

Matters Revolutionary

Errico Malatesta writing to *La Révolte*

October 1890

We have had the following letter from comrade Malatesta:

Dear comrades,

A French-language paper has chosen to dwell upon what I said at the anti-parliamentary conference held in London on 3 August in the hall of the Autonomie Club, and reports me as saying pretty much the opposite of what I actually did say.

Would you allow me to re-state the truth? It might well also provide an opening for a discussion between comrades regarding matters of the utmost interest to the anarchist party.

Here, then, are the thoughts I put to the comrades gathered at the Autonomie—albeit at rather greater length than I was able to express them in the little time afforded to each speaker.

The main topic that the conference had set itself was how to go about ensuring international solidarity in respect of revolutionary activity.

Which boils down to the much-debated question of organization: a matter which has a bearing equally upon international action and national or local activity.

Within the anarchist camp, there are comrades who reject all thought of organization for fear that it lead to the creation of an authority and hobble free initiative. To be sure, all or nearly all of the revolutionary organizations formed in the past have been more or less tainted by authoritarianism; but are we to deduce from that that all organization is, of necessity, authoritarian? Certainly not. An organization is authoritarian where there are some among its membership who are out to wield authority and another faction prepared to defer to it; an organization made up of thoughtful anarchists is, of necessity, libertarian.

I would go further: the very inability to conceive of an authority-free organization is proof that the anarchist idea has yet to sink properly into our heads. Indeed, what is an anarchist society but organization without authority? And if it feasible in the future society when it comes to meeting every human need, why would it not be feasible today between those who understand and have a feeling for Anarchy when it comes to meeting the needs of the fight against the Bourgeoisie?

Authoritarian organization is a menace and damaging to the revolution: it places the entire movement at the mercy of particular thinking, or indeed of the shortcomings and treachery of a handful of leaders; it leaves us wide open to the blows of governments and, worst of all, it schools revolutionaries in abdicating their initiative to the hands of a few, and the people to look to some sort of providence for its salvation.

But non-organization, on the other hand, spells powerlessness and death; it accustoms people to lack of solidarity and hateful rivalry of each against all, and its upshot is inactivity.

Free initiative is certainly progress's great asset; but for it to operate, there still has to be some cognisance of its force. Folk toil and take risks and make sacrifices when they believe that there is some end-product to these things, when they know that what they are doing will be understood, abetted, and followed up by their comrades.

Heroes who act on an idea without a care for what others may say or do, are very few and far between; we need not depend on them. And though their action is never entirely fruitless, still its impact, should it remain isolated, is out of all proportion to the effort expended.

The loner is the most powerless of creatures; and the further we travel down the civilisation, the more overwhelming becomes the part played by cooperation and solidarity in life.

Moreover, all this really comes down to nothing but a quibble.

Should they happen to be men of action, those who preach against organization of any sort will do just what the rest of us will: they will combine their several efforts so as to achieve a thing and strive to widen their circle of friends and come to arrangements and more or less stable relations with the individuals and groups that serve their purpose.

True, they rack their brains to come up with names to take the place of organization, but in actual fact they quite sheepishly engage in organization or attempts at organization. Just like Mr Jourdain who used to churn out prose quite unwittingly.¹

If it were only a quibble over words, this would leave us wholly cold and we should readily allow them to call it by whichever name they deem best. But the fact is that by preaching that Anarchy does not countenance organization, they are doing an injury to the idea in the minds of sensible folk, causing precious time to be wasted on idle controversies and keeping many a comrade in a dither that prevents them from doing a thing.

Besides, as it happens, folk who might have all of the makings of an anarchist but who think we are doomed to impotence (as indeed we would be if we really were to abjure the benefits of association), prefer—making the best of a bad situation—to sign on with the social democrats and other politickers.

And besides, non-organization culminates in an authority which, being unmonitored and unaccountable, is no less of a real authority for all that. Indeed, vigorous types, men of action do not shrink from banding together and organizing so as to amass the strength that springs from cooperation; so all the propaganda directed against organization merely succeeds in making organization the privilege of the few. The bulk of the party, floundering in dis-organization, is naturally led by those who, being united, are strong and who, even though they may not wish it, impose their thinking and their will thanks to their single-mindedness and by the coordination they inject into their propaganda and into their actions.

