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Resistance Societies

Errico Malatesta

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The resistance society is the workers' association for defending their own interests against the contrary interests of the capitalists.

Workers in the same trade, or from various trades attached to the same firm, band together and fight to improve their pay and other working conditions, or in order to stop the master from making existing conditions worse, as well as to protect any of them who may be personally singled out for injustice and annoyance. And, in order to add vim to their struggle and marshal the resources of all behind whatever section of them may from time to time be involved, these various groupings, conscious of the ever-growing solidarity of interests between workers of every trade and every land, progressively band together into local, national, and international federations for each trade, and into general federations of workers from amalgamated trades.

The normal weapon available to the resistance societies—besides the moral respect that is always obtained by men who have shown themselves capable of understanding and defending their own rights—is the strike, which is to say, the refusal to work.

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The meaning and the economic and moral implications of strikes need scrutiny if we are to avoid illusions—which are followed by inevitable disappointments and bring loss of heart and indifference—and unjustified scepticism, which leads to blithe acceptance of all bullying and reduces the worker to the most humiliating dejection.

If the worker were an animal (as all too often he still is), short of intelligence and bereft of willpower, and if there were no forces in society beyond the economic one, the strike would serve no purpose.

Capitalists and the propertied have control over all means of subsistence; they regulate production, they rule the market and set prices. The workers, always threatened by hunger the moment they lack work and always in danger of being replaced by other unemployed workers and compelled by poverty to any act of vileness, must of necessity endure the conditions it pleases the masters to impose.

If, by some extraordinary effort, helped by the competition of one employer with another and profiting from exceptional circumstances, the workers managed to obtain some improvement, it would only be temporary and would soon turn into a vanished illusion.

If it is an increase in wages (besides the master's being always able to withdraw the increase as soon as the circumstances that helped the strike have passed), it so happens that the price of consumer goods rise in proportion and therefore the increase in wages would only be nominal and nothing would have changed. If it is a reduction in work hours, the master hits back by introducing new machines and making work more intense and wearisome; moreover, after the introduction of the new machines, he might still seize upon the first favorable circumstance to reintroduce the old hours and fire part of his workforce, thereby making any future resistance harder because of the swelling numbers of the unemployed. In the case of a solidarity strike in defense of

comrades unjustly targeted, the master would not fail to seek opportunities for revenge and would definitely find one, come the first depression in the market.

In short, in a society where a few have it all and the rest have nothing, those who have nothing are allowed to live only because it suits the former, and in return for their labor, they receive the minimum required to allow them to render the services demanded of them. This tendency of wages to fall to the minimum necessary to survive and reproduce has been described as the iron law of wages.

But none of this is wholly true unless, as we stated, the workers had no consciousness, no will, and no capacity to resist—in which case even striking would not be possible, and humanity would stay forever divided into two unequal parts: a handful of ferocious, grasping oppressors and a mass of abjectly servile slaves.

The mere fact that strikes happen shows that the workers have a certain awareness of their rights and there is a level of suffering past which they refuse to go. This is why the strike has become such an important factor in the history of the emancipation of proletarians.

While it is true that the capitalists control all means of subsistence and can call upon the entire machinery of the state to guarantee their possession and unimpeded use of those means—without which the workers can neither work nor survive—it is also true that the workers have greater numbers and that they alone have the effective capacity to produce. Ultimately, therefore, there is no doubt that, if the workers wanted, they could demand the entire product of their labors and thus radically transform the existing social order.

Meanwhile, the facts are these: the masters are out to exploit the workers as much as possible, and the workers strive to secure as much as they can of their products for their own consumption; the masters are out to reduce the workers to slave

status, and the workers to achieve the dignity of free men. And at a given point the real life conditions of the workers, all else being equal, hinges upon the degree of resistance they are capable of putting up against the pretensions of the masters.

These days such resistance mainly takes the form of the strike or the threat of strike.

On examining the history and statistics of strikes we find that, on most occasions, the workers have either been forced to settle for negotiations or have been completely routed—and if one considers the enormous expense incurred and huge suffering endured during the strike and the wages lost, it could reasonably be argued that strikes are, broadly speaking, damaging to workers.

But to get the proper measure of this issue, we need to bear in mind what the workers' conditions would be if strikes never took place, and to observe the conditions in those countries where labor resistance is unknown or still in its infancy, like Italy. In reality the strike is forced on the worker, on pain of seeing his bread gradually whittled away, until he lives as the Chinese and Blacks do. The fact that the masters know that they cannot exploit the worker beyond a given limit without triggering a backlash damaging to their own interests is what sets a limit upon exploitation; and if, say, the Parisian worker is not reduced to eating rotten polenta like the Lombard peasants, if he does not live in the beastly conditions of the Apulian peasants, it is simply because he would not accept such living conditions.

The same applies to strikes as to political upheavals and revolutions. Those mounting them usually lose their freedom, or their lives, or at least their tranquillity, but it is only because of these upheavals, or the fear of them, that governments concede a little more freedom. Without revolutions we would still be under the lash of the Inquisition; and now, precisely because there has been no revolution for so long and there is no visi-

ble disposition to make one, we are gradually reverting to that condition.

So the strike is a good way for the worker to cling to a given measure (however small) of well-being. It is, at any rate, an inevitable fact of life for the proletarian, if he does not want to sink into an ever lower and more beastly standard of living.

The strike and, even more, the strike's preparations unite workers as brothers, get them used to reflecting upon their conditions, open their eyes to the causes of social wretchedness, and, while uniting them in the pursuit of immediate gains, prepare them for the future emancipation.

However, we should not believe that strikes suffice to solve the social question, or even improve the conditions of all workers in a serious and enduring way.

No matter how determined the workers might be to rebel against living conditions that fall below a certain standard, with production organized as it presently is, there are even stronger circumstances at work crushing all possible resistance. The swelling numbers of the unemployed, crises, and relocation of industries will persist as long as private property and production for profit endure, and poverty will merely swing between a highest and a lowest point without ever going away, forcing workers to travel the same painful road over and over again.

So, while they wage the daily struggle of labor resistance, the resistance societies must also aim at a higher and more general target: the transformation of the system of ownership and production. They must prepare the workers for the great fight and equip them to someday perform those functions in the life of society that are carried out today, to the workers' detriment, by capitalists and rulers.