

Necessity of the Revolution

Bernard Lazare

1896

The Bourgeois — And you believe in the revolution?

Me — I believe in it. Like you, by the way.

Bourgeois — Me? You must be kidding! Is a revolution possible in our time? The armed forces; the wisdom of the proletarians — resolved to legally obtain the improvement of their lot; the will of the republicans — who have already done so much for the workers — to resolutely march on the path of social reforms: isn't all of this guarantee enough for you?

Me — No more for me than for you. I know your reasoning, and I know how much you'd like to believe in it. You're like the sick men who calculate their chances to escape an illness and calm their fears by maintaining hope. You can do what you want, but you won't be able to avoid a revolution.

The Bourgeois — But why?

Me — Because it's the fatal outcome; and because in contemporary societies everything leads there, everything drives us there. You — a bourgeois, a shareholder of a big store, a big company — you are one of the actors in this, like the unionized worker, like the unemployed — whose number increases as the ranks of owners thins out. The hour is such that from here on capital, like labor, is an agent of revolution.

The Bourgeois — Don't you think that intelligent reforms could stop the movement?

Me — What do you call reforms? What do you call intelligent reforms? These are words that ministers use at banquets. Do you seriously think that new fiscal laws, progressive taxes, a new means of taxing inheritances, retirement laws assuring the exhausted worker 100 francs a year maximum when he's 70, could stop our march? You are all imprudent! You admit that everything isn't for the best in the best of all possible worlds. By this admission you justify everything, for the whole world isn't obliged to accept your definition of the best. How much stronger you'd be if you would affirm that the relations between capital and labor are just and good, and that no others could exist. On the contrary, you recognize that other relations can be conceived of between these two powers, and you hope to save yourself by maintaining the subordination of labor to capital. I feel really sorry for you.

The Bourgeois — We're not dead yet.

Me — No, but you are sick, and what makes your case worse is that you're aware of your illness. Every morning when you rise you look upon the progress of your jaundice, and you're powerless to cure it.

The Bourgeois — Do you take us for people incapable of defending ourselves?

Me — Of course not. You have already given several satisfying examples of your ferocity. It's only that — and see to what extent what I say is true — the day that you defend yourselves, you will give the signal for the Revolution. And if you don't defend yourselves, it's the Revolution that will come to wake you up. You are caught in a frightening impasse. If you cede a few things to the poor, you recognize the legitimacy of their demands, and you encourage them to push things to the extreme. If you grant nothing, you legitimize all demands and all events. If you hedge, you'll find yourself caught in other still difficulties.

The Bourgeois — So we won't be supported?

Me — Of course! You still have some old fortresses, the army, the judiciary, the administration, but all of this will quickly collapse at a certain time. You have machines that seem to work that will nevertheless stop on their own. The day when the worker will stop fighting with paper balls, the day he will stop sending to parliament jokers and the hesitant, the day when he will say to those who claim to represent him: all or nothing, that day you'll be in danger.

The Bourgeois — We'll emigrate

Me — No, because the Revolution will be in Coblenz, too. That's what's serious: the social Revolution will be European. A political revolution is localized; an economic one becomes generalized.

The Bourgeois — You're pessimistic.

Me — Pessimistic for you, to be sure, but optimistic for the others.

The Bourgeois — Even so, we'll always have our good army.

Me — You won't always have it.

The Bourgeois — Why?

Me — Because what you call the state of armed peace can't last indefinitely, and no matter what solution you find to this problem, the revolution is inevitable. If you persist in preserving permanent armies, it's either bankruptcy or revolution. If you make war, it's revolution in the defeated country, and it will spread, touching the victorious nation. Unless, of course, from the moment of the declaration of war the proletarians of the two countries answer by declaring a general strike, or destroy on both sides of the lines the railroads, and it's still revolution. If you lay-off the permanent armies you will immediately liberate a few hundred thousand men (sic) workers. You thus will fatally increase the ever growing mass of the unemployed, but you increase it in so sudden a way, you so quickly worsen the total misery, you bring on so imprudently a general lowering of salaries — for you want to profit by the excess of working arms — that it's still the revolution.

The Bourgeois — You make me lose hope! Tell me what should be done.

Me — Make the revolution with us.

