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Open Letter to Western European Workers

Pëtr Kropotkin

4 June 1917

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With the outbreak of war, the anarchist newspaper *Temps Nouveaux*, in which Kropotkin was a regular contributor, had to be suspended, as almost all its readers and subscribers went off to war. In its place the publishing group of *Temps Nouveaux* — Jean Grave, Kropotkin, Guerin, Paul Reclus, Cherkezishvili, and others — published a series of pamphlets: the first, issued in May 1916, contained a “declaration” on war and peace, in response to the Zimmerwald negotiations; and the last, with drawings by Luce and others, was entitled “Questionnaire on the Conditions of Lasting Peace.” In this series of editions appeared a letter written by Kropotkin on the eve of his departure for Russia, of which we now present a translation.

Dear comrades and friends!

Having worked for forty years in your environment, I do not want to leave for Russia without saying a few parting words to you.

From the bottom of my heart I thank you for the more than fraternal welcome which I have met in your environment. The Workers' International was not an empty sound to me.

In Switzerland, in France, in Spain, in the United States, everywhere in the workers' milieu I felt myself among brothers and friends. Whenever I had to take part in your struggles, I experienced the best moments of my life and I felt to the very depths of my heart the whiff of human solidarity, this guarantee of a better future, across borders.

We are currently experiencing sad days. It is not the exploiters and the exploited, not the masters and the people, but entire nationalities that are destroying each other with unprecedented ferocity. And the more I reflect on this catastrophe, the more I am convinced that the cause lies not only in the existence of individual states, but also in a phenomenon which we have not sufficiently foreseen: that whole peoples are capable of being lured by their governments and their religious leaders into the conquest of neighbouring lands and peoples, for the purpose of national enrichment or under the pretext of historical predestination.

And, then, we have not sufficiently insisted on the basic principle that it is the duty of every true internationalist to resist with all their strength every attempt, from wherever it comes, to invade a neighbouring country for the purpose of conquest; and that they are obliged, if necessary, **to take up arms in defence of the invaded country.**

Without this there can be no International. Without this, the International will become as barren and false a commandment as the supposed "Christian love of one's neighbour".

Yet the enormous dimensions and horrors of this war have awakened humanity. They set before it important social tasks which had been put forward by the Socialists of the 1840s and the First International, and which mankind neglected at the time, for which it is paying today with the immense suffering created by this war.

“You did not want socialism,” wrote Herzen in 1848, “so, behold, you will have a war, a seven-year war, a thirty-year war.”

In fact, we are now seeing its beginning, and we shall have a war for a full thirty years, unless all men with heart, mind, and knowledge put all their energy into reorganising society to prevent it.

If the Russian people were able to banish the autocrats, overthrow the domination of the bureaucratic and police regime, and in a few days win the main basis of any social reorganisation — **the political equality of all citizens** — it is thanks to the creative work which was carried on in Russia from the very beginning of the war, voluntarily, by free initiative, and which made the revolution possible and inevitable.

The revolution broke out in Russia because of the **need** to organise the free, spontaneous distribution of the necessities of life on communist and federative principles, and the need to organise production in the same way, from the simple to the complex. And this very necessity makes itself felt in the West.

We have all learnt, palpably felt the truth preached by the Socialists, that neither the production of all the necessities of life for the people, nor the distribution of the wealth created, should be abandoned to fate and free competition. Still less can they be left to profit-hungry men fighting among themselves over the division of the spoils. We have all become convinced that these two essential branches of human life must, by all means, be organised, with a view to satisfying the needs of all, and consequently the social capital required for production must be centralised.

Only three years ago this programme was considered a utopia. Even the most advanced socialist workers did not recognise the possibility of its realisation and thought it would only be done by future generations. And now, the immediate solution of these basic tasks of the social question has become a necessity due to the coincidence of circumstances during the war.

Thus, the immense work of social construction is at hand. There is no more talk of utopia: it is necessary to build according to a new plan, without slowing down, according to a plan whose main lines are already being outlined. And it is high time that the workers took this work of restructuring into their own hands, without hesitation, without waiting for the State to do it for them.

The essential features of social restructuring have already been marked by life itself: all the production of necessities, as well as the distribution of the wealth created, **must be organised to meet the immediate needs of all.**

It is no longer a question of increasing wages by a few francs a week (which, however, are soon swallowed up by a whole cloud of exploiters); it is necessary that the productive workers should themselves become **the managers of all social production**, that they should determine the ends and means of production, and that society should recognise their right to dispose of social capital for this purpose.

As soon as the war is over, you will, comrades and friends, have to take up this tremendous work. The history of mankind has laid it upon you: you must take up this labour.

But above all, let us not forget that **the war is not yet over.** We are approaching the supreme moment which will decide the outcome of the war, and any weakness at this moment may have disastrous consequences for the progress of all mankind.

We all long for peace. None of us wants more slaughter. But mere desire is not enough. It is necessary to have the strength **to force the very people who started the slaughter to stop it.** And so far the German people have not shown that they have realised that their rulers have involved them in a mad scheme that is not feasible and without an outcome.

The German nation is not yet conscious that the plan to enrich the German nation by a sudden attack on its neighbours and by rapid conquests in the West and in the East, **has failed;**

that it must give up the conquered lands, the power over which it cannot retain by final victory.

Sad as it is to be convinced of this, it is clear that the German people still demand that this should be proved to them by force of arms, and in the meantime their government endeavours to sow discord among the Allies.

There is only one outcome left: a final effort must be made to convince the mass of the German people that their leaders, by dragging them into this war, have committed a crime against humanity and have taken a mad step.

And as soon as the war is over, it will be necessary to begin again the **radical reorganisation**, the social foundations of which have already been outlined by life itself and even recognised by a great many people: the socialisation of social wealth, socialist production and socialist distribution of the wealth created.

If these fundamentals are widely recognised, popular common sense and the concerted efforts of all will find the means to achieve the goal with the least struggle and least destruction. Russia will join you in this endeavour.

With fraternal greetings from the bottom of my heart with you,

Peter Kropotkin

4 June (N.S.) 1917.