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New Tactics For Trade Unionists

Max Nettlau

1897

In labor struggles at every juncture, the solidarity of labor and public opinion are appealed to, and prove valuable, or rather invaluable helps to the isolated action of smaller or larger groups of workers. Fortunately their strength and broadness and soundness of views are ever improving—yet this increase of solid co-operation with individual labor struggles seems very far from attaining its full height, for in that case labor would simply be invincible and the end of the capitalist system would be at hand. Hence the question of means to increase this solidarity must be of interest to all friends of labor, and it is upon this subject that I want to put forward a few reflections.

Sympathy with labor is found with two sections of people—with conscious opponents of the capitalist system, and by sentimental (no harm is meant by this word) friends of fair play. We need not consider politicians as they have their own interests and advance them the more the keener their insight into the tendencies of the masses in popular movements, whom, after all, they do not so much lead as follow up. All one or the other of the two sec-

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tions defined. One might miss a third section, which would also comprehend the two first ones, namely, those who feel *economically* interested in the success of the labor movement. If we are of opinion that every victory of labor hastens the advent of a society based on the freedom and well-being of all, all sympathizers with labor may be considered to feel a material interest as well as intellectual or moral satisfaction in its success and triumph. But if by being “economically interested” in the issue of a labor struggle we understand benefitting by its successful issue in a material way, similar to that in which the strikers—however little—are supposed to benefit, the aspect of the question becomes different, at any rate in many cases and from the point of view I look at it. For example, if the strikers obtain an increase in wages, the capitalists may recoup their loss by raising the price of the article in question all round; such a rise may be almost imperceptible and no impose insupportable sacrifices even on the poorest of the buying public; yet such an issue cannot be considered sincerely as a victory for labor, because it means a mere shifting of money within the consuming public—higher wages for some, greater expense for all the rest—and the capitalist remains unhurt and as great a menace to labor as ever.

By *the public* one understands all those who are not taking part in the production and distribution of an article (workers), and those not financially interested in these operations (capitalists). The public, of course, comprehends rich and poor, but it is the immense mass of the poor who are almost solely interested in the price and quality of the necessaries of life (of which I am speaking chiefly). The price of bread vitally affects the exchequer of a poor family, whilst its fluctuations do not affect in an appreciable degree a rich household. Hence, of the public, the poor not only count by their overwhelming numbers, but, so to speak, by the weight of their very poverty; the poorer they are the more they are interested in obtaining decent commodities at low prices. Therefore “the public” is no negligible quantity; on the contrary, it is a factor of immense

this is anarchism in a nutshell—no way of action can be considered as a real remedy.

Many Socialists advocate a *military strike*—the refusal of soldiers of all countries to carry out their murderous trade. Strikes of the kind suggested would be but an extension of this principle over all kinds of internecine warfare practiced by workingmen upon their fellow-workers. How often do we say that it seems almost preferable to be killed outright in a battle than to be murdered slowly in unsanitary houses, miserably clad and fed, stunted by overwork and anxiety? Why, then, if we call upon the soldier to stop their murderous trade should we not also call upon all classes of the workers to stop at least the most crying abominations of this system? If they strike together—*the general strike*—so much the better; but in the meantime strikes in favour of their fellow-workers—the public which, by directing its custom, by the powerful weapon of boycotting will help them to win—such strikes might perhaps be tried. No more sham concessions at the cost of the public, which mean but a new way of exploitation for the workers themselves; but active solidarity, the refusal to take further part in frauds on the public, the reply will be an unheard-of enthusiasm for labor, and by this wide sections of people would also become accessible to our more advanced propaganda.

For it will repeat, in conclusion, that this is not an advice to divert our Anarchist propaganda into another minor channel, but a suggestion to workers in general and trade unionists in particular. I point out what appears to me to be a source of strength not hitherto used, and, if I am mistaken, I am anxious to learn the reason why.

to whom the labor question too often seems to mean but useless waste and sacrifice: the workers' wives who, having to economise every penny and farthing to make both ends meet, are but too often prevented by actual loss and inconvenience from feeling any sympathy with the labor movement, and consequently discourage their husbands and children as well. No wonder; for, to them, the shop-assistants or weavers or plumbers are not fellow-workers, but persons who cheat and trick them at the bidding and for the profit of their greedy employers. If they should, perhaps for the first time in their lives, see any act of practical solidarity on the part of all these trades, their sympathy with advanced movements would become far deeper-rooted and enthusiastic than it can possibly be now.

Moreover, such tactics, owing to their negative character, can easily be put into practice. Positive, constructive action (co-operation, etc.) requires enormous preparations, and is hampered on all sides by existing laws and privileges; whilst for these rapid and destructive tactics plentiful opportunities arise, the number of frauds and abuses to be combated being endless. It would also be a good opportunity for direct action in contrast to the roundabout and fallacious way of political action and legislation.

