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Errico Malatesta
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16 October 1889

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Another Strike

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For the past several weeks the dock porters of Rotterdam (Holland) had set about starting their strike. On 26 September, the strike spread and the number of strikers climbed to four or five thousand; on 10 October they all returned to work, having secured a 10 cents an hour rise in pay.

The police actively sided with the bosses and were violent and brutal.

On the 27th they sabre-charged and dispersed the strikers, wounding several of them. The reporter from the English *Daily News* says that the ones who should have been kept under surveillance and restraint were the police officers rather than the strikers, who bore the insults and sabre blows with resignation. No English workman, the reporter adds, would ever have put up with such treatment!

It is only natural: act like a lamb and be eaten by the wolf. In the London dockers’ strike the police refrained from all provocation, and the bourgeois, or at any rate the more intelligent among them, instead of calling for a violent crackdown, did their best to play up to the workers and keep them calm and amenable.

Back to the incidents in Rotterdam. Several social democrats (authoritarian socialists) arrived from Amsterdam and the Hague and, in concert with local colleagues, busied themselves urging calm and action within the law as usual.

On the other hand, the strikers turned down the offer made by the socialists to “lead” the strike and made it their business to distance themselves from any suggestion of socialism. At one meeting, they drove out one workman who had begun indulging in socialist talk, and unanimously cheered the House of Orange (the ruling dynasty in Holland).

All of this is painful—no mistake about it—and at first glance triggers a sense of profound pity and something bordering on fury, like the spectacle of a crowd cheering its death and wishing its life was over. Victims of poverty, these blind men manhandled one who talked to them about doing away with poverty and, with their shoulders still bruised from the flat of the Orange soldiers’ blades, cried out “Long live the House of Orange!”

Yet, on reflection, there is nothing there to make one wonder nor to dishearten.

And indeed, is it not small wonder that these strikers gave a hostile and suspicious welcome to individuals upon whom they had never before set eyes nor met but who were now stepping forward to offer themselves as ready-made “leaders” of the strike, which is to say, to claim the credit and the glory for it?

Is it any wonder that they rejected the socialists when the latter, without doing anything that others had not also done, were bringing to the dispute nothing but a word, which—given that determination to stay within the law—served only to add to the authorities’ suspicion and violence and make any concession on the part of the bosses that much harder to come by?

Before one can wield any influence over the masses, one has to live among them, work alongside them, suffer and struggle along-

side them. When the opportunity to act comes around, there is no need to offer oneself as a leader; instead, one should dive into the melee, preaching by example and paying the price in person. And, rather than stopping at abstract affirmations of theory, one should put himself in the masses' shoes, lower himself to their same starting point, and urge them on from there.

History teaches us that revolutions nearly always started with moderate demands—something akin to protests against abuses rather than outright revolts against the essence of institutions—and often with shows of respect and devotion towards the powers-that-be.

But where there is a ferment of ideas, and if one steps outside of the dead sea of legality and resorts to force, and the turmoil lasts long enough to grow, it always ends up toppling all the idols against which, initially, even the most timid attack could not be dared.

Revolt has a logic of its own; and every strike can—if it can hold out and spread—end up as a brazen and open assault on the principle of mastery, just the same as open insurrection against the monarchy can be the outcome of any attack on a town hall or on a *carabinieri* post, even if mounted to cries of “Long live the king! Long live the queen!”

Governments know this: let us learn it and capitalize upon it too.

In newspapers and books and everything addressed to the general public, as in debates between socialists, there is the essential need to specify one's thinking and to proclaim the entirety of our program loud and clear, without regard to persons or occasion. In one-to-one propaganda, however, and in the midst of a rioting populace, if one wants to make some headway, one has to be able to adapt to the intelligence, circumstances, practices, and prejudices

of the individuals or masses so as to steer them by the best route towards socialist beliefs and socialist action.

There is a reluctance to get personal: fine, let us not name names when it helps to get things done.

What does it matter if the people cry out “Long live the king!” as long as it revolts against the king’s men?

What does it matter if the people do not want to hear any talk of socialism, as long as they turn away from the bosses and seize their stuff?

Was the applause for the king with which the people of Paris, with unwitting irony, hailed every victory over royalty in any way an impediment to Louis Capet’s having his head lopped off?

Let us take the people as they are and let’s move forward with them. Casting them aside simply because they have no abstract grasp of our formulas and our rationale would be both idiocy and treason.

But let us be clear on this: this is no excuse for dumping our program and forgetting to call things by their proper names.

We can, we must, in certain circumstances, avoid mentioning socialism and anarchy, but only as long as our practice is socialism and anarchy. We may well not speak out against the government, but only as long as we are actually attacking the government; we can steer clear of talk directed against property, but only as long as our practice is expropriation.