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The Anarchists' Task

Errico Malatesta

1899

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What should we do?

That is the question facing us, as indeed it does all who have ideas to put into effect and interests to defend, in every moment of our party life.

We want to do away with private ownership and authority, which is to say we are out to expropriate those who cling to the land and capital, and to overthrow government, and place society's wealth at the disposal of everyone so that everyone may live as he pleases with no other restriction than those imposed by natural and social necessity, *freely* and *voluntarily* recognized and accepted. In short, we are out to implement the anarchist-socialist program. And we are convinced (and day to day experience confirms us in this belief) that the proprietors and governments use physical force to protect their ascendancy, so, in order to defeat them, we must of necessity resort to physical force, to violent revolution.

As a result, we are the foes of all privileged classes and all governments, and inimical to all who, albeit with the best of intentions, tend, by their endeavors, to sap the people's revolutionary energy and substitute one government for another.

But what should we do to ensure that we are up to making our revolution, a revolution against all privilege and every authority and that we win?

The best tactic would be for us to spread our ideas always and everywhere; to use all possible means to nurture in proletarians the spirit of combination and resistance and to egg them on to ever greater demands; to be unrelenting in our opposition to every bourgeois party and every authoritarian party and remain unmoved by their complaints; to organize among those who have been won over and are being won over to our ideas and to provide ourselves with the material means needed for struggle; and, once we have built up enough strength to win, to rise up alone, on our own exclusive behalf, to implement our program in its entirety, or, to be more exact, to secure for every single person unrestricted freedom to experiment, practice and progressively amend that form of social living that he may feel is best.

But, unfortunately, this tactic cannot always be strictly adhered to and there is no way that it can achieve our purpose. The effectiveness of propaganda is, to say the least, limited, and when, in any given context, all individuals likely, by virtue of their moral and material conditions, to understand and embrace a given set of ideas have been brought on board, there is little more to be achieved by means of the spoken and written word until such time as an alteration in the context elevates a fresh stratum of the population to a position where it can value those ideas. Likewise, the effectiveness of labor organization is limited by the very same factors as inhibit the indefinite spread of propaganda; as well as by broad economic and moral factors that weaken or entirely neutralize the impact of resistance by conscious workers.

Our having a strong, vast organization of our own for the purposes of propaganda and struggle runs into a thousand hurdles in ourselves, our lack of resources, and, above all, government repression. And even if it were possible, over time, to

arrive by means of propaganda and organization at sufficient strength for us to make the revolution, striking out directly in the direction of anarchist socialism, every passing day, well ahead of our reaching that point of strength, throws up political situations in which we are obliged to take a hand lest we not only lose the benefits to be reaped from them, but indeed lose all sway over the people, thwart part of the work done thus far, and render future work the more daunting.

The problem therefore is to come up with some means whereby, insofar as we can, we bring about those changes in the social environment that are needed if our propaganda is to make headway, and to profit from the conflicts between the various political parties and from every opportunity that presents itself, without surrendering any part of our program, and doing this in such a way as to render victory easier and more imminent.

In Italy, for instance, the situation is such that there is the possibility, the probability sooner or later of an insurrection against the Monarchy. But it is equally certain that the outcome of the next insurrection is not going to be anarchist socialism.

Should we take part in laying the groundwork for, or in mounting, this insurrection? And how?

There are some comrades who reckon that it is not in our interest to engage with a rising that will leave the institution of private property untouched and will simply replace one government with another, that is to say, establish a republic, that would be every bit as bourgeois and oppressive as the monarchy. They say: let us leave the bourgeois and would-be governors to lock horns with one another, while we carry on down our own path, by keeping up our anti-property and anti-authoritarian propaganda.

Now, the upshot of any such abstention on our part would be, first, that in the absence of our contribution, the uprising's chances of success would be lessened and that therefore it might be because of us if the monarchy wins—this monarchy

that, particularly at the present moment, when it is fighting for its survival and rendered fierce by fear, bars the way to propaganda and to all progress. What is more, if the rising went ahead without our contribution, we would have no influence over subsequent developments, we would not be able to extract any advantages from the opportunities that always crop up during the period of transition from one regime to the next, we would be discredited as a party of action, and it would take us many a long year before we could accomplish anything of note.

It is not a case of leaving the bourgeois to fight it out among themselves, because in any insurrection the source of strength, material strength at any rate, is always the people and if we are not in on the rising, sharing in the dangers and successes and striving to turn a political upheaval into a social revolution, the people will be merely a tool in the hands of ambitious types eager to lord it over them.

Whereas, by taking part in the insurrection (an insurrection we would never be strong enough to mount on our own), and playing as large a part as we can, we would earn the sympathy of the risen people and would be in a position to push things as far as possible.

We know only too well and never weary of saying so and proving it, that republic and monarchy are equally bad and that all governments have the same tendency to expand their powers and to oppress their subjects more and more. We also know, however, that the weaker a government is, the stronger the resistance to it from among the people, and the wider the freedom available and the chances of progress are.

By making an effective contribution to the overthrow of the monarchy, we would be in a position to oppose more or less effectively the establishment or consolidation of a republic, we could remain armed and refuse to obey the new government, and we would be able, here and there, to carry out attempts at expropriation and organization of society along anarchist and

communist lines. We could prevent the revolution from being halted at step one, and the people's energies, roused by the insurrection, from being lulled back to sleep. All of these things we would not be able to do, for obvious reasons of popular psychology, by stepping in afterwards, once the insurrection against the monarchy had been mounted and succeeded in our absence.

On the back of these arguments, other comrades would have us set aside our anarchist propaganda for the moment in order to concentrate solely on the fight against the monarchy, and then resume our specifically anarchist endeavors once the insurrection has succeeded. It does not occur to them that if we were to mingle today with the republicans, we would be working for the sake of the coming republic, throw our own ranks into disarray, send the minds of our supporters spinning, and when we wanted to would then not be strong enough to stop the republic from being established and from embedding itself.

Between these two opposite errors, the course to be followed seems quite clear to us.

We must cooperate with the republicans, the democratic socialists, and any other anti-monarchy party to bring down the monarchy; but we must do so as anarchists, in the interests of anarchy, without disbanding our forces or mixing them in with others' forces, and without making any commitment beyond cooperation on military action.

Only thus, as we see it, can we, in the coming events, reap all the benefits of an alliance with the other anti-monarchy parties without surrendering any part of our own program.