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The American Strike

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We were overwhelmed with emotions when the telegraph brought us the news: striking workers have taken control of Pittsburg. We did not even know there was an insurrection, and suddenly we learn that workers are holding the official and bourgeois world of the United States in check. For the conservatives of Europe, it was a day of dread; for all of us, men of the revolution, it was a great day of hope.

But, it must be said, the fearful of Europe were soon reassured and reality did not meet our sudden hopes. The strike of American workers was not a revolution; it was only partial and the great mass of workers remained separated from the movement. After twelve days of emotion, business seems to have resumed its usual course; the slave again gave his limbs to the chain and the God Capital retrieved all its serenity. However, this short period of fear for some, hope for others, will not have passed without leaving profound traces in the history of the United States. It is important to quickly study the strike in its causes, its twists and its consequences.

Americans, it is well known, are men who know little about restraint. They go straight to their goal. The capitalist, there, does not pride himself with philanthropy; the trader of human flesh,

who sells white people after having trafficked black people, does not claim to bring happiness to his living commodity; he exploits excessively workers, like its colleagues in Europe, but with less hypocrisy. In recent years, the decrease in work which has resulted in the United States in the increase in pauperism has enabled American capitalists to to dictate the law of famine to the workers. Free to choose at their will in the crowd of those begging to work, they jumped on the opportunity to lower wages, while trying to sell to the public their products or services always at the same price or even on even more onerous terms.

Of all the groups of capitalists, those who united to operate the railways, and thus to command all of the exchanges between producers and consumers, are those who have the greatest power. Competition between the various lines is an isolated fact. Almost all the companies have banded together to keep transport prices high, and, alone to distribute the country's produce, they no longer have any orders to receive from the government or the public. Having together a capital that cannot be less than 25 billion and an income of two to three billion, presiding by that all the oscillations of credit, masters, by the purchase of votes, of all the local legislatures and of the government of the United States, these companies laugh at the poor farmer who would like to ship his products without leaving all the profit of capital, and many times, while in England miserable people died of starvation and of hunger typhus in Germany, we saw American farmers forced to use their corn as fuel, so as not to ruin themselves on shipping costs.

By the effect of the increasing concentration of capital, the companies themselves are owned by a small group of men. As Minister Sherman recently admitted in an official speech, the United States is the financial property of four individuals, the presidents of the railway companies Erie, New-York-Central, Pennsylvania, Baltimore and Ohrio . It is they who hold the stock market and create at will the well-being or the ruin of the shareholders; they

set in motion the pump, aspirating and treading, which makes capital flow from the pockets of petit bourgeois into that of the big ones. They have, it is true, only a modest official salary of 200,000 or 250,000 francs, but "Other people's money" is an inexhaustible mine for them. If they cry poverty, it is on behalf of the poor shareholders that they have ruined, and when those complain, they are satisfied by reducing the wages of the workers. In the space of the last four years, the price of a day has been lowered several times for all small railway employees: it is by 40 percent on average that we can assess the general decrease in salary, and on a few lines the payment of salary was several weeks late, even two months on the Baltimore-Ohio road. From decrease to decrease, the average salary no longer even reaches 4 francs per head of family, and it is with this sum that he must provide for the maintenance of his wife and children in a country like the United States where money has so little value. The United States, which once proudly compared itself to the countries of the old world as a 'promised land' for all the unfortunate, now has its proletariat as has England, France, Belgium or Germany. In Massachusetts, the model state, the number of those in need has risen in ten years from 22,000 to over 220,000; in the city of New York alone, 40,000 unfortunate people have no other resources than that of public charity; in the Union as a whole, nearly two million workers go without work. America, after receiving hundreds of thousands of Europeans every year, has in turn become a country of emigration: not only hopeless migrants are returning to their homeland, but also real yankee workers go seek their fortunes in South America, Australia and England.

A further 10 percent cut in wages has set off the storm on the Baltimore-Ohio line. It was July 16th. In the city of Baltimore itself, the mechanics, the drivers, the brakemen, numbering several thousand, went on strike; but the directors of the company, prepared for the event, had taken their measures: immediately the strikers were replaced by formerly starving people, who had registered to demand work, and the service was hardly interrupted.

But east of Baltimore, in a valley of the Blue Mountains crossed by the Potomac, things turned out differently. The Martinsburg workers, who went on strike like those of Baltimore, remained masters of the station from which they wished to be driven out, and did not let in the newcomers whom they came to put in their place. They told the Company that if their wages were lowered they would stop the service and not let any freight trains pass. The Governor of West Virginia, to which the Company immediately addressed itself as its natural ally, hastened to call in the local militia. It meets indeed, but composed in great majority of farmers and petit bourgeois exasperated by the rates of the Company, it only appeared in front of the station to cheer on the strikers; some militiamen even gave their weapons to the workers before returning to their villages. The boatmen of a large canal which passes through Martinsburg joined the ranks of the small insurgent troop.

