

Anarchism in the Workers' Movement

Errico Malatesta

7 October 1897

We would draw our readers' attention to the Toulouse (France) workers' congress,⁹² which we report in this edition, and to the speech delivered to said congress by our comrade Delessalle, which we are reprinting under the heading "Workers' Resistance."¹

The Toulouse congress was a significant victory for our persuasion and tactics—a victory that was predictable from the stance of the majority of the French delegation at the recent London International Congress and which was made that much easier for our friends in France by the authoritarian, intolerant behavior of the marxists.²

To be sure, the Toulouse congress was no anarchist congress—and it is a good thing that this was the case. Anarchist congresses should be held by anarchists, not by the workers at large... unless the latter have already become anarchists, in which case anarchy would have carried the day and no more congresses would be held for propaganda and struggle purposes, but only technical congresses to thrash out practicalities arising in the life of society.

It is not our intention to impose our program on the masses who have yet to be persuaded, much less are we out to put on a show of strength by using ambush and more or less *clever* intrigues to get workers to vote through statements of principles that workers have yet to embrace. We are not out to have our party take the place of the life of the people; but we strive to ensure that said life may be comprehensive, thoughtful, and thriving and so our party can bring to bear upon it whatever influence may naturally derive from the activity and intelligence it can inject into its propaganda and its entire action as a party.

And one of the main reasons for our most recent fall-outs with the democratic socialists was their ambition to take over the workers' movement, in defiance of our demand for full freedom for all, to foist their democratic socialist creed upon it and harness it for their own electoral purposes—an ambition that has received a severe set-back in Toulouse, as far as France goes, and

¹ At the 3rd Congress of the *Confédération Générale du Travail* (General Confederation of Labor), held in Toulouse from 20 to 25 September 1897, the principle of the general strike was reaffirmed and the use of boycott and ca'canny (French *sabotage*) tactics, as illustrated in Paul Delesalle's report, was approved. Delesalle, a leading figure of the French syndicalist movement, for the next decade was to serve as joint secretary of both the CGT and the other major syndicalist organization, the *Fédération des Bourses du Travail* (Federation of Labor Exchanges).

² At the London congress of the Second International, held from 27 July to 1 August 1896, the French delegation voted against the anarchists' exclusion from the congress. Malatesta was part of that delegation, representing the Amiens metalworkers.

that will be utterly defeated, we believe, the world over at the great international congress in preparation for 1900.³

For us, it is enough if workers learn to do for themselves, acknowledge the conflict of interests between them and the bosses, and seek, through union and all manner of resistance, to shrug off the state of degradation and wretchedness in which they find themselves. Conscious, systematic socialism and anarchism will come little by little, as the conflict widens and deepens and as the need for radical organic remedies becomes apparent to all.

The Toulouse congress shows that the thoughtful part of the French proletariat, even though it may not understand or may not accept our general principles, can discern the path that must lead to the ending of human exploitation—and we are proud to record the important part that our comrades have played in this.

May their example spur us on.

The short-term practical means of struggle embraced by those attending the Toulouse congress—striking when possible and appropriate, *boycotting* traders and bosses as circumstances allow, and easing up on the quantity and quality of work, squandering raw materials and ruining machinery and tools until such time as the boss caves in to the demands put by the workers—may appear (especially those last two) ill-suited to the social conditions in Italy and to the state of public opinion.

This is because, up until a few years ago, workers not entirely brutalized by poverty and ignorance, fell in behind bourgeois parties and looked for improvement to the kindness of the bosses or to the arrival in power of one or the other faction of the bourgeoisie. There was no collective awareness of class antagonisms, and only now the first inklings of it are breaking through. At a personal level, every worker has always thought of the boss as his enemy, and has sought to give him as little work as possible and often to do him as much harm as he could; but, lacking the illumination of an ideal, lacking the purpose of the general good, such feelings were merely the instinctive and almost unthinking backlash against hurt. They were unable to generate any lasting, general impact and boiled down to personal hatreds and rivalries, which, for the most part, led to barbarism in practices, falling levels of sociability and a debasement of everybody's level of morality.

It is up to us, up to the socialists generally, to cultivate in the proletariat a consciousness of the class antagonism and the need for collective struggle, and a yearning to have an end of struggle and to resolve differences by establishing equality, justice, and freedom for everyone. And as that new consciousness and those new ideals spread, the tactics advocated in France and already being practiced in England will be feasible and useful even here in Italy, through adaptation to changing circumstances of time, place, or person.

The odd friend of ours may think this small potatoes: and there will be no shortage, either, of voices calling us “legalitarians.”

This is mere rhetoric, the sort of thing we have not yet completely outgrown!

As individuals and as a party, we have grown up under the sway of admiration and craving for the classic, traditional forms of revolution: barricades, armed bands, gunfire, etc. And we are

³ The organization of an international congress to be held in 1900 was one of the resolutions taken at the Toulouse congress. The congress, which was to be held in Paris, was eventually prohibited by the police.

still of the view that those are superb forms... as long as they do not have the drawback of not being practicable and of remaining pious wishes.

We also say: such education and desire of ours will prove greatly useful to us come the day of final crisis, and it would be a mistake and a sin to let them fall into disrepute and oblivion.

But let us remember that neglecting small means when greater means cannot be deployed, and wallowing in inertia on the pretext of wanting to only engage in big things, eventually leads to our becoming impotent and incapable of doing a lot or a little.

This is how the legalitarians, the parliamentarists have managed to make headway. The revolution is a beautiful thing, they say; but since you do not make it, allow us to do what we can: enter Parliament.

We, on the other hand, have to demonstrate that even while waiting for the revolution to arrive, we can fight, and fight to some effect, without dragging the masses down the unwinnable byways of parliamentarism. Once we pull that off, parliamentary socialism's days will be numbered.

Moreover let us not forget that, even when they are possible, barricades erected without a measure of awareness in the people lead only to the replacement of one government by another—and that such awareness can only develop gradually, through the day-to-day struggle, which cannot be barricade warfare.

So let us not scorn the “petty means.” They will hoist us into a position where we can deploy major ones.

The Anarchist Library
Anti-Copyright



Errico Malatesta
Anarchism in the Workers' Movement
7 October 1897

The Method of Freedom: An Errico Malatesta Reader, edited by Davide Turcato, translated by Paul Sharkey.

Translated from "L'anarchismo nel movimento operaio," *L'Agitazione* (Ancona) 1, no. 30 (7 October 1897).

theanarchistlibrary.org