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The International Movement of the Workers

Mikhail Bakunin

May 22, 1869

If, today, there is one fact that strikes the minds of the most recalcitrant conservatives, it is the always more general and always more imposing movement of the working masses, not only in Europe, but in America as well. The men of state and the politicians of all countries, whether aristocratic or bourgeois, are worried, and we have the proof of it in every speech they make; they do not pass up any occasion to express their sympathies—so deep and above all so sincere—for that mass—so numerous and so interesting—of the laborers, who, after having served for so many centuries as a passive, mute pedestal for all the ambitions and all the politicians of the world, are finally tired of playing a role as unprofitable as it is unworthy, and today announce their firm desire to live and work from now on only for themselves.

Indeed, it would be necessary to be endowed with a large dose of stupidity, it would be necessary to be blind and deaf not to recognize the importance of this movement. And whoever has preserved within themselves a glimmer of life and honest feeling, not deprived by interest or doctrine, will recognize with us that there

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is only one single movement today that is not a ridiculous, fruitless agitation, that bears a whole future within its flanks, and it is the international workers' movement.

Apart from that movement, what remains? First, at the top, a very respectable thing, no doubt, but absolutely unproductive and above the absolutely ruinous marketplace: the organized brutality of the States. Then, under the protection of that brutality, the great financial, commercial and industrial exploitation, the great international plundering; some thousands of men united internationally among themselves and, with the power of their capital, dominating the entire world.

Below them, the *moyenne* and *petite bourgeoisie*, a class formerly intelligent and comfortable, but today stifled, destroyed and displaced into the proletariat by the progressive invasions of the financial feudalism. It is not that much more miserable, as it unites all the vanities of a privileged world with all the real miseries of the exploited. It is a class condemned by its own history and physiologically exhausted. Formerly it marched forward, and therein lay all its power; today it retreats, it is afraid, it has condemned itself to nothingness. If it had saved a bit of that energetic vitality, a bit of the sacred fire that had made it conquer a world in the past, it would have found within itself the courage to admit that today it is in an impossible situation, and that without a heroic effort on its part it is doomed in every way, dishonored, ruined and threatened with dying in the confrontation. Only two powers presently exist and both prepare for an inevitable encounter: the power of the past, represented by the States, and the power of the future, represented by the proletariat.

What effort could save it, not, undoubtedly, as a separate class, but as an aggregation of individuals?—The response is very simple: *driven by the force of things into the proletariat, the moyenne and especially the petite bourgeoisie should enter it freely, voluntarily.*

We will return to this question soon. Meanwhile, we end this article with the following reflections, which we take from our colleague in Vienna, organ of social democracy, the *Volksstimme*:

“Only the blindest selfishness can fail to understand that there is no longer anything but the triumph and realization of the socialist principle that can put an end to the terrifying rot that has invaded all the strata of society, and establish, in place of the present anarchy, a social order consistent with justice and general well-being. Truly, there is no need for scientific dissertations in order to prove the necessity of profound social reforms. Today, socialism inevitably takes hold of all minds. The future belongs to it. There can no longer be any doubt on this point, for the waves of the workers’ movement mount always higher and more threatening in every country. – The main force of the working masses is especially concentrated in the capitals and in the other large cities of Europe—our organized battalions press forward everywhere.—Already, in Spain, the red flag has received its baptism in blood.

“The electoral agitations in France and especially the recent crimes of the privileged class in Belgium, prove that everywhere there are those determined to oppose the legitimate demands of the workers with the arguments of brutal force and the eloquence of bayonets. In Vienna as well a certain paper has given out this sinister cry: ‘It is time to finish it!’—We have been threatened, and yet, without letting ourselves be intimidated at all by these threats, we are not afraid to say that if we feel an ardent desire, it is the desire to see all these social reforms, which have become absolutely necessary today, realized in a peaceful manner, through the fraternal agreement of all.

“*For us*, the red flag is the symbol of universal human love. – So let our enemies not dream of transforming it *against themselves* into a flag of terror.”