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Errico Malatesta  
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16 October 1889

*The Method of Freedom: An Errico Malatesta Reader*, edited by  
Davide Turcato, translated by Paul Sharkey.  
Translated from "La propaganda a fatti," *L'Associazione* (Nice)  
1, no. 2 (16 October 1889).

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# Propaganda by Deeds

One Way of Marking Socialism's Anniversaries

Errico Malatesta

16 October 1889

A comrade writes us:

"It is our custom to mark our anniversaries with gatherings, talks, the putting up of posters and displaying of banners. Indeed we have stood trial and passed many a long month in prison for precisely these things. Meanwhile, as a rule, our gatherings and lectures are usually attended only by comrades who are already believers, our manifestoes are scarcely read and soon torn down, and our banners are poorly understood if at all. So I wonder, given the results produced by these things, whether they are worth the trouble of exposing the bravest of us to the danger of being taken out of circulation for a long time at intervals.

"Something occurs to me. Would it not be a good idea for groups of comrades, on such anniversaries and of course choosing the place, time, and manner likely to have the greatest impact, to burst into

the wealthiest grocery, clothing, footwear stores, etc., and hand out their contents to poor folk passing by or loitering there? And, out in the countryside, could small teams of daring folk not unexpectedly swamp the landowners' warehouses, invite the peasants to follow suit and grab and carry home some wheat, oil, wine, tools, and everything to be found there?

“And if, in the doing of these things, our principles will be spoken of and manifestoes distributed to explain the action, tell of past struggles, and hint at the battles and victories in the near future, then the event of which we are celebrating the anniversary will indeed be etched into people's minds and will serve as propaganda and example.

“True, we shall often have dangers and commitments to grapple with; but that is no reason not to try. If we can compromise ourselves over matters of paltry or questionable usefulness, why could we not when it is a matter of securing big and certain outcomes? Besides, if a modicum of prudence and skill can be added to the enthusiasm, it is much easier to get away with matters that easily gain the complicity of the crowd, instead of those that leave the crowd uninvolved and indifferent. And getting away with something, when one can, is always a good thing, because then one can move on to something else.”

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We whole-heartedly endorse our correspondent's suggestion and commend it to all other comrades so that each of them may do whatever he can to implement it.

We have been stymied for a long time by an obsession with doing things on a grand scale.

We have wasted years constantly hatching ventures, which then never came to fruition, or, worse yet, waiting for others to hatch them.

Let us at last set about the real, practical, useful work : let us do whatever we can, but let us do it.

Some things that are in themselves insignificant, if repeated over and over and in lots of places are of more use than important things that are done once every ten years.

We shall never weary of stating it: the great revolution, the mass uprising will come as the result of relentless propaganda and an exceptional number of individual and collective revolts.

ever they may be and removed from their setting and natural center of activity; an extensive organization operating along authoritarian lines is needed; and expert leaders of some prestige are required. Then, once all the difficulties have been surmounted, the band takes to the field, to find the ground not prepared and is scattered and defeated before the people even get to learn what it is that the band wanted!

Meanwhile, the bulk of the support, unable to take part in the band, looks on impassively, useless as far as the attempted revolt is concerned.

It really is a truism that new things require new methods.

We want a popular revolution, made through the handiwork of all the willing, with no leaders imposed; so we need to embrace methods accessible to all and to accommodate every attitude and support.

In place of the classical band—formal, solemn, no longer reflecting the conditions and the party's aspirations, and made ever more difficult by changing topographical, military, and political conditions in the area—which comes together once and then goes ten or twenty years without being put to the test, let us have the unfettered, spontaneous, and unrelenting action of individuals and groups.

There is another sort of band that can still be put together anywhere, be it in the village or in the city, and requires no assets or only those assets that it procures for itself: this is the, so to speak, free-wheeling, temporary band that comes together in order to carry out a specific act and disbands as soon as it has been done, even before the authorities have had wind of it or been able to take steps.

We should practice that sort of band arrangement wherever individual action is inadequate or ineffective, pending the day when we can take to the streets with the masses of the people to deliver the coup de grace.

In fact, the sort of action the comrade proposes strikes us as so fruitful and so easy that we should like to see it carried out not just on anniversaries but at any time, everywhere.

