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The Police

Ferdinand Domela Nieuwenhuis

1904

Besides the high lords of justice, who do the fine work, the existing society has at its disposal persons who have been commissioned to do the dirty work. These are called policemen. And it is remarkable that these persons, who themselves are disgusted with their work — which is best proved by the fact that they leave the police service as soon as they get a place with equal pay — do not belong to the possessing class, but to the working class. These, who do not own any property themselves, are the protectors of the sacred right of property — for others. Those, who themselves belong to the class of the robbed, protect the thieves, so that they may enjoy their plunder in peace. Out of service, in the hope of reward and promotion, they often behave in the most ruthless manner towards their brothers and classmates.

Police discretion is the supreme law in our existing society, and the bourgeoisie has sunk very low, as it clings to the police force like a straw. The consequence of this has been that the police, whose violent acts win approval in the circles of the rulers, have become increasingly brutal and ruthless. The hero of the bourgeoisie is the helmeted policeman, on whom it relies in the hope that he will be able to keep the people down. The

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policeman is the brutal suppressor of rebellion and riots, he is the tracking dog, who must track down, discover and bring to justice the poor man who has been driven by hunger to steal a loaf of bread.

Just as the poor see the policeman as their enemy, the rich see him as their friend, proof that here we are faced with a class institution, one of the many pillars of the class state.

How brutally does the policeman behave towards the worker, how dare he mistreat him, knowing full well that he will not have to give an account for it? And how groveling, how submissive does he show himself towards the well-off?

And yet the policeman has little reason to feel satisfied. Is he not paid, like other proletarians, in a manner that borders on the famine line! Are not the policemen recruited from the proletarian class, from the wage slaves, and are they not made to bear the burden of poverty just as well as other workers? But in spite of this, they stand on the side of the rich through thick and thin.

The policeman is a henchman in prostitution, he is a mediator in the international trade in women's flesh, which is carried on in our so-called civilized societies.

He is the manufacturer's faithful support in strikes and wage movements. Without bothering to investigate on whose side the law is, he always stands on the side of the employer against the workers.

He is the hope of the rich, and they trustfully entrust him with the protection of their property.

In other words: always for the possessors and against the poor.

Who acts first against the workers if they have the idea of lightening their heavy burden a little?

The police and the military.

Who receive the workers with blows of the cane and sabre if they want to break their shackles?

Again the police and the military.

That they act on higher orders does not change the situation. When we are attacked in the street, we certainly do not ask whether the attackers act on their own initiative or on the orders of others.

If you are killed, trampled and beaten and your opponent acts on their own initiative or on the orders of others, you may be quite indifferent.

Some object: These people cannot be responsible, since they are only fulfilling their mission. They are, like everyone else, a product of *circumstances*.

It is all well and good that they are a product of circumstances when they attack or kill us, but we are also a product of circumstances when we defend ourselves against attacks.

Actually, the murderer who murders on the orders of others and often does not know why he murders is more despicable than the one who murders on his own initiative and can at least give reasons why he does this or that.

“There are also decent policemen,” I hear another say.

Talk! There are “decent” people even among the robbers. Among the largest robber gangs one meets such as Jay Gould, Vanderbilt, Rothschild, Morgan, etc. People are not decent because they can show off in fine society or be celebrated and praised by it. And for the victim it plays a very subordinate role whether he is beaten and abused by a “decent” bandit or a simpleton.

A major newspaper once wrote with complete justice: “Just as there is a priestly spirit or a bourgeois spirit, there is also a police spirit. — Everyone who sets foot in a police station with the intention of seeking employment there is seized by it, even if he has not previously been animated by it.” And what does this police spirit consist of?

Its chief characteristic is: *Hatred of the poor*. The police are evidently established to assure the rich a peaceful sleep. Their chief aim in social life is to protect the possessors from the possible desire of the non-possessors to appropriate something

of what belongs to all. Consequently, the police must be the natural enemy of the poor.

The police proceed from the assumption that every poor man is a criminal, or at least carries within him a seed of crime, which may at any time burst forth and bear fruit. The police do not therefore protect the worker in his efforts to earn an honest living. They watch the worker as if he were a criminal who is at large, and arrest him at the most opportune moment. The police have not the slightest interest in eradicating crime. The existence of criminals is the only excuse for the police's own existence. Thus, instinctively, the police force breeds criminals — out of self-preservation.

But although the possessors support the police force with large sums of money, they cannot trust it in all weathers. For the police sell themselves to the highest bidder, and on the day when the current ruling class is dethroned, the police will pass over with flying banners and resounding music to the new ruler. For, unconcerned about who is the ruler, tomorrow they will shout with the same joy: "Long live the republic!" as today they shout: "Long live the king!". Crooks always hasten to side with the victorious party.

Since the possessors are an international power, it is not surprising that the police are also internationally organized in order to be able to oppose the internationally organized proletariat.

In the long run, however, the police force will not be able to offer the proletariat the lead, for in that case each separate fortune must be supervised by separate policemen. What a spectacle our world would then offer and is already offering to others! Against the poor, pale with hunger, would stand the rich, pale with terror and anxiety, and between these policemen, armed from head to foot, ready to strike him down at the first suspicious movement of the poor.

As a rule, the police and justice hold out their hands to each other. After all, they are both servants of the same master: cap-

italism. And if the police never behave so brutally, never so stupidly, justice will certainly hasten to turn a blind eye, to give the police the right. One may complain as much as one wants about the police, one may call for its reorganization — it will not serve any purpose. One can improve the prisons, but one is not thereby able to obtain a good prison, because the concepts of good and prison exclude each other. The same applies to the police force; it will not succeed in getting a good one, for that which is in itself bad cannot be made good, one must never exert oneself too much.

Capitalism does not disdain any means to maintain its power. Espionage, incitement, the awakening of distrust between people, — these are means which are used daily. Capitalism despises the traitor, but makes use of treason; it despises the liar, but makes use of lies.

The police are a means of violence, of which the rulers make use to maintain their power. They use the whip of hunger to arm one part of the working people in order to keep the other in subjection, which is so much easier, as this other part is unarmed. If one examines carefully what the power of the police consists of, one comes to the conclusion that it depends not so much on the batons and sabres, but on the policeman's awareness that he can beat, even kill, without being held responsible for it. The workers also know that a blow inflicted on the sacred person of the policeman cannot be reconciled with less than months, even years of imprisonment. Protected by its impunity, the police power is strong against the masses.