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Errico Malatesta
The Armed Strike
2 June 1902

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We are promised the likely appearance of a new Spanish-language anarchist newspaper, entitled *The Armed Strike*.

Its title defines its program.

Whether the planned publication comes off or not, we hope that the title will be taken up and become the motto of a brand new approach to revolutionary tactics. Words and slogans are of great importance in popular movements; and the expression “armed strike” may prove very useful, in that it is the happiest encapsulation of a pressing need at the present time. And it is good that it has come from Spain where there is already a mass of organized and conscious workers who have already shown what they are worth and who are better placed than anyone else to demonstrate the new tactics by practical example.

The propaganda for the general strike has done and is still doing an immense amount of good.

By pointing out to workers an effective means with which they can emancipate themselves, it demolishes blind and harmful belief in parliamentary and legislative methods; it banishes from the workers’ movement the ambitious types on the look-out for a springboard to power; it provides revolutionaries with the means

of involving the great toiling masses in the struggle and poses that struggle in such terms that a radical transformation of social relations must naturally and well-nigh automatically ensue.

But the big benefits of this propaganda and the success it has had, have given rise to a grave danger that threatens the very cause it promotes.

The illusion has been forming that the revolution can be made almost peaceably, by folding one's arms and reducing the bosses to discretion by simply refusing to work for them. And by dint of repetition of the great importance of the economic struggle, it has been all but overlooked that, beside and defending the boss who keeps us hungry, there is the government that famishes and kills.

In Barcelona, in Trieste, in Belgium, the price of this illusion has already been paid in the blood of the people.¹ The strike has almost entirely been mounted without arms and without any definite intention of deploying what very few there were—and with a few volleys the governments have restored order.

When thought of as merely a law-abiding, peaceful strike, the general strike is a nonsensical idea.

To begin with, given the proletariat's circumstances and the specific nature of farm production, it can be *general* only in a manner of speaking; in actuality, it will merely be the handiwork of a more forward-looking minority—a forceful minority capable of deploying its moral and material energies on the steering of events—but it will always be a numerically tiny minority that could only have a brief impact on the scales of production and consumption.

¹ In February 1902, a strike of the Barcelona metal workers developed into a city-wide general strike, during which about thirty workers were killed in street fighting. In Trieste, it was a strike of the stokers at Lloyd Austriaco's shipping company that gave rise to a general strike in the city. A great demonstration took place on 15 February 1902, at the end of which fourteen workers were left dead. In Belgium, a general strike against the plural vote system was called on 13 April 1902. On the night of 18 April, the civil guard fired into a crowd of protestors, injuring fourteen and killing six.

But even if we supposed the strike to be authentically general, that would make things even more nonsensical—provided, we say again, that it be thought of in terms of a lawful, peaceable movement.

What would there be to eat? What would be used to purchase life's necessities?

The workers will have starved to death well before the bourgeois are forced to give up any morsel of their surplus.

So, if one wants to mount a general strike, one has to be ready to seize possession of the means of existence, despite any of the alleged rights of private ownership. But then along come the troops and one must flee or fight.

So, if we know that the strike will necessarily lead to a clash with armed force and turn into a revolution, why not say so and make our preparations?

Must this inept farce of periodical clashes, in which proletarian deaths are numbered in the hundreds with scarcely a soldier or policeman struck by a stone, carry on for all eternity?

Let us go on strike, but let us do so in circumstances in which we can defend ourselves. Since the police and the troops show up wherever a clash between bosses and workers occurs, let us ensure that we are in a position to command their respect.

Revolutionaries should arm themselves so that they are ready to make the revolution whenever the opportunity arises. Non-revolutionary workers should arm themselves as well, if only to avoid being beaten like so many sheep.

Even with their savings, proletarians will never be in a position to amass the capital needed to fight the bosses' capital; but with a modicum of good will they may well get their hands on a revolver. And a mob of strikers armed with revolvers or any other weapons commands a lot more respect than one blessed with a strike fund, no matter how swollen.

Long live the general strike, but let it be an ARMED STRIKE.