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The First of May

Errico Malatesta

1 May 1893

For the third time the thinking proletariat of all countries affirms by means of an international demonstration, true solidarity among the workers, hatred of exploitation, and the will, which from day to day grows more determined, to bring the existing system of things to an end.

Governments and the classes tremble, and they have good reason. Not because on this day the revolution will break out—for that is an event which may happen on any day in the year—but because when the oppressed people begin to feel the weight and the shame of oppression, when they feel themselves brothers, when they forget all the historic hatreds fomented by the governing classes, when they clasp hands across frontiers and feel solidarity in the struggle for a common emancipation, then is the day of deliverance close at hand.

What matters it that men and parties give various reason now-a-days as to their immediate ends, and according to the profit that they hope to derive from them? The main fact remains that the workers announce that they are all united, and are of one accord in the struggle against masters. This fact remains, and will remain, as one of the most important events of the century, and as one of the signs heralding the

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Great Revolution—a revolution which will bring to birth a new civilisation founded on the welfare of all, and the solidarity of labour: It is a fact, the importance of which is only equalled in the present day by that other proletarian announcement of international association among the workers.

And the movement is the most significant as being the direct work of the masses, and quite apart from and even in opposition to the action of parties.

When the State Socialists in the Paris Congress of 1889, called the 1st of May a day of *international strike*, it was merely one of those platonic definitions that are made at congresses just to state a principle, and which are forgotten as soon as the congress is over. Perhaps they thought further that such a decision might help to give importance to their party, and to be useful to certain men as an electoral top; for unhappily these people seem to have hearts that can only beat with enthusiasm for election purposes. In any case it remains certain that from the moment they perceived that the idea had made headway, and that the demonstrations became imposing and threatened to draw them into revolutionary paths, they endeavoured to check the movement and take away from it the significance with which popular instinct had endowed it. To prove this, one need but recollect the efforts that have been made to shift the demonstration from the first *day* of May to the first *Sunday* in May. Since it is not the rule to work at all on Sunday, to speak of suspension of labour on that day is simply a farce and a fraud. It is no longer a strike, no longer a means of asserting the solidarity of the workers and their power of resisting the orders of the employers. It remains nothing but a *fête* or holiday—a little marching about, a few speeches, a few indifferent resolutions, passed with applause from larger or smaller meetings—that is all! And in order still more effectually to kill the movement which they unthinkingly started, they have got so far as to want to ask the Government to declare the 1st of May an official holiday!

Then LONG LIVE the 1st May!

It is not, as we have said, the revolution day, but it remains all the same a good opportunity for the propagation of our ideas, and for turning men's minds towards the social revolution.

The consequence of all these lulling tactics is that the masses who at first threw themselves into the movement with enthusiasm are beginning to lose confidence in it, and are coming to regard the 1st of May as a mere annual parade, only different from other traditional parades as being duller and more of a bore.

It is for revolutionists to save this movement, which might at some time or other give occasion for most important consequences, and which in any case is always a powerful means of propaganda which it would be folly to give up.

Among Anarchists and Revolutionists there are some who take no interest in the movement, some who even object to it because the first impulse, in Europe at least, was given by the parliamentary Socialists who used the demonstrations as a means of obtaining public powers, the legal eight hours day, international legislation with regard to labour, and other reforms which we know to be mere baits, serving only to deceive the people, and divert them from putting in substantial claims, or else to appease them when they menace the Government and the proprietary classes.

These objectors are wrong in our opinion. Popular movements begin how they *can*; nearly always they spring from some idea already transcended by contemporary thought. It is absurd to hope that in the present condition of the proletariat the great mass are capable before they stir of conceiving and accepting a programme formulated by a small number to whom circumstances have given exceptional means of development, a programme which can only come to be consciously accepted by the great number through the action of moral and material conditions which the movement itself must supply. If we wait to plunge into the fray until the people mount the Anarchist Communist colours, we shall run great risk of remaining eternal dreamers; we shall see the tide of history flow at our feet while scarcely contributing anything toward determining its course, leaving a free field meanwhile to our adversaries who

are the enemies, conscious or unconscious, of the true interests of the people.

Our flag we must mount ourselves, and we ought to carry it high wherever there are people who suffer, particularly wherever there are people who show that they are tired of suffering, and are struggling in any way good or bad against oppression and exploitation.

Workers who suffer, but who understand little or nothing of theories, workers who are hungry and cold, who see their children pine and die of starvation, who see their wives and sisters take to prostitution, workers who know themselves to be marching straight to the workhouse or the hospital—these have no time to wait, and are naturally disposed to prefer any immediate amelioration no matter what—even a transitory or an illusory one, since illusion so long as it lasts passes for reality. Yes, rather this than wait for a radical transformation of society which shall destroy forever the *causes* of wretchedness and of man's injustice to man.

This is easy to understand and to justify, and it explains why the constitutional parties who exploit this tendency by speaking always of pretended reforms as “practicable” and “possible,” and of partial but *immediate* improvements generally succeed better than we do in their propaganda among the masses.

But where the workers make a mistake (and it is for us to set them right) is in supposing that reforms and improvements are more easy to get than the abolition of the wage system and the complete emancipation of the worker.

In a society based upon an antagonism of interests, where one class retains all social wealth and is organised in political power in order to defend its own privileges, poverty and the subjection of the disinherited masses always tend to reach the highest maximum compatible with the bare existence of man and with the interests of the ruling class. And this tendency meets with no obstacle except in the resistance of the oppressed: oppression and exploitation never stop till that point

is reached at which the workers show themselves determined to endure no more of it.

If small concessions are obtained instead of great ones, it is not because they are easier to get, but because the people content themselves with them.

It has always been by means of force or of fear that anything has been won from the oppressors; it has always been force or fear that has hindered the oppressors from taking back what they have granted.

The eight hours' day and other reforms—be their worth what it may—can only be obtained when men show themselves resolved to take them by force, and will bring no improvement to the lot of the workers unless these are determined no longer to suffer what they are suffering to-day.

Wisdom then, and even *opportunism*, requires that we do not waste time and energy on soothing reforms, but struggle for the complete emancipation of all—an emancipation which can only become a reality through the putting of wealth in common, and by the abolition of governments.

This is what Anarchists have to explain to the people, but in order to do so they must not disdainfully hold aloof, but join the masses and struggle along with them, pushing them forward by reasoning and example.

Besides, in countries where the disinherited have tried for a strike on May 1st they have forgotten the “8 hours,” and the rest, and the 1st May has had all the significance of a revolutionary date, on which the workers of the whole world count their forces and promise one another to be unanimous in the approaching days of decisive battle.

On the other hand, governments work hard to remove all illusion which anyone may cherish, as to the intervention of public powers in favour of the workers; for instead of concessions, all that has been obtained up to the present time have been wholesale arrests, charges of cavalry, and discharge of firearms!—murder and mutilation!