On the 18th, the Martinsburg strikers and their friends formed an army of 800 men and organized militarily to resist the Company. More than 80 freight trains were stranded in Baltimore and other eastern stations; earthworks rose on a favorable point above a curve in the line; large grain supplies and other foodstuffs that were in the station had been seized by workers in anticipation of a siege; as for the cattle found in the stables and the wagons, they had been released in the surrounding meadows. But passenger trains passed regularly and the government of the United States, taking advantage of this, was quick to use it to dispatch to Martinsburg old disciplined troops, accustomed to march, to slash and to kill on command. On the 19th, these old soldiers, soldiers of the order, cherished children of Capital, were in the presence of workers in revolt and in such large numbers that it became impossible to resist them. Some insurgents, among others the one they had chosen as leader, the mechanic Zebb, were taken prisoner and the bulk of the band was forced to retreat west into the Cumberland Pass. The soldiers pursued them; but they could not cross the barricade of wagons opposed to them; they in turn retreated and the strikers

of Kentucky, they succeeded in appointing six representatives of the local legislature out of seven; in Covington, near Cincinnati, they elected a senator. In other places they have also won lesser victories; in Ohio they think they are strong enough to make one of theirs dispute the first magistracy of the State: flatterers, the square runners aren't lacking when it comes to encouraging them in this way, and their journals are full of articles prophesying future victory. Under the influence of German ideas, they are thinking of organizing themselves into a Volkstaat and want to seize the state to make its cogs work to their benefit.

We do not want to overlook the importance of this great workers' party which is now forming in all the American states, outside of the two large bourgeois parties, the Republicans and Democrats. It is already an important fact that of the final split between the exploiter and the exploited in the political field; But soon, we hope, American workers will have to recognize that the vote is an even less powerful weapon than the strike. Assuming that fraud does not slip into the ballot for the benefit of the masters, assuming that all representativesappointed by the workers remain faithful to their cause and only enter the bourgeois world to fight it, finally granting that the laws presented by their delegates are accepted by the legislatures and officially promulgated, who can guarantee us the obedience of capital? Those who have money, and who, through money hold the society as while, will they give in, out of respect for the law? Will a new constitution clause suffice to eliminate the coalition of all bourgeois interests? No ! This is not how workers will succeed in conquering their rights; it is not parliamentary cunning that will provide them with bread. What they need is a full understanding of their rights and a strong will to seize upon them as soon as soon as they have the strength to do so. No rhetoric or perfide politics, but action as it befits men!

celebrated their first victory. It is in the surrounding area, near the village of Charlestown, that John Brown, twenty years ago, gave the signal for emancipation of black people, and one could wonder if the strikers of Martinsburg in their turn would not have inaugurated a new war from which the freedom of white slaves would come out.

The events of the Potomac Valley caused great emotion throughout the working class of America, and the strike, which until then had been only an isolated fact, became general on the network of Pennsylvania, New York, Ohio, Indiana, Illinois; even in Canada, railway workers broke free from their company. In Baltimore, on the 21st, the dismissed workers assembled in front of the station; the crowd there followed them to boo the soldiers of two regiments which were hurriedly dispatched to Martinsburg; a conflict took place, in which the soldiers armed with their rifles and their sabers, won, not without difficulty, over the multitude armed with stones. Ten dead, twenty-five wounded remained on the pavement; but the track was partially destroyed and the station set in flames. In the town of Pittsburg, the large coal and oil warehouse , a huge industrialized metropolitan area in eastern Pennsylvania, the conflicts were much bloodier and the disaster more serious. A first call for militia by the government was unsuccessful; Only 300 men answered the call, but to disband immediately. Soon the federal troops arrived by hijacked railways whose employees were not on strike, appeared. A soon as they exited the cars, they were already charging the crowd, bayonets in front. From the first meeting, 70 individuals, dead or injured, were left on the battlefield. The exasperated crowd retreats on the hills to the east of the city and from there the struggle continues, throwing stones and bricks. Near the evening, the troops attacked from all sides, takes refuge in the machine workshop, near the station, and there, like a fortress, continued fire on the attackers. These have no weapons, but they know how to make some; they seize all kinds of projectiles, then, seizing the wagons laden with coal and oil, they light them and, by using

the converging tracks, send them to the machine workshop; the circle of fire gradually narrows around the soldiers: they barely escape , leaving behind the wounded that the fire consumes. Pursued by the crowd, the soldiers cross the river, then disperse in small bands, and only in the evening, the wounded general manages to regroup them in a fortified camp 16 kilometers away from the town; they had lost 25 of theirs during the retreat; all in all, nearly 500 men on both sides were killed or wounded. The fire had spread from wagon to wagon, building to building, and from the machine workshop to the end of the freight yard, everything was burning on span of more than five kilometers. One hundred and twenty-five locomotives, over a thousand wagons, immense supplies, that was the loss of the day for the company.