We want to see free initiative in organization as in every other domain; let each person organize himself as he sees fit, with those who suit him, in accordance with whatever his purpose necessitates and according to affinities of temperament, leanings, and interests; but just as long as there is the least possible number of isolated individuals and squandered energies.

¹ Jourdain is the character of Molière's *The Bourgeois Gentleman*, who aims to rise above his middle-class origins and be accepted as an aristocrat. In his fatuous vanity, he is surprised and delighted to learn that he has been speaking prose all his life without knowing it.

We are certainly not about to give up on organization, which is life and force; on the contrary, we shall strive to develop it so as to become as strong as we may. But, being anarchists and given that we are not out to use it as an instrument of domination, we want all our comrades to strive too to acquire as much strength as they can by tightening the ties that bind them together. And the strength of us all will be the strength of the Revolution and will be the lever with which we shall overturn the bourgeois world.

There is a fear of leaders—and rightly so—but the genuine, the only way of dispensing with leaders is knowing what one wants and how to get it. So the preventive against leaders is the spread of anarchist principles and methods. An anarchist organization has no leaders because it is founded, not upon belief in an individual, but upon a comprehensive understanding of the program on the part of every member of the organization.

And if, even among the anarchists, there are those who blindly follow certain persons, that is a blight attributable to the authoritarian education by which humankind is still oppressed after so many centuries. Such people will find leaders no matter what they may do or where they may be; if they are to be rid of leaders the darkness must first be banished from their minds. There are no two ways about that.

Since the foundation stone and chief bond of an anarchist organization should be the program understood and embraced by all, it might be useful to say something about that program in terms of its comprehensiveness, so as to see what manner of men we might consider as belonging to our party and with whom we must strive to come to agreement and organize.

Plainly, we can work only with fellow anarchists. There are too many differences over aims and methodologies between us and the non-anarchist socialists for agreement to be feasible, especially right now when the latter, swept along by the logic of their methodology, are edging ever closer to the bourgeoisie and virtually forgetting that they are socialists.

But among the anarchists there are factions that differ over their notions about the society of the future. Why should we not all be on the same side provided that we all see eye to eye over how the Revolution is to be prepared and carried out?

We, for instance, are communists; but there are also the anarchist collectivists, who are quite rare in other countries but who are, in Spain, many, well-organized, and very active workers on behalf of the common cause. Needless to say, they are not to be confused with the French “collectivists” who may well be communists but who are primarily authoritarians and parliamentarists, which is to say, anti-anarchists.

Now, like us, these collectivist anarchists dismiss all hope vested in or expediency in parliament and they are for revolution by force. Like us, they seek the expropriation of property-owners by force and the taking in hand and into common ownership of all private and public wealth, by means of direct action by the people. Like us, they want to see governments of any description destroyed, and society reorganized through direct action of the people and without delegation of authority. Like us, they mean to use force to prevent any new form of authority’s tampering with the results of the Revolution.

So why would we not collaborate with one another in our common endeavour?

Between us and them, there are differences galore over matters having to do with how production and distribution should be organized in the society of the future. We communists reckon

that the only solution that can resolve all possible difficulties and conflicts in an egalitarian society, while satisfying cravings for justice and fraternity, is a social organization founded upon the solidarity principle: *From each according to his abilities, to each according to his needs*, meaning that *everything belongs to everybody*.

The collectivists, on the other hand, believe that society will be reorganized in accordance with the fairness principle: *from each according to his abilities, to each according to his handiwork*, meaning that *each owns the product of his work*—a solution we find both unfair and narrow-minded and which is, worst of all (according to communists), unrealizable in practice or at least incapable of surviving without either quickly evolving in the direction of communism or collapsing back into bourgeois practice.

