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Further Thoughts on Anarchism and the Labour Movement

Errico Malatesta

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Obviously I am unable to make myself understood to the Spanish speaking comrades, at least as regards my ideas on the labour movement and on the role of anarchists within it.

I tried to explain these ideas in an article that was published in *El Productor* on 8th January (an article whose heading, 'The Labour Movement and Anarchism' was wrongly translated as 'Syndicalism and Anarchism'). But from the response that I saw in those issues of *El Productor* that reached me I see I haven't managed to make myself understood. I will therefore return to the subject in the hope of greater success this time.

The question is this: I agree with the Spanish and South American comrades on the anarchist goals that must guide and inform all our activity. But I disagree with some as to whether the anarchist programme, or rather, label, should be imposed on workers' unions, and whether, should such a programme fail to meet with the approval of the majority, the anarchists should remain within the wider organisation,

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continuing from within to make propaganda and opposing the authoritarian, monopolist and collaborationist tendencies that are a feature of all workers' organisations, or to separate from them and set up minority organisations.

I maintain that as the mass of workers are not anarchist a labour organisation that calls itself by that name must either be made up exclusively of anarchists — and therefore be no more than a simple and useless duplicate of the anarchist groups — or remain open to workers of all opinions. In which case the anarchist label is pure gloss, useful only for helping to commit anarchists to the thousand and one transactions which a union is obliged to carry out in the present day reality of life if it wishes to protect the immediate interests of its members.

I have come across an article by D. Abad de Santillan¹ which opposes this view ... Santillan believes that I confuse syndicalism with the labour movement, while the fact is that I have always opposed syndicalism and have been a warm supporter of the labour movement.

I am against syndicalism, both as a doctrine and a practice, because it strikes me as a hybrid creature that puts its faith, not necessarily in reformism as Santillan sees it, but in classist exclusiveness and authoritarianism. I favour the labour movement because I believe it to be the most effective way of raising the morale of the workers and because, too, it is a grand and universal enterprise that can be ignored only by those who have lost their grip on real life. At the same time I am well aware that, setting out as it does to protect the short-term interests of the workers, it tends naturally to reformism and cannot, therefore, be confused with the anarchist movement itself.

Santillan insists on arguing that my ideal is 'a pure labour movement, independent of any social tendency, and which holds its own goals within itself.' When have I ever said such

¹ Diego Abad de Santillan (1897–1983), Argentinian by birth. Active in the Spanish Civil War. Journalist and editor.

a thing? Short of going back — which I could easily do — to what Santillan calls the *prehistoric* time of my earlier activities, I recall that as far back as 1907, at the Anarchist Congress of Amsterdam, I found myself crossing swords with the ‘Charter of Amiens’ syndicalists and expressing my total distrust of the miraculous virtues of a ‘syndicalism twat sufficed unto itself.’

Santillan says that a *pure labour movement has never existed, does not exist and cannot exist* without the influence of external ideologies and challenges me to give a single example to the contrary. But what I’m saying is the same thing! From the time of the First International and before, the parties — and I use the term in the general sense of people who share the same ideas and aims — have invariably sought to use the labour movement for their own ends. It is natural and right that this is so, and I should like the anarchists, as I think Santillan would too, not to neglect the power of the labour movement as a means of action.

The whole point at issue is whether it suits our aims, in terms of action and propaganda, for the labour organisations to be open to all workers, irrespective of philosophical or social creed, or whether they should be split into different political and social tendencies. This is a matter not of principle but of tactics, and involves different solutions according to time and place. But in general to me it seems better that the anarchists remain, when they can, within the largest possible groupings.

I wrote: ‘A labour organisation that styles itself anarchist, that was and is genuinely anarchist and is made up exclusively of dyed-in-the-wool anarchists, could be a form — in some circumstances an extremely useful one — of anarchist grouping; but it would not be the labour movement and it would lack the purpose of such a movement.’ This statement, which seems simple and obvious to me, dumbfounds Santillan. He throws himself at it in transcendental terms, concluding that ‘if anarchism is the idea of liberty it can never work against the ends of the labour movement as all other factions do.’

Let's keep our feet firmly on the ground. What is the aim of the labour movement? For the vast majority, who are not anarchist, and who, save at exceptional times of exalted heroism, think more of the present moment than of the future, the aim of the labour movement is the protection and improvement of the conditions of the workers now and is not effective if its ranks are not swelled with the greatest possible number of wage earners, united in solidarity against their bosses. For us, and in general all people of ideas, the main reason for our interest in the labour movement is the opportunities it affords for propaganda and preparation for the future — and even this aim is lost if we gather together solely with like-minded people.

Santillan says that if the Italian anarchists had managed to destroy the General Confederation of Labour there would perhaps be no fascism today. This is possible. But how to destroy the General Confederation if the overwhelming majority of the workers are not anarchist and look to wherever there is least danger and the greatest chance of obtaining some small benefit in the short term?

I do not wish to venture into that kind of hindsight that consists in saying what would have happened if this or that had been done, because once in this realm anyone can say what they like without fear of being proved wrong. But I will allow myself one question. Since the General Confederation could not be destroyed and replaced with another equally powerful organisation, would it not have been better to have avoided schism and remain within the organisation to warn members against the somnolence of its leaders? We can learn something from the constant efforts made by those leaders to frustrate any proposal' for unification and keep the dissidents at bay.

A final proof of the mistaken way in which certain Spanish comrades interpret my ideas on the labour movement:

In the periodical from San Feliu de Guixol, *Accion Obrera* is an article by Vittorio Aurelio in which he states:

'I believe that my mission is to act within the unions, seeking to open from within the labour organisations an ever upward path towards the full realisation of our ideals. And whether we achieve that depends on our work, our morale and our behaviour. But we must act through persuasion, not imposition. For this reason I disagree that the National Confederation of Labour (CNT) in Spain should directly call itself anarchist, when, unfortunately, the immense majority of its members do not know what this means, what libertarian ideology is about. I wonder, if the defenders of this argument know that the members of the workers' organisation do not think or act anarchically, why is there this anxiety to impose a name, when we know full well that names alone mean nothing?'

This is precisely my point. And I wonder why, in saying this, Vittorio Aurelio finds it necessary to declare that he does not agree with Malatesta!

Either my style of writing is getting too obscure or my writings are being regularly distorted by the Spanish translators.