Similar conflicts, though less bloody, took place in several other cities of the United States, in Reading, in Chicago, in Buffalo, in Columbus, everywhere where the company directors had at their disposal federal troops to shoot at the people. The President of the United States, himself arrived by fraud in office, hastened to give his support to his friends, the honest Railroad Directors; he had placed the 25,000 Federal troops at their disposal * and recalled General Sherman from the Indian border. It was necessary to go as fast as possible, to neglect the enemies on the outside to deal with those on the inside. Order had to be ensured at all costs, that is, to maintain against the strikers the ten percent wage reduction imposed by the bosses. The ships scattered on the coast were summoned in all haste; they were assigned a combat post in front of the major coastal towns and captains were ordered to reduce to ashes the suburbs and workers' quarters, if the revolt was there to burst. There was even talk of decreeing a levy of 75,000 men, as Lincoln had done at the beginning of the Civil War. But the active resistance was already drawing to a close, and the riots had changed in nature almost everywhere. In many places where the crowd rose up, it had already forgotten the strike, the root cause of the national crisis; it was only obeying its own instinct, very legitimate, leading

their wages; it is to seize for the benefit of all the property that they are made to exploit without benefit to them!

And now that American society has returned to the usual calm and that capital has regained its so-called rights in crushing the proletarians and turning them into mud, so to say, what lessons have the masters drawn from the formidable insurrection they have just escaped from. Some think that it would be good to regulate the exploitation of the human mater, by substituting the State for the companies. They imagine that by imitating the great Bismark and by buying the railway network on behalf of the government, one would ensure at the same time, to the public a more regular service, and to the worker, an existence more at peace. Later perhaps we could think of the acquisition of all the factories, then to that of the fields, and the whole society would become an immense army with its generals and its captains, sergeants and privates, all ordered in advance by the almighty State.

Those who think so, idealists of the bourgeoisie, are called dreadful communists by the right thinking, the worshippers of political economy. The vast majority of capitalists and the turf around them have little care for such projects! For them, the question is quite simple. To maintain the poor people, force is enough; but we must always arrange ourselves in such a way as to be able to dispose of this force. The army saved a first time this that they call society, that is, their money bags. Well! it is necessary to increase the army, to build barracks and redoubts in all the manufacturing towns; to train by military exercise half of the people to shoot the other half ! Here the ideal of society as they understand it! The repression of the Paris Commune, that is their epic. Thiers and his friend MacMahon ordering the massacres, these are their heroes, those they intend to imitate!

As for the workers, the failure of the strike made them change their tactics: it is through voting, through electoral agitation, that most of them are now considering winning over their bosses. A first triumph gave them great hope. In Louisville, the principal city

dinary advantages of civilization, they ceased to wish them good; little by little opinion changed and became hostile to them. They felt it themselves and that is why they dispersed in many places where, from the first days, they had been the masters. The big question is still that of bread: the hunger of the producers caused the strike; that of consumers put an end to it.

But how different the results of the strike could have been if the workers, understanding their rights, had put themselves, in the name of the public utility, to manage for the satisfaction of the common interests the lines which they had power over. Thus in the State of Indiana, they had the fifteen railway lines converging regularly, like the spokes of a circle, towards the central station of Indianapolis, and consequently, it was on them that depended the circulation of life within the very limits of the whole state. This commercial life, they suddenly stopped it by the strike; But what would have prevented them from warning the farmers, workers' corporations, the petty bourgeoisie, that they were taking charge of transport, not only at reduced prices, but at cost price, that they would become agents of the whole Society for the product distribution and would limit themselves to deducting from the daily income the part necessary for their personal maintenance. If they had acted in this way, by transforming the whole movement of the railways into a public service, the whole people, as soon as the first moment of astonishment passed, would have happily become their accomplice; a whole revolution was taking place peacefully; an entire new social order of ideas was beginning to take shape! Even if, supported by all the armed force and all the resources of the government, the ousted capitalists had succeeded in regaining possession of their network of railways, the memory of the interregnum would have remained in the populations, one would have compared the two regimes, those of public service and capitalist exploitation, and sooner or later the forced expropriation of companies would have become inevitable. Let the workers not forget this in a future strike: what matters is not to maintain or increase

her to fight an enemy society, but it had no other goal than to enjoy the euphoria of battle for a few hours. In San Francisco, popular passion even ended up targeting the Chinese workers, as if these unfortunate people were responsible for the tiny wages to which the greed of white people doomed them. The last strike riot and the last massacre of unarmed workers took place on August the 2nd in Scranton, not far from where the movement had started, two weeks earlier. The repression was merciless. As for constitutional guarantees, the immunities of states and towns, and the rights which the laws of the republic recognize for citizens, they were no longer of any importance. Laws are made only for the oppressed; they are not made for the oppressor, because it is he himself who legislates and he pleasantly ridicules his own work. It's for the one who took no part in their making to tremble before them.

