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The European War and the International Workers' Organization

Errico Malatesta

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Once again the threat of a general war hangs over Europe. While the diplomats boasted that they had successfully localized the Greco-Turkish conflict, and now that peace should be on the agenda, the natural and predictable claims of a victorious Turkey are still playing on the poorly concealed rivalries between the European powers, and conjuring up what may be the greatest threat of war we have known in recent times.

War between the civilized peoples of Europe would be an immense disaster: a disaster not just in terms of lives extinguished and ruins piled up, but even more in terms of the poisonous passions it arouses, the patriotic pride that it feeds, and the long trail of hatreds and resentments it leaves in its wake.

It is true that war, by shaking the structure of the State and, in the vanquished country, destroying the prestige of army and government, can, in certain circumstances, present a suitable occasion for radical political and social changes—and, should such circum-

stances arise, we hope that the proletariat and advanced parties of the various countries will profit from them.

But it is above all true that the patriotic sentiment, in the direst sense of the word, and bloodthirsty instincts are far from spent forces and that they return with renewed vigor every time the cannon roars and the blood flows.

In Italy, in the wake of Abba Garima, we have indeed had an explosion of popular revulsion and a widespread clamor for peace, but that was because the Italian soldiers were shamefully thrashed, and, besides, the victorious foe was a long way off and in no position to pose a threat to the soil of the fatherland. If, instead, victory had gone to Italian arms, the whole of Italy would have been traversed by delight in and enthusiasm for war. Let us remember the lyricism of *all* parties, except the socialists, when Africa seemed to hold out the promise of glory and wealth; and let us remember the people's enthusiasm when, prior to the final and irreversible defeat, every skirmish, no matter how insignificant, was reported as a glorious victory. Violent, inept, and immoral though he may be, Crispi was able to lord it over Italy and, maybe, but for the Abyssinians he still would be, simply because he had successfully stroked Italians' pride with his "grand politics."

And Italy is, in terms of her deepest masses, maybe the least patriotic people in the World!

So a social revolution mounted in a time of war or in the presence of the foreign invader is always very hard and, even should it come to pass, readily degenerates into out-and-out political and nationalist turmoil.

War is a threat forever hanging over the head of the European proletariat, a menace to progress, a threat to our finest hopes. It may erupt now over the Eastern Question, or later over some other issue, but it is the inevitable end towards which Europe's states are striding and through which they will look for a solution to the inextricable political and financial difficulties in which they are becoming more and more embroiled. It is true that governments them-

selves fear it because its outcomes are unpredictable and especially because of the domestic consequences it may have in the different states, but they are driven on by necessity. And besides, war is still the last, the ultimate weapon in the arsenal of states in diverting the people's attention away from social issues and halting the menacing self-organization of the proletariat in time.

Only a solid determination by the proletarians to refuse to fight one another for the greater glory of their masters can, and should, prevent war and consign this vestige of barbarism once and for all to the dismal memories of the past.

It is almost banal to state that war cannot be waged if the people are against it, but our entire propaganda is made up of this kind of banality: persuading the people that they can have what they want, if only they learn how to want it consciously and steadfastly.

It is the people that wage war because it is them that supply the soldiery, the people that lay on the transport and supply lines. If, at the mere rumor of war, soldiers refused to march; or the workers in the shipyards and arms plants struck; or the railway employees refused to help transporting troops, materials, and food supplies to the theaters of war; or the miners stopped mining and the haulers stopped ferrying the coal used for the railroads, the navy, and military workshops, there would be no more possibility of wars.

Years ago, anti-militarist propaganda among the people was more active than it is today. In 1870, there were international solidarity demonstrations mounted by German and French workers, which might not be the case today. There too, the influence of parliamentarism within socialism has had its damaging effect.

At the Brussels socialist Congress in 1891, the Dutchman Domela Nieuwenhuis proposed that the military strike should be written into the socialist program: meaning that in the event of war, they would refuse to serve. But he was defeated by the democratic socialists and ridiculed in every socialist mouthpiece, great and small, obedient to the word going out from Berlin.

At the 1896 London Congress, in order to oppose war, the *Allemanist*¹ revolutionary socialists and the anarchists proposed a general strike of every organized trade whose labors are needed for the army to wage war, but they were unable to get the social-democrats to even do them the courtesy of debating the matter.

“Utopias!” came the contemptuous cry from the *practical* men of parliamentary socialism; and utopias they will indeed remain until the people have attained a certain degree of consciousness and organization. But until the people say no, everything, even the most anodyne reform, is utopian; and sooner or later we have to start asserting and spreading these utopias, if they are to enter into the popular consciousness and become practical possibilities and living realities!

Or do they wait, before opposing international slaughter, until they have a parliamentary majority that denies the ministry the credits it needs? Is that a utopia, or a chimera?

But even now around Europe there are telltale signs of better times ahead.

In England, Belgium, France, and Germany, the miners are more and more tightening the bonds of international solidarity; in those very same countries, the new “International Federation of Ship, Dock and River Workers”—which brilliantly fought its first economic dispute in the recent strike in Hamburg docks—is gaining in strength and importance.²

¹ The Allemanists, named after their leader Jean Allemane, were a branch of French socialists. In 1890, they broke away from the Possibilists, the followers of Paul Brousse, to form a party of their own. The two factions were equally opposed to the Marxist orthodoxy of the Guesdists, which subordinated the labor struggle to the political struggle. However, whereas the Possibilists prioritized trade union gains made under capitalism, the Allemanists looked upon the unions and the general strike as powerful means of revolutionary action.

² The Federation, which was presided by Malatesta’s British friend, Tom Mann, promoted the dockers’ organization on an international basis. The Hamburg dockers conducted a great strike that lasted eleven weeks, from November 1896 to February 1897.

In France, the railway workers constitute a mighty organization, which makes no secret of its revolutionary tendencies and has already, with the threat of a strike, managed to force the government to withdraw a bill intended to take the rights of association and strike away from workers on the railways (which in France belong almost entirely to the State).

This is the right way, the only way to make wars impossible: by furthering organization of the proletariat and extending it to every country.

Meanwhile, with every outbreak of patriotic incitement, let us, as one voice, shout: Long live brotherhood between peoples; long live the Workers’ International.