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E. Malatesta
The Socialists and the Elections
A Letter from E. Malatesta
2 February 1897

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Davide Turcato, translated by Paul Sharkey.

Translated from “I socialisti e le elezioni: Una lettera di E. Malatesta,” *Il Messaggero* (Rome) 19, no. 38 (7 February 1897). This was a response to an open letter from Malatesta’s comrade and friend Francesco Saverio Merlino, published in the same newspaper on January 29. In that letter Merlino proposed new tactics for the anarchists, which, in addition to direct action, were to include the ballot box.

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The Socialists and the Elections

A Letter from E. Malatesta

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Mr. Editor of the *Messaggero*,

I am informed that Italy’s parliamentary socialists are putting it about that I, agreeing with Merlino, see some purpose in anarchist socialists taking part in election contests by voting for the most progressive candidate.

Since they honour me by even considering my opinion, I will not be thought presumptuous if I hasten to let them and the public know what I truly think on this issue.

I certainly do not query my friend Merlino’s right to his own thoughts and to express them without holding back. It might have been better had he, prior to making a public announcement about a switch of tactics, which after all is worthless unless the comrades agree to it, discussed the matter at greater length with members of the party to which he has hitherto belonged and alongside which I hope he will be willing to carry on fighting. But the blame for that belongs, not so much to Merlino, as to the prolonged crisis by

which our party has been beset and the, as yet, incipient stage of reorganization in which we find ourselves.

But it needs to be placed on record that what Merlino has said regarding parliamentarism and electoral tactics is merely a personal view, not binding upon whatever tactics are to be adopted by the anarchist socialist party.

For my own part, much though it may displease me to take issue on such an important matter with as worthy a fellow as Merlino, to whom I am bound by so many ties of affection, I feel it my duty to state that, as I see it, the tactics advocated by Merlino are damaging and would of necessity lead to the abandonment of the entire anarchist socialist programme. And I think I am speaking the thoughts of all, or nearly all, anarchists there.

The anarchists remain, as ever, resolutely opposed to parliamentarism and parliamentary tactics.

Opposed to parliamentarism because they believe that socialism should and can only be achieved through a free federation of producer and consumer associations, and that any government, parliamentary government included, is not merely powerless to resolve the social question and reconcile and satisfy everybody's interests, but of itself represents a privileged class, with ideas, passions, and interests contrary to those of the people, which it can oppress by means of the people's own strength. Opposed to the parliamentary tactics because they believe that, far from encouraging the development of popular consciousness, it has a tendency to disaccustom the people to the direct care of their own interests and schools the ones in slavishness and the others in intrigues and lies.

Far be it from us to ignore the importance of political freedoms. But freedoms are only secured once the people have shown themselves determined to have them; and, once obtained, they endure and have value only until such time as governments feel that the people would suffer their being abolished.

Accustoming the people to delegating to others the winning and defence of its rights is the surest means of giving a free hand to the whims of those who govern.

True, parliamentarism is better than despotism: but only if it represents a concession granted by the despot out of fear of worse.

Given a choice between a parliamentarism, embraced and boasted, and a despotism forcibly thrust upon minds that cry out for redemption, despotism is a thousand times better.

I am well aware that Merlino places small store by elections, and seeks, as we do, to ensure that the real battle is fought in the country and with the country. But, for all that, the two methods of struggle do not go together and whoever embraces them both inevitably winds up sacrificing any other consideration to the electoral prospect. Experience proves as much and the natural love of the quiet life explains it.

And Merlino demonstrates that he appreciates that danger when he says that the anarchist-socialists need not stand candidates of their own, since they do not aspire to power and have no notion what to do with it.

But is that a tenable position? If good can be done through Parliament, why others and not ourselves, when we reckon we know better than the others?

If we do not aspire to power, why would we help those who do? If we have no idea what to do with power, what would others do with it, other than wield it to the people's detriment?

Let Merlino be assured on this point: if we tell people today to go out and vote, tomorrow we will be telling them to vote for us. In which we would be logically consistent. Be that as it may, if it were up to me to give someone advice about voting, I would promptly advise them to vote for me, since I believe (and I am probably wrong here, but to err is human), since I believe that I am as good as anyone else and am perfectly certain as to my honesty and steadfastness.

To be sure, with the considerations above, I have not said everything that needed saying, but I would be loath to presume unduly upon your space. I shall explain myself more fully in a related article: and I hope, also, that some collective act will be forthcoming from the party to reaffirm the anarchist-socialists' anti-parliamentary principles and abstentionist tactics.

In the hope that you will find this letter useful in informing the public about the stance that will be adopted by the various parties in the coming elections and that you will therefore be willing to publish it, my thanks to you in anticipation.

Errico Malatesta
112, High Street, Islington N.
London