

The Irreconcilable Contradiction

Errico Malatesta

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They write from Bari, Italy:

Our city is going through a very sad crisis. Barrel-making, once a thriving industry, is increasingly on the decline. The cause of this decline lies in the introduction of new fares by railroad and shipping companies, which allow for the return of empty casks at very low cost; therefrom comes a decreased consumption of barrels. Some time ago the barrel-making masters took steps to resolve this critical condition by asking that the transportation costs of empty casks be increased. Last Sunday, in front of the prefecture, they met to ask the authorities for help. A committee of 12 barrel-making workers, accompanied by a public safety inspector, was received by the prefect, who promised to sort things out.

How on earth will the prefect sort things out?

By ordering the railroad companies to increase again the transportation costs for empty casks? How so, if the capitalists are the ones who own the railroads, the ones who command the prefects and the prefects' masters!

And then, increasing the charge for returning barrels would drive up the price of wine.

If the wine consumers were to turn to the prefect, would he promise to sort things out for them too?

That poor prefect must find himself in a similar position as Almighty God, to whom one person asks for rain and another for good weather. And he is not even omnipotent!

But in vain do we worry about the position of prefects, who know quite well how to dig themselves out of this puzzle... by making promises to everybody and keeping none of them.

Much more deserving of our commiseration are those poor workers who, ignorant of the root causes of their problems, let themselves be deceived and mocked to the extent that they let themselves be escorted to the prefecture by a public safety inspector, and hope that the officials will care about their fate.

The case of the barrel-makers of Bari is a typical case, which clearly shows the absurdity of capitalist society.

In similar cases there is no possible cure other than the abolition of capitalism, the radical transformation of the system of production. And every trade, every form of human activity must, sooner or later, find itself in the same case, which is already rather widespread due to the overabundance of labor.

Associations are of no help; nor are strikes and all other forms of resistance; nor cooperatives. Whenever no one needs the labor of a worker, the worker cannot impose any agreement: he must die of hunger—more or less slowly, more or less convulsively, but die of hunger he must... unless he can break free from the current system.

And progress tends to make the labor of an ever-increasing number of workers unnecessary. This is the ultimate, irreconcilable contradiction between capitalism and progress.

Either prevent all progress, enshrining the current castes, abolishing competition between capitalists, prohibiting any production development, any new machine, any new scientific application, and reducing workers to the status of domestic animals granted rations by their masters—in short, a regime like the one the Jesuits exercised in Paraguay;²⁹⁴ or destroy capitalism and organize production not for the profit of a few, but for the greatest well-being for all.

The request of the Bari barrel-makers to increase the transportation cost of used casks, so that the wineries would find it more convenient to burn them rather than send them back, is the same as asking the barrel-makers to only send 10 out of every 100 barrels to the market and destroy the other 90 before they can be used.

Is it possible to achieve that? Of course not. Yet, the current structure of society is so absurd that it would make such a measure beneficial.

When people die of hunger because there is too much stuff, or because it is too easy to produce it, or because it is too durable, destruction might appear—and might fleetingly be—more useful than production. A fire, an earthquake might be a blessing, bringing work and bread to the unemployed.

But destruction of wealth is not how workers can emancipate themselves. And luckily the time has passed, at least in the more advanced countries, during which workers thought they could stop progress, and put as much energy into smashing up machinery as it would have required to take control of it.

We must not fight progress, but direct it to everyone's benefit.

And for that to happen workers must take possession of all the capital, all social wealth, so that it would then be in their interest that products abound and production require the least possible effort.

This is why it is necessary to make the revolution.

Labor organizing, strikes, resistance of all kinds can at a certain point in capitalist evolution improve the conditions of workers or prevent them from worsening; they can serve very well to train workers for the struggle; they are always, in capable hands, a means of propaganda;—but they are hopelessly powerless to resolve the social question. And thus they must be used in such a way as to help prepare minds and muscle for the revolution—for expropriation.

Anyone failing to grasp this, is reduced to pleading to the prefects... and being mocked.

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