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Anarchism and the Unemployed

Max Nettlau

1908

Dear Comrade,—May I make a few remarks on Anarchism and the unemployed? A problem of suffering humanity ought not to be considered from an exclusive propaganda standpoint but at the same time none of our ideas ought to be relegated, even temporarily, to the background. We believe that our ideas will help us to find an adequate solution for all such problems, only our own different personal dispositions make us sometimes disagree on these proposed solutions, which, after all, experience alone can verify.

Thus I fail to see that authoritarian measures can ever lead to any good; and compulsory taxation, which the proposed levies from the rich would practically amount to, and a National Convention, which would be another majority-ruled, time-wasting Parliamentary assembly, are weapons which our enemies would soon use against ourselves, the absolute opponents, if anything, of compulsion and majority rule. If the French Revolution resorted to authoritarian measures it was digging its own grave thereby, undermining and destroying the spirit of freedom hardly roused in the people; and it

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prepared the way for increased authority, culminating soon in the dictatorship of Bonaparte, the military leader.

The present unemployed movement is about to lead to a considerable extension of State Socialism, which, as we all know, simply means new strength added to the existing State machinery, new links forged to the chains of the workers. The Right Honorable ex-John Burns lays down the principle: work for the capitalist in periods of brisk trade and full employment; work for the municipalities and the State in periods of slack trade and want of employment. This will soon be achieved by creating the frame and machinery of permanent relief works, and what with old-age pensions and workhouses—not forgetting the attractions held out by the recruiting sergeant—the worker will be like a caged squirrel in a permanent grinding mill from cradle to grave, and all will be for the best in this best of all possible worlds. He will linger in that state of abject dependency and semi-starvation which so admirably keeps down his spirit and perpetuates his enslavement.

What can we do against this? “Back to the land” is a beautiful cry, but it is of no avail in the present situation. To the few of us who are fortunate enough to know the sunny side of country life, such a cry is enchanting. But to the mass of town-bred people it has lost its meaning; and those labourers who from village tyranny took refuge in the towns are not too eager either to heed that cry. Again, a man competent in his trade does not wish to give it up and to begin afresh as an inexperienced toiler on barren soil, having to create almost all out of nothing. This seldom succeeds even among the enthusiasts whom their ideas and the fellowship of comrades support when an agricultural Communist colony is formed. How is it to succeed with people whose energies the miseries of unemployment have already somewhat crushed “Back to the land,” then, is a solution for the few who really want it, not a general remedy.

There, is too much looking-for *general* remedies. As Anarchists, we reject laws because they pretend to be general, uniform solutions applied to given questions. From the same standpoint we are opposed to generalising of any description. To classify a man as an unemployed, to create a special position for him, means simply to perpetuate the unemployed class and to absorb it into some department of the huge State machinery. To us, an unemployed is, before all, a man who belongs, first, to the circle of his family and his friends; second, to that of his fellow workers of the same trade; and lastly only, to that mixed and confused agglomeration, the Unemployed. We ought to try to disentangle the webs by which, they are gradually being encircled, and out of men become particles of some State-supported relief body, if they are not sucked up by that ever-greedy consumer of men, the Army.

How can anything be practically done in this direction? The moment anything becomes what is termed a general problem, nearly everybody ceases to take an interest in it, knowing that either this or that part of the State machinery or representative assemblies will deal with it, and a private person has only to submit and pay; or that ambitious people and busybodies will take the matter up, and they also strive to hand it over to public bodies, after having gained some notoriety out of it. It is for us to emphasise that the unemployed problem is not such a general problem which every private person can but leave untouched, but that much, if not all, can be achieved by real private and personal energy, the best kind of direct action. There are certainly in this country as many groups and organized bodies—each possessing a certain, however small, sphere of influence—as there are unemployed; on the other hand, most of the unemployed are or have been in touch with circles of friends, of fellow workers, etc. Our appeal ought to go to all these numberless groupings of people, to let each one try to do something, not for *the* unemployed, but for a proportional number of unemployed, for *one* unemployed if the respective

limits of influence extend no further. *Individual effort exercised by collectivities*—that seems the right way to handle this problem, and not to let it drift, by tacitly approving authoritarian measures, until the unemployed are fitted in as a permanent body of half-enslaved men into the mechanism of the capitalist State.

If this way of action, or rather of advice, be practised on ever so small a scale; if only a few men are thus rescued from that new army of semi-slaves, something will have been done, the spirit of independence will have been aroused in however so few; and this is (as I saw it explained in another part of last month's Freedom) the primary condition of all further progress.

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M. N.