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The Labour Movement and Anarchism

Open letter addressed to the editors of *El Productor*,
an anarchist journal published in Barcelona

Errico Malatesta

December 1925

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Dear comrades,

In your journal I came across the following sentence: ‘If we must choose between Malatesta, who calls for class unity, and Rocker, who stands for a labour movement with anarchist aims, we choose our German comrade.’

This is not the first time that our Spanish language press has attributed to me ideas and intentions I do not have, and although those who wish to know what I really think can find it clearly set out in what I myself have written, I have decided to ask you to publish the following explanation of my position.

Firstly, if things were really as you present them, I too would opt for Rocker against your ‘Malatesta,’ whose ideas on the labour movement bear little resemblance to my own.

Let’s get one thing clear: a labour movement with anarchist objectives is not the same thing as an anarchist labour movement. Naturally everyone desires the former. It is obvious that in their activities anarchists look to the final triumph of anar-

chy — the more so when such activities are carried out within the labour movement, which is of such great importance in the struggle for human progress and emancipation. But the latter, a labour movement which is not only involved in propaganda and the gradual winning over of terrain to anarchism, but which is already avowedly anarchist, seems to me to be impossible and would in every way lack the purpose which we wish to give to the movement.

What matters to me is not 'class unity' but the triumph of anarchy, which concerns everybody; and in the labour movement I see only a means of raising the morale of the workers, accustom them to free initiative and solidarity in a struggle for the good of everyone and render them capable of imagining, desiring and putting into practice an anarchist life.

Thus, the difference there may be between us concerns not the ends but the tactics we believe most appropriate for reaching our common goals. Some believe anarchists must assemble the anarchist workers, or at the least those with anarchist sympathies, in separate associations. But I, on the contrary, would like all wage-earners, whatever their social, political or religious opinions — or non-opinions — bound only in solidarity and in struggle against the bosses, to belong to the same organisations, and I would like the anarchists to remain indistinguishable from the rest even while seeking to inspire them with their ideas and example. It could be that specific circumstances involving personalities, environment or occasion would advise, or dictate the breaking up of the mass of organised workers into various different tendencies, according to their social and political views. But it seems to me in general that there should be a striving towards unity, which brings workers together in comradeship and accustoms them to solidarity, gives them greater strength for today's struggles or prepares them better for the final struggle and the harmony we shall need in the aftermath of victory.

Clearly, the unity we have to fight for must not mean suppression of free initiative, forced uniformity or imposed discipline, which would put a brake on or altogether extinguish the movement of liberation. But it is only our support for a unified movement that can safeguard freedom in unity. Otherwise unity comes about through force and to the detriment of freedom.

The labour movement is not the artificial creation of ideologists designed to support and put into effect a given social and political programme, whether anarchist or not, and which can therefore, in the attitudes it strikes and the actions it takes, follow the line laid down by that programme. The labour movement springs from the desire and urgent need of the workers to improve their conditions of life or at least to prevent them getting worse. It must, therefore, live and develop within the environment as it is now, and necessarily tends to limit its claims to what seems possible at the time.

It can happen — indeed, it often happens — that the founders of workers' associations are men of ideas about radical social change and who profit from the needs felt by the mass of the people to arouse a desire for change that would suit their own goals. They gather round them comrades of like mind: activists determined to fight for the interests of others even at the expense of their own, and form workers' associations that are in reality political groups, revolutionary groups, for which questions of wages, hours, internal workplace regulations, are a side issue and serve rather as a pretext for attracting the majority to their own ideas and plans.

But before long, as the number of members grows, short-term interests gain the upper hand, revolutionary aspirations become an obstacle and a danger, 'pragmatic' men, conservatives, reformists, eager and willing to enter into any agreement and accommodation arising from the circumstances of the moment, clash with the idealists and hardliners, and the workers' organisation becomes what it perforce must be in a capitalist

society — a means not for refusing to recognise and overthrowing the bosses, but simply for hedging round and limiting the bosses' power.

This is what always has happened and could not happen otherwise since the masses, before taking on board the idea and acquiring the strength to transform the whole of society from the bottom up, feel the need for modest improvements, and for an organisation that will defend their immediate interests while they prepare for the ideal life of the future.

So what should the anarchists do when the workers' organisation, faced with the inflow of a majority driven to it by their economic needs alone, ceases to be a revolutionary force and becomes involved in a balancing act between capital and labour and possibly even a factor in preserving the status quo?

There are comrades who say — and have done so when this question is raised — that the anarchists should withdraw and form minority groupings. But this, to me, means condemning ourselves to going back to the beginning. The new grouping, if it is not to remain a mere affinity group with no influence in the workers' struggle, will describe the same parabola as the organisation it left behind. In the meantime the seeds of bitterness will be sown among the workers and its best efforts will be squandered in competition with the majority organisation. Then, in a spirit of solidarity, in order not to fall into the trap of playing the bosses' game and in order to pursue the interests of their own members, it will come to terms with the majority and bow to its leadership.

A labour organisation that were to style itself anarchist, that was and remained genuinely anarchist and was 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, which is to attract the mass of the workers into the struggle, and,

especially for us, to create a vast field for propaganda and to make new anarchists.

For these reasons I believe that anarchists must remain — and where possible, naturally, with dignity and independence — within those organisations as they are, to work within them and seek to push them forward to the best of their ability, ready to avail themselves, in critical moments of history, of the influence they may have gained, and to transform them swiftly from modest weapons of defence to powerful tools of attack.

Meanwhile, of course, the movement itself, the movement of ideas, must not be neglected, for this provides the essential base for which all the rest provides the means and tools.

Yours for anarchy

Errico Malatesta