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May Day

Sophie Zaïkowska

May 1st, 1912

This day was chosen by our fathers so that the proletariat throughout the world protest and demand rights in a global movement. The boldest among them saw there, in a faraway future, the means for the proletarian class to rise up against oppression, to grab social wealth, and to establish a fairer system. In the meantime, to everyone, it was a means to remind the bourgeoisie that workers were tired of being treated like beasts of burden, and that they demanded a few immediate improvements.

The main demand was and still is the 8-hour day: to have 8 hours of work a day, okay, but also 8 hours of leisure and 8 hours of sleep.

Every demand must stem from economic conditions and not from a desire, as justifiable as it can be. The 8-hour day propaganda was intense for a number of years, but, in in the industry, commerce and agriculture, such a reform could only ever be imposed by force. Maybe a firm will of the proletariat acting directly, in a revolutionary capacity, could have succeeded in imposing this demand. But we know how the May Day march was transformed, we know that it was mutated into a delegation to public powers. Some of us have in front of our eyes

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the painting in which Guesde and a group of Socialist deputies give a man the notebook of worker's demands in an office.

On May 1st, 1912, there won't even be a delegation, some Socialists town councils will officially celebrate May Day. And in quite a few places where workers are conscious and organised, after a day's work, they will attend meetings and parties!

Of course, many workers wish to obtain a shorter working day. But even if we achieve some results to that effect, we can see that it is not as a class that this demand is imposed. Shorter hours are obtained in such and such a trade, then in another by a series of strikes and struggles limited to that industrial branch.

May Day has totally failed. Maybe a small result was obtained in some industries, but that's all. In the textile industry in Vienna, for example, thanks to the energy of some of our comrades, among whom was Pierre Martin.

May Day has failed like everything that the ignorant, cowardly mass of workers has ever undertaken, as they stop at the first obstacle on their way: even in Vienna, where workers obtained a few improvements in the brutality of their exploitation only thanks to anarchists, when a strike occurred, the women who had especially benefited from past struggles exclaimed: "If anarchists get involved, we are going back to work. We don't want any more martyrs."

Women, who sabotage every social movements by their narrow and personal minds, would need to be educated so that they acquire, like many men, some personalities. Unfortunately, this issue is never addressed head-on. People try to lure women, are afraid to scare them. As high as the motives which lead militants to try and win over women may be, they approve women who, like Jacqueline in "La Bataille Syndicaliste" (The Syndicalist Fight) flatter their sisters' prejudices.

Still, “La Bataille” is truly the best daily paper, the only workers’ paper, but Jacqueline wants her sisters to read it, so she writes:

“Even without being greedy like many of these women are (women of the bourgeoisie) let’s not allow people to steal from us. Let’s keep a watchful eye and tell ourselves that this money which we get from our partner’s sweat and labour must be used in the most intelligent way and in the way that benefits the community the most.”

Proudhon had said: either a courtesane or a housewife; Jacqueline boldly claims: a courtesane and a housewife!

By giving us advice, Jacqueline tells us that when some friends unexpectedly visited, she bought a piece of roast beef which, all things taken into account (parts to be discarded, inaccurate weight and so on) she paid 2,70 franc a pound. She adds, grumbling:

“It is still necessary to have some on the table sometimes, especially in Paris to compensate for the air we don’t get. Workers need food well thought-up: not too much, not too little.”

Later she says: “we must not forget that beef stew is the basis of family food.”

Jacqueline’s main course is always a meat dish! The inevitable beef stew, that workers’ ignorance believes to be a healthy and fortifying food, is, even for the partisans of meat-eating, recognised to be a breeding ground for microbes, in such a way that it acts on our organisms like a real poison.

Ignorant like every courtesane, like every housewife, vegetarianism, dairy products and eggs don’t seem enough for her to feed her man who’s been working all day!

But this poor Jacqueline talks about cooking like Jouhaux talks about workers’ needs. That is because among the militant proletariat there is a unity of opinion on the issue of needs.

Jouhaux, in a study entitled “The Minimum Wage” (its social value), demands a minimum wage which should be indexed on the absolute necessities of the life of a worker’s family, that is:

“rents, necessary foods: bread, meat, wine or beer, vegetables, clothes, etc.” And he concludes that “it is for an extension of our needs that the fight for wage increases must go on.”

How do you want a worker to work less while spending more and having to feed his courtesane—his wife—on top of that?

Workers can't wait to go back to the factory because they are always on the break of terrible misery, despair, thanks to the excellent advice from Comrade Jouhaux, from revolutionaries, who tell them to increase their needs instead of reasoning them.

It is obvious that if consumer demand decreased, working days would be shorter. People will say that the number of unemployed people would increase without the working day getting any shorter. I'll say that it is possible that unemployment rates would momentarily go up, but it would be such a danger that measures would have to be taken, because revolt would soon threaten. The people is great only when it is hungry, it is like my neighbour's cow who moos when her hay is late.

People will say that there has been high unemployment rates in some capital cities at some time, and that this did not lead to the revolution. It is easy to reply that this was only momentary, that it was only some economic disturbance. But I believe this disturbance would soon become a chronic condition, if workers reasoned their needs. And then, and only then, would the bourgeoisie be forced to let workers' demands be imposed by the course of events itself!