But all of this relates to the post-revolutionary period, and cannot be a dividing line in the struggle we have to wage today. And even after the Revolution such divergence of opinion should produce only a brotherly competition in the bestowal of the greatest social good. Were we an authoritarian party, that is, if it was our aspiration to establish a government and impose our view, then, of course we could only march in step with those who are out to lay down the same decrees, the same laws as us. But since, according to us, it is the people itself and every single person who goes to make the people that should fashion its organization and its accommodation with other factions; it being the spontaneous evolution and unfettered inter-play of needs and enthusiasms and everyone's observation and experimentation that should fashion the shape or shapes of social life, we anarchists, of whatever hue, will need only to preach by example by putting our ideas and solutions to the test of experience.

In social struggles as in scientific research, the method precedes and determines the outcomes. And parties form around what they mean to do rather than around wishes or anticipations.

As a result, it seems to me that all anarchist socialists who espouse the same methods of struggle can be counted as and make up the same party, regardless of matters of reorganization.

Let me close with a few remarks about revolutionary tactics.

We must immerse ourselves in the life of the people as fully as we can; encourage and egg on all stirrings that carry a seed of material or moral revolt and get the people used to handling their affairs for themselves and relying on only their own resources; but without ever losing sight of the fact that revolution, by means of the expropriation and taking of property into common ownership, plus the demolition of authority, represents the only salvation for the proletariat and for Mankind, in which case a thing is good or bad depending on whether it brings forward or postpones, eases or creates difficulties for that revolution.

As we see it, it is a matter of avoiding two reefs: on the one hand, the indifference towards everyday life and struggles that distance us from the people, making us unfathomable outsiders to them—and, on the other, letting ourselves be consumed by those struggles, affording them greater importance than they possess and eventually forgetting about the revolution.

Let us apply this to the question of strikes.

As we are slightly prone to doing, we have stumbled from one exaggeration to another one.

Once upon a time, being convinced that the strike was powerless not only to emancipate but also to bring any lasting improvement to the workers' lot, we were too dismissive of the moral

side of things and, with the exception of a few regions, had left that mighty weapon of propaganda and agitation almost entirely to the authoritarian socialists and the lullaby-singers.

Having recovered from such indifference in the wake of the recent great strikes and above all the London docks strike, which gave one to believe that if the men leading it had had a clear-cut revolutionary outlook and had not been afraid of the responsibility, the dock workers might have been induced to march on the wealthier districts and carry out the revolution. Now there are signs of a tendency to swing too far in the opposite direction, that is, towards unrealistic expectations of strikes, with the strike being almost conflated with revolution.²

This is a very dangerous trend since it conjures up chimerical hopes and the practice is—not so corruptive to be sure, but equally as disappointing and soporific—as parliamentarism itself.

The general strike is preached and this is all to the good; but, as I see it, imagining or announcing that the general strike is the revolution is plain wrong. It would only be a splendid opportunity for making the Revolution, but nothing more. It might be transformed into revolution, but only if the revolutionaries wielded enough influence, enough strength and enough enterprise to drag the workers down the road to expropriation and armed attack, before the effects of hunger, the impact of massacre or concessions from the bosses come along to erode the strikers' morale and bring them to a state of mind (so readily produced among the masses) where they are ready to submit, no matter what the cost, and where anybody calling for all-out struggle comes to be looked upon as an enemy or an agent provocateur.

Moreover, given the current economic and moral circumstances of the worldwide proletariat, I regard an authentic general strike as unachievable; and I hold that the revolution will be carried out well before that strike can be mounted. But big strikes are already afoot and, with the right activity and agreement, even bigger ones could be triggered. This might well be the form in which, in industrialized countries at least, the social revolution will arrive. So we need to be on the lookout so as to cash in on any opportunities that might arise.

No longer should the strike be the warfare of folded arms.

Far from their being made redundant by strikes, rifles and all the means of attack and defence placed at our disposal by science are still instruments of emancipation and will find in strikes a splendid opportunity for advantageous use.

² We already have hereafter part of the arguments that Malatesta would oppose to syndicalism after the turn of the century.

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Errico Malatesta writing to *La Révolte*
Matters Revolutionary
October 1890

The Method of Freedom: An Errico Malatesta Reader, edited by Davide Turcato, translated by Paul Sharkey.

Translated from “Questions révolutionnaires,” *La Révolte* (Paris) 4, no. 4 (4–10 October 1890).

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