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Action of this sort offers the double advantage of a direct assault on property and of being feasible for all, and applicable, in however varied a form, always and everywhere.

Private ownership is the foundation upon which the entire edifice of exploitation, oppression, infamy, corruption, hate, vice, criminality, and warfare making up much vaunted modern civilisation rests. Above all else, we must destroy private ownership.

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The property prejudice with which priests, moralists, law-makers, and politicians have striven down the ages to imbue men right from the cradle, lives on those who suffer its murderous consequences.

In strikes, for example, we very often find ourselves faced with men of vigor who thrash or slay bosses and foremen; we have seen, for instance in Montceau-les-Mines, in France, working men dispatched to prison by the dozens for having tossed bombs into the homes of engineers and administrators; and we have seen, as we have in Belgium, mobs of rebellious miners manhandling the bourgeois, setting fire to the mines, and for days at a time being masters of large districts including wealthy cities—but we have never seen such strikers seizing goods and homes and proving that they have understood that the bosses are useless bloodsuckers and that everything that is has been created by them and belongs to them.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The episodes at Montceau-les-Mines, a company-town near Lyons, occurred in 1882, when the town's mines were hard hit by a recession. An

The sort of working man who defies the boss and uses a knife to repay him for the lengthy martyrdom he inflicts upon his wage slaves is not so rare. But the one that blithely makes off with the boss's belongings, with the calm and contented conscience of one who knows that he is merely exercising his rights is very, very rare. Impelled by need, the working man carries off whatever he can, but does so in shame, in the belief that he is doing wrong; and what should be an act of revolt in pursuit of demands remains common thievery and degrades one's character and dignity.

This business of ownership is one of the greatest prejudices and we have to bend all of our efforts to destroying it.

War, out and out war on property!

The people must get it into their head that the approaching revolution is going to be the revolution of the wretched, of the starvelings and that, wherever possible, it should have a foretaste of its benefits. Therein lies the success of the revolution, the assurance of the future, the salvation of humanity.

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How much there is that could be done with just a little good will, a little get-up-and-go, a little imagination!

An employer is handing out wages to his workers: one strong man would be enough to wrestle his strongbox away from him and to toss all the cash it contains to his comrades.

A landlord shows up to collect his rents: what would it take to send him tumbling down the stairs, albeit unbeknownst to the poor widow or the ailing pauper, from the mouths of whose children the vulture was about to snatch the bread?

organization known as the Black Band sent warning letters to managers and government officials, then began resorting to direct action. Twenty-three men were arrested and brought to trial. In Belgium, large strikes for better salaries and universal suffrage occurred in 1886 among the miners of the Borinage area, Liège, and Charleroi. The agitations were bloodily repressed by the army, under general Van der Smissen's command.

Carts belonging to some landlord or speculator arrive to collect the harvest that has cost the poor farmer such a lot of sweat: it would take only a few people who had come to a prior arrangement between themselves to seize those carts and divide their loads between the neediest families.

A tax collector makes his rounds, from house to house: how much effort would it require to dump him at the bend in some lonely street?

A landlord has evicted his share-cropper or his tenant for failure to pay his dividend or rent: might it not be good practice to present his heirs with a terrifying example of the vengeance of the oppressed?

There are, in our country districts especially, bulls and rams being fattened for our masters' tables; why not butcher one when the opportunity presents itself and invite the scurvy, anaemic peasants to help themselves to a bit of the meat they so sorely need? And if, on the first occasion, these wretches do not dare show up, why not bring the wholesome food to their very hovels? The *carabinieri* simply cannot be everywhere... and then again, they too are flesh and blood, and if they realize that people mean business, they know how to keep off.

But why be drawn into further examples? Once embarked upon the path of conscious independent action, anyone, if he has the will, will be able to set himself a task and find the comrades he may need.

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Time now to own up to more mistakes.

Once upon a time we raised bands of armed men.

The band, in the classical sense of the word, and this is the sense in which we practised it, is a war party; it takes strong-arm methods, chosen weapons and specially trained personnel. It is very hard to do, but vital that that preparation is shrouded in strict secrecy; the personnel have to be chosen from wher-