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The worker and the machine

Ricardo Flores Magón

1916

“Wicked machine!” exclaims the worker, sweating from fatigue and distress. “Wicked machine, that makes me endure your rapid movements as if I were also made of steel and was granted a motor! I detest you, vile contraption, because you do the work of ten, twenty, or thirty workers, robbing the bread from my mouth and condemning my wife and my children to starve.”

The machine groans to the impulses of its motor, as if it participates equally in the fatigue of its comrade of blood and muscle: man. The thousand parts of the machine move, move without ceasing. Some glide, others bounce; these ones gyrate, those ones swing; oozing black oil, hissing, trembling. It exhausts the vision of the flesh and bone slave who must pay close attention to its movements, overcoming the nausea they provoke, so that he doesn’t allow a finger to be seized by one of these steel imps, so as not to lose a hand, an arm, even life itself ...

“Infernal machine! Spawned by the devil, you should all disappear! What a lovely job you do! In one day, costing only as much as some buckets of coal for your motor and with only one person by your side, each one of you makes more than a

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single man could make in a month! In this way, a man of my class, who could normally secure work for thirty days, is reduced to working only one. And we die of hunger! This does not interest you! Without you, more than twenty proletarian families would be ensured of having bread!”

The thousand parts of the machine move, groaning, sliding in different directions, joining together and separating, descending, ascending, oozing foul grease, shaking, creaking dizzily. The black contraption does not have a point of rest, yet it pants like a living thing. It seems to spy on the slave of flesh’s least mistake as an opportunity to chomp off a finger, to munch on a hand, to tear off an arm or life itself.

Through a skylight penetrate the light rays of a jail cell, livid, bitter, dreadful. Even the light prohibits smiling in this pit of sadness, of anguish, of fatigue, of the sacrifice of working lives to benefit idle existences. From outside, the sounds of footsteps penetrate. It is the flock going to work. In the crevices of the factory, the microphones spy. The worker coughs ... coughs! The machine creaks, creaks, creaks...!

“For seven hours I have to come stand by your side, and I still have three more to go. I feel dizzy, but I have to control myself. My head spins, but I can not neglect myself, traitor! I must follow your movements to prevent you from murdering me in your steel teeth, to stop you from imprisoning me in your iron fingers! Still three more long hours...! My ears are buzzing, a terrible thirst devours me, I have a fever, my head is exploding!”

From outside comes the cheerful racket of some children joking about. They laugh, and their laughter, naïve and comical, breaks the sad ambiance for an instant, breathing a sensation of freshness into it, like when spirits are humbled on hearing the chirping of birds. The worker quakes with emotion. This is how the children chirp! This is how they laugh! And, without taking his sight from the thousand parts which move in front of him, he thinks and thinks and thinks...! He thinks of

the pieces of his heart that await him in his humble home. He feels chilled considering the idea that those adorable beings that he launched into life will later come to agonize before the machine, in the shadow of the factory, in whose crevices microphones spy.

“Wicked machine! How wicked you are!”

The machine trembles with more momentum, and ceases its groaning. With all its iron tendons, with all its steel vertebrae, with the strong teeth of its gears, with its thousand tireless parts, it emits a husky sound, angry and wrathful, which, translated to human language, would say:

“Quiet, you miserable man! I do not complain about you, coward! I am a simple machine that moves to the impulses of a motor, whereas you have brains yet you do not rebel, wretch! Enough of your lamentations, unhappy man! It is not me who has made you wretched, but your own cowardice! Make me yours, seize me! Wrench me from the claws of the vampire who sucks your blood and work for yourself and for your own people, idiot! Machines are good: we save human effort! Yet you workers are so stupid that you leave us in the hands of your torturers, when you are the ones who make us! Could there be anything more idiotic? Quiet, quiet down! If you do not have the valor to break your chains, do not complain! Go, it is already time to leave! Go away and think!”

The salutary words of the machine, and the fresh air of the street made the worker think. He felt a world collapse within his mind: those of his prejudices, of his preoccupations, of his regard and devotion for tradition and for laws. Shaking his fist, he yelled:

“I am an anarchist! Long live Land and Liberty!”