them in contact with those of

other towns, to federate across France, to federate across borders, internationally. The concept of workers' solidarity must become more than just a saying: it must become a daily reality for all trades and all nations. In the beginning, the International faced national and local prejudices, rivalry between trades, and so on; and yes—and this is perhaps one of the greatest services the International has done for us—these rivalries and these prejudices were overcome, and we really did witness workers from distant countries and trades, who had previously been in conflict, now working together. The result of this, let us not forget, was achieved by organisations emerging from and owing their very existence to the great strikes of the time. It is through the organisation of resistance to the boss that the International managed to gather together more than two million workers and to create a powerful force before which both bourgeoisie and governments trembled.

---

“But the strike,” the theoreticians tell us, “only addresses the selfish interests of the worker.” In the first place, it is not egotism which drives the worker to strike: he is driven by misery, by the overarching necessity to raise wages in line with food prices. If he endures months of privation during a strike, it is not with a view to becoming another petty bourgeois: it is to avoid dying of starvation, himself, his wife, his children. And then, far from developing egotistical instincts, the strike serves to develop the sense of solidarity which emerges from the very heart of the organisation. How often have we seen the starving share their meagre earnings with their striking comrades! Just recently, the building workers of Barcelona donated as much as half their scant wages to strikers campaigning for a nine-and-a-half hour day (and we should acknowledge in passing that they succeeded, whereas if they had followed the parliamentary route, they would still be working eleven or twelve hours a day). At no time in history has solidarity among the working classes been practised at such a developed level as during strikes called by the International.

Lastly, the best evidence against the accusation levelled at the strike that it is purely a selfish tactic is of course the history of the International. The International was born from strikes; at root, it was a strikers' organisation, right up until the bourgeoisie, aided by a few ambitious types, managed to draw a part of the Association into parliamentary struggles. And, at the same time, it is precisely this organisation, by means of its local sections and its congresses, which managed to elaborate the wider principles of modern socialism which today gives us our strength; for—with all due respect to the so-called scientific socialists—until the present there has not been a single idea on socialism which has not been expressed in the Congresses of the International. The practice of going on strike did not hinder different sections within the International from addressing the social question in all its complexity. On the contrary, it helped it as well as simultaneously spreading the wider ideas among the masses.

---

Others have also often been heard to say that the strike does not awaken the revolutionary spirit. In the current climate, we would have to say that the opposite is true. There is hardly a strike called these days which does not see the arrival of troops, the exchange of blows, and numerous acts of revolt. Some fight the soldiers, others march on the factories; in 1873 in Spain, the strikers at Alcoy declared the Commune and fired on the bourgeoisie; [in 1877] at Pittsburgh



in the USA, the strikers found themselves masters of a territory as large as France, and the strike became the catalyst for a general uprising; in Ireland, the striking farm workers found themselves in open confrontation with the State. Thanks to government intervention, the factory rebel becomes a rebel against the State. Today, he finds ranged before him soldiers who will tamely obey the orders of their officers to shoot. But the use of troops to suppress strikes will only serve to “demoralise,” that is to say, to moralise the soldier; as a result, the soldier will lay down his arms and refuse to fight against his insurgent brothers.

In the end, the strike itself, the days without work or bread, spent in these opulent streets of limitless luxury and the vices of the bourgeoisie, will do more for the propagation of socialist ideas than all manner of public meetings in times of relative social harmony. Such is the power of these ideas that one fine day the strikers of Ostrau in Austria will requisition all the food in the town’s shops and declare their right to society’s wealth.

---

But the strike, we must be clear, is not the only engine of war in the struggle against capital. In a strike, it is the workers as a whole who are taking up the fight; but there is also a role for groups and even individuals; and the ways in which they may act and be effective can vary infinitely according to local circumstances and the needs of the moment and the situation. It would be pointless to analyse these roles here since each group will find new and original ways to further the workers’ cause as it becomes active and effective in their own part of the great labour movement. The most important thing for us to do here is to agree upon the following principles:

The goal of the revolution is the expropriation of the holders of society’s wealth, and it is against these holders that we must organise. We must marshal all of our efforts with the aim of creating a vast workers’ organisation to pursue this goal. The organisation of resistance [to] and war on capital must be the principal objective of the workers’ organisation, and its methods must be informed not by the pointless struggles of bourgeois politics but the struggle, by all of the means possible, against those who currently hold society’s wealth—and the strike is an excellent means of organisation and one of the most powerful weapons in the struggle.

If we manage, over the course of the next few years, to create such an organisation, we can be sure that the next revolution will not fail: the precious blood of the people will not be spilled in vain, and the worker, currently a slave, will emerge victorious from the conflict and will commence a new era in the development of human society based on Equality, Solidarity and Labour.

The Anarchist Library (Mirror)  
Anti-Copyright



Pëtr Kropotkin  
Workers' Organisation  
10<sup>th</sup> and 24<sup>th</sup> December 1881

Le Revolté  
Translation by James Bar Bowen.

[usa.anarchistlibraries.net](http://usa.anarchistlibraries.net)