Of course, such action giving under existing conditions great power (not exercised to-day) to the trade-unions, etc., might here and there lead to corrupt practices—but what action could not?—and the freer a union is organized the less power is given to single persons or officials, the smaller the opportunity for and possibility of regrettable actions will be. In other words, leaders will always be corrupt; so every one must become free himself and look after his own affairs or they will be mismanaged. Before this is done—and

mitted to exercise are twofold: the direction of and profiting by the production as well as the distribution of all commodities; and, to be successfully attacked, they must be attacked from both sides—by the producers of a particular article and by the workers of all other trades (the public),—otherwise what one section wins the other loses and the capitalist triumphs over both.

importance, all-powerful if only conscious of its strength; and this is, I believe, not always fully into consideration.¹

It cannot be denied, I presume, that labor struggles sometimes impose sacrifices upon the public at large. A miners' strike may give the mine owners a welcome pretext to raise the price of coal, which will be more or less acutely felt by every worker's family over large districts or the whole country. Or the Early Closing movement, where successful, will reduce the time and hence the opportunities for shopping for many poor families who can only spare a few hours in the evening for this purpose; for instance, in urgent cases they may have to resort to the nearest but dearest shop instead of having the usual choice of where to go. All these greater or smaller inconveniences will be borne patiently and cheerfully by the intellectual or sentimental friends of labor, but they cannot be described as means to make labor more popular with the general public, *i.e.* with the immense number of workers' families all round. A man need not be considered a mean and stupid reactionist if he is not over enthusiastic on the subject of Early Closing *per se*: he might argue that this is a compact between the shop-owners and the shop-assistants at no cost (and time and expenses, etc., saved) to the employers, the advantage of reduced hours to the employees, and at the exclusive cost of the convenience of the public; and he might imagine that, had the shop-assistants taken into consideration the convenience of the public—that is, that of their

¹ If these enormous masses would, for example, lean towards distributive co-operation, middlemen would be abolished by scores of thousands and an immense source of fraud and exploitation be done away with. It is quite true (and I do not fancy it for a moment) that the capitalist system cannot be abolished in that way; but this objection can be raised against every move in the labor struggle. We do not believe in anything of all this as a remedy nor even as a palliative; but we do not dream, either, of advocating quiet and indifference, and all this is written for the consideration of trade unionists at large; as Anarchists we have got to propagate our ideas first, and cannot afford to lose ourselves in these, after all, but little advanced general movements, but must try to convince those whom these movements (and their failures) have set thinking.

fellow-workers,—the public might have sided with them to a far greater extent than it did or does at present. They might have said: “We uphold the customary right of the public to shop at late hours when convenient, but we claim reduced hours, half-holidays, etc. for ourselves; hence more of us will have to be employed—which would also reduce the number of the unemployed and strengthen our whole position.” I believe that the public would be delighted to support such real solidarity with its interests; and, as I am going to show, *this solidarity need not end here.*

In general it may be said: *if the workers of any trade claim the solidarity and help of their fellow-workers they must also endeavour to exercise this solidarity on their own part.* As a result all will feel benefitted by their victories and will support them with greater energy than is done now by the slowly increasing, but far too small, host of sympathizers. More than that; labor struggles, instead of testing the utmost limits of sacrifice as is sometimes the case now, will be of greater propaganda value for labor. It is quite true that bitterness of warfare and defeat open the eyes of many; but victory is perhaps a still better source of renewed strength.

Such solidarity may be shown in a thousand ways; at present it seems hardly to exist in the sense I am speaking of. Any amount of shoddy, worthless goods are manufactured by workingmen; the trade of others consists in making them look nice and solid; food is adulterated wholesale and with scientific skill; and those engaged in distribution use every artifice of persuasion to make the public, that is their *fellow-workers*, buy these rotten goods and poisonous stuffs. The employer needs to give orders to his managers and agents, whilst every detail of this endless process of fraud and poisoning is done by the hands of wage-workers, who seem not to care that it is their fellow-workers who will have to put up with all this; for the rich will not use these goods, although they are also cheated, but in other ways. Now, why do we never hear that the workers of these factories or the shop assistants who retail their products refuse to lend a hand any farther in these infamous prac-

tices? “They would lose their situations,” one might reply. But this happened to the first Socialist propagandists, and to the forerunners of every movement; and no movement with any backbone has been suppressed in this way.

What if trade unions, the whole trade union world were to take up question of this kind in a body?

If, for example, the immense unions of the textile workers said: “We refuse to produce, or see produced by others, all these shoddy goods by which the public is cheated; and we also claim the Eight Hours,” or other reforms. If these demands are refused, the names of the recalcitrant manufacturers will be all known and then let them continue to produce their worthless cloth by blackleg labor as long as they like—the public will be sure to give them a wide berth. Or the building trades might refuse to construct insanitary, jerry-built houses, or to perpetuate the existence of our dirty dens and rookeries by patching them up, by sham repairs. Or the railways servants might refuse to execute all sorts of vexatious regulations annoying and victimizing the public. Or the shop assistants might pledge themselves not to see adulterated food or shoddy goods: this demand might win them the eight hours forthwith; for what shop-keeper would not prefer these reforms to being left alone with his poisonous stuff in his empty shop? Or if he prefers the latter, let him do so: co-operation, doing away with middlemen altogether, would only be stimulated by such resistance; so much the better! In short there is no trade, I believe, in which the working class element of the public is not cheated in an exceptional degree, and where such a solidarity would not be desirable, welcome and almost all-powerful.² Every move in this direction would reach those

² This method of action goes right in the teeth of another means sometimes suggested, namely, the “*Ca’ canny*” tactics of slow or unreliable work. These tactics, whilst intended to hurt the employer, also endorse, in my opinion, the American capitalists’ maxim: “The public be damned!” for they do not care for the fact that in all probability the capitalists will manage to shift the burden of their loss on to the patient shoulders of the public. The functions which the capitalists are per-