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Le Rétif
The Illegals
June 20, 1908

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The Illegals

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Armand's conviction in Paris for counterfeiting has brought back the old question of the Illegals.

I don't know Armand or the details of his affair. And so without showing any particular interest in his personality — towards which I only feel that sentiment of fraternity that binds all the militants of the idea — I will simply pose questions of principle.

What should our attitude be towards Illegals (in the economic sense of the word, i.e., people living off illicit labor) and particularly towards the comrades in that category?

The answer seems so clear to me that if I hadn't heard numerous discussions on this subject — and even in our circle — the idea of writing this article would never have occurred to me.

We approve and admire the anti-militarist who either by desertion or by some other means refuses to serve the Masters' Fatherland and in so doing puts himself in open struggle against society, whose law he violates: that of military service, otherwise known as servitude owed the state.

After this, how can we disavow that other comrade whose temperament bows as little before the regime of the workshop as the anti-militarist bows before that of the barracks and who, by some

illegal method puts himself in revolt against the law of the slavery of work?

Every revolt is in essence anarchist. And we should stand alongside the economic rebel (when he is conscious, of course) the same way we stand beside the political, antimilitarist or propagandist rebel.

All rebels, through their acts, are one of us. Anarchism is a principle of struggle: it needs fighters and not servants the way statist socialism does, a machine with complicated gears that has only to allow itself to vegetate in order to live in a bourgeois fashion.

But it seems proper to me to trace a limit. I said above “economic rebel,” for if the Duvals and the Pinis, who steal because they can’t submit to the oppression of the bosses, are our people, it isn’t the same for many so-called anarchists who have paraded through the various criminal courts over the past few years. Theft is often nothing but an act of cowardice and weakness, for he who commits it has no other goal than that of escaping work, while at the same time escaping the difficulties of social struggle. Before the jury, instead of being a common criminal the burglar or the counterfeiter declares himself an “anarchist” in the hope of being interesting or appearing the martyr to a cause he knows nothing about. He finds nothing better to respond to the judge who condemns him but the traditional and a bit banal “*Vive l’anarchie!*” But if this cry in other mouths has taken on a powerful resonance, it has here a flimsy title to our solidarity.

For our part these unfortunates deserve neither sympathy nor antipathy. They aren’t rebels, but escapists. They have clumsily escaped from the social melee. More clever, more daring, or luckier they would have “arrived” and become bankers, functionaries or merchants — in a word, honest men. They would have legislated against us like vulgar Clemenceaus and without hesitation would have sent their unlucky brethren to the penal colonies. Such shipwrecks denote so much weakness and powerlessness that they can only inspire pity.

Between them and the militant who steals though *revolt* the distance is as great as that between a revolutionary terrorist and the highway murderer who kills a shepherd in order to steal ten *sous* from him. One is a rebel of conscience, the other a rebel by powerlessness or bad luck. The act of the former is an act of revolt; the act of the latter is that of a brute too stupid to imagine better.

To stand alongside economic rebels does not in the least mean preaching theft or erecting it into a tactic. This method has so many drawbacks that preaching it would be madness. It is *admissible* and nothing more. Noting this simply means acting as an anarchist who doesn’t fear that what he says will be heard, and having the courage to take his reasoning to its limits.

Admissible, and nothing else. For the anarchist, if he doesn’t care about bourgeois legality and honesty, must above all aim at preserving himself as long as possible for action and realizing to the greatest extent possible for himself the life he desires. His work, rather than appearing harmful and destructive, should be a work of life, a long apostolate of stubborn labor, of goodness, of love. In order to partake of the ambiance, the new man, the man of the future must live with goodness, fraternity, and love. In this way, when he will have passed he will have left behind him a trail of sympathy and astonishment that will do more for propaganda than a whole life of petty and shady struggles could have done.

But to work at his labor of life and to preserve himself *all* means are good, for in order to reach the summits of clarity the route is often dark.