Only one political figure, let it be said to his honor, refused to assemble the troops against the strikers, Mr. Williams, governor from Indiana. All the railway lines which converge on Indianapolis, the state capital, had fallen peacefully into the hands of the employees, through the flight of the directors; they insisted on returning to their stations, accompanied by soldiers and cannons. "Try to get home on your own," said to them the governor, "and if some violence is done to you, then I may think of defending you". So what a concert of curses on the part of all the honest people against this demagogue governor, this flatterer of the vile multitude who refuses to kill his electors, at the first summons of a few millionaires!

After the conflicts in Pitsburg and Chicago, the strikers remained in control of a part of the network which can be estimated at about one-seventh of all American lines. It was enough to noticeably hamper the trade and to increase the price of food and goods in large cities; but it was not enough to prevent the movements of troops, nor to force the companies to give in to the demands of workers. Moreover, the strike which the frightened bourgeois said had been resolved by a general conspiracy, unfortunately took place without order, without understanding; on a lot of lines, the workers had

continued their service or remained available, while waiting for the way to cease to be blocked; and where the strike was serious, an infinity of starving people waited impatiently to be given the places which had become vacant. Between a bourgeoisie, knowing what it wanted, and a proletariat acting haphazardly, the outcome of the struggle could not have been in doubt. We can judge the lack of workers' solidarity by the fact that the most powerful association, that of the united mechanics, which has fifteen million francs alone, did not consider the moment an opportunity to intervene in anything. It allowed herself to make few threats, but neither through its men nor its money did she try to influence the outcome of the strike.

Once again, then, we have the proof that no strike, however important, can lead to the definitive success of the workers, if it does not turn into a revolution. No doubt it is true that if all the workers at once, those who harvest the wheat and those who turn it into bread, the workers of the soil and those of the factory simply crossed their arms, waiting for the money handlers to deliver their bags of money, the social transformation could not be delayed; the strikers could dictate their conditions and take possession of the entire land and its tools. But when will we see this popular unanimity? For a long time still it can only exist in the domain of the ideal: it is from revolutionary groups marching in the vanguard and not from the entire army, who will start the fights which will decide of the future victory.

The complaints of American workers, numerous documents which they had published in the newspapers and which they handed over to legislators and congresses, testify that they are not yet arrived at the awareness of their rights. For the vast majority of them, the whole question seems to be that of the salary and not that of property. They appeal to the feelings of their masters; they invoke their spirit of fairness; but all, or almost all seem to recognize in principle the essential difference which must exist between the capitalist and the poor; between the employer

and the employee. Only a small number conceive of a possible participation for their common benefits; but the capital remains for them holy and sacrosanct. "Our goal," says the manifesto of a large working-class society, "is both to increase our salary and give the capitalist more security and more regular profits."

Thus, the workers of America, inferior to those who exploit them by the lack of unanimity, are also inferior by the lack of principle that directs them. The bourgeois start from the precise idea that the land and its products must belong to the strongest, the most able, the most cunning, and that misfortune must be the lot of the vanquished: property is for them a privilege to be kept. And this starting point is unfortunately also the one that the workers have accepted. It is appropriate for them to not care about property, provided they have the salary; the privilege does not hurt them, as long as they enjoy tolerance. How different and stronger would their attitude be if, in agreement among themselves, they knew how to say to the bourgeois: "Your property is only a theft and we do not recognize it; the laws you make to protect it are just a deception and we curse them; your whole society is only injustice and we want to destroy it to found a new society of right and freedom."

Masters of the railroads as they were in some states for more than a week, the strikers, if they understood correctly that the merchants of New York and Boston have no right to seize all the country's traffic and to forcibly levy a traffic tax on the public, would have had time to expropriate the companies by virtue of their collective authority and to manage, for the benefit of all, the lines of railways of which they had temporarily become owners. It was then that the real revolution would have started and the public opinion of the peasants, of the small employees, of all those exploited by big capital, would have been in support of them. First of all, the sympathy of the people supported the strikers; food was brought to them, weapons even; public meetings were held in their favor; but as soon as commodity prices increased, as soon as general circulation was partially interrupted to the detriment of the or-