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Looking Forward

Alexander Schapiro

April 1915

We have been told often enough these last few months that Anarchists have failed to grasp the gist of the present situation called forth by the war; that they have failed in their antimilitarist propaganda and in that of the general strike as a means for averting war.

It is true that our propaganda has failed to give tangible results, but only in so far as we did not develop it enough, in so far as we did not “go at it” with greater energy, with deeper enthusiasm.

But we were certainly on the right track when Anarchists said that antimilitarist propaganda is the backbone of every agitation that has for its purpose the destruction of the war-gods—which in its turn is the direct consequence of the existence of the State. And Anarchists were right when they always tried to make the people understand that the only practical means the workers have to stop any attempt at war was the general strike. This, after all, is no pet invention of the modern Anarchist agitation. Already at the Brussels Congress of the old International in 1868, the idea of a general strike against war was broached, and in 1871—about a month before

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Retrieved on 09.02.22 from
<https://libcom.org/library/volume-10-issue-2>
Published in *Mother Earth*, Vol. X No. 2 (April, 1915).

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the Paris Commune—the following resolution was passed by the German sections of the International:

“1. To remind the members of the federation of the resolutions of the Brussels Congress which proclaim the necessity to aim at the organization of a general strike, i.e., the general cessation of every production, in case a new war were to endanger the European nations. For this purpose, the conference finds it necessary:

“2. To undertake an energetic propaganda against armies and institutions which favor war, so that the protest of the International should, at last, be able to express itself not only in words, but also in deeds;

“3. That the protest of the International should be efficacious, it is necessary that the workers should refuse to work at the manufacture of ammunition and instruments of war, looking elsewhere for means to make a living; it is also necessary that they should organize on the basis of solidarity, thus giving them also the power to refuse that blood-tax—military service.

“4. The conference is convinced that the best means for organizing such a propaganda is to create everywhere international sections —chiefly in the villages.

“It is only thus that we shall be able to reach the political development and the social liberation of the working class.”

This was written 44 years ago. How little we have gone forward in that direction! How much there is yet to do! And yet—in spite of all this—could the Anarchists regret anything in their propaganda? Would they go back on anything they have

preached until now? Far from it. All that has now occurred has only strengthened them in the right course they had taken by following in the footsteps of the old International. They only acknowledge, once again, that the workers have been fooled—not only by the governing classes, but by those who had continually promised them the parliamentary millennium. State Socialism has been dangled before the workers as a cure-all; they were promised it as an antidote to the scourging poison of capitalism that ate into their souls and bodies—that antidote which is the same effective poison but under a more concentrated form. And if Socialism could show nothing better at a critical stage of its development than to become the slaves of their respective governments—when the Sudekums become agents of the German Government, Vandervelde and Guesde and Sembat become Cabinet ministers in Belgium and France, it is the grandest occasion for the Anarchists, instead of taking however small a part in the present conflagration, to show that they have always been right, is ceaselessly pushing home the truth that the State is the worst danger to the free development of nations and nationalities, and that only by its total abolition could one hope for a better future.

The present war is nothing else but the apotheosis of the State; the more tragic is it to find that the bellicose spirit has caught even those whom he thought totally immune. We see how, for example, the French *Confederation Generate du Travail* joins hands, for the first time in its history, with the Socialist parties, and sends official delegates to the Socialist conference of the “allies” just held in London. It may, of course, be a temporary aberration on the part of the C. G. T., but it is certainly a sign of the times that even the revolutionary Syndicalists—with some exceptions no doubt—have fallen the prey of State Socialists, hoping for a brighter future through a victory of the French, or the English, or the Russian states over the German state!

Bakunin wrote in one of his essays that Germany had saved France in 1870 by destroying the latter's army—an army that was an obstacle to every progress—and appealed to France to render the same service to Germany.

Forty-five years have passed, and we have again the same two armies fighting each other “for the liberties of the world.” Does not all this indicate that *armies* as such—even when they destroy other armies—do not make for progress? To appeal to Socialists and to Anarchists to help this or that side of the belligerents is therefore to capitulate unconditionally in the hands of the State—thus burning everything one believed in, believing in everything one had burned.

It was one of the corner-stones of Anarchist principles that to compromise voluntarily with the State is to admit its necessity, and that therefore we shall use all means at our disposal to weaken the State, so as to finally destroy it—and not to strengthen it by helping one State against another.

In this shape, the question for the Anarchists changes into a struggle of first magnitude. And if there is a reproach that could be made to the Anarchist movement it is that it has insufficiently developed its activity within the labor organizations where, after all, we shall always find the best material with which to regenerate humanity. The last few years have seen an increased lukewarmness on the part of our comrades within the French labor movement. A great heap of sharp criticism was flung at it; it has certainly deserved it sometimes, but in great part, through its abnormal exaggerations, it was often unmerited and only cooled the ardor of the younger elements.

It is the duty of the Anarchists to recapture at once these lost positions. This has to be done—or, at least, begun—*now*, while the war is still raging. The weakening of the Anarchist element in the French C.G.T. has also had a bad effect on the activity of our comrades in other countries. This must not be. On the contrary, it should be a lesson to us all, that if we wish to give an anti-State and a true antimilitarist character to the labor move-

ment, we must see that our comrades should everywhere be in the advance guard, always on the lookout, ever active within their labor organizations. The general strike must remain our weapon *par excellence* for making as harmless as possible either haughty employers or nefarious militarist states. But let us not have any illusions on that score; the general strike in the sense of a general cessation of production may be a sufficiently powerful lever to bring to their knees the economic exploiters of our age; but we must always be ready to transform such a general strike into the forerunner of a general insurrection having for its aim either the destruction of any attempt at a cataclysm like an international war, or the complete social reconstruction of society. That its cost will be heavy does not diminish its vital importance—knowing as we do now, that we could have had a dozen *successful* revolutions with the blood spilled, for all intents and purposes in vain, during the first few months of the present war.

It is unfortunately difficult to talk reason to people engaged in the war game, be they even Anarchists. But would it not be as well that comrades of all those countries where the war fever, has not become epidemic should at once, and without a moment's hesitation, begin—internationally in so far as it is now possible—the work of reorganization of our forces on the same old foundations which have stood so well the test of time, and spread our principles and tactics more energetically than ever and with a stronger united front, within our own ranks as well as within the labor movement. And if we stick to our guns, and if our opposition to the State—to any State—remains as irreconcilable as it has ever been—there should be no doubt of the ultimate result. Victory WILL be ours.