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Anarchists – Bandits

Victor Serge

February 6, 1909

Last week the dailies related in detail a tragic incident of the social struggle. In the suburbs of London (in Tottenham) two of our Russian comrades attacked the accountant of a factory and, pursued by the crowd and the police, held out in a desperate struggle, the mere recounting of which is enough to make one shiver...

After almost two hours of resistance, having exhausted their munitions, and wounded 22 people, three of them mortally, they reserved for themselves their final bullets. One, our comrade Joseph Lapidus (the brother of the terrorist Stryge, killed in Paris in the Vincennes woods in 1906) killed himself; the other was taken seriously wounded.

Words seem powerless to express admiration or condemnation before their ferocious heroism. Lips are still; the pen isn't strong enough, sonorous enough.

Nevertheless, in our ranks there will be the timorous and the fearful who will disavow their act. But we, for our part, insist on loudly affirming our solidarity.

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We are proud to have had among us men like Duval, Pini, and Jacob¹. We today insist on saying loudly and clearly: The London “bandits” were at one with us!

Let this be known. Let it be finally understood that in the current society we are the vanguard of a barbarous army. That we have no respect for what constitutes virtue, morality, honesty, that we are outside of laws and regulations. They oppress us, they persecute us, they pursue us. Rebels constantly find themselves before the sad alternative: submit, that is, abolish their will and return to the miserable herd of the exploited, or accept combat against the entire social organism.

We prefer combat. Against us, all arms are good; we are in an enemy camp, surrounded, harassed. The bosses, judges, soldiers, cops unite to bring us down. We defend ourselves – not by all means, for the most peremptory response we can give them is to be better than them – but with a profound contempt for their codes, their morals, their prejudices.

By refusing us the right to free labor society gives us the right to steal. In taking possession of the wealth of the world the bourgeois give us the right to take back, however we can, what we need to satisfy our needs. Anti-authoritarian, we have the burning determination to live free without oppressing anyone, without being oppressed by anyone. Current society, based on the absurd egoism of the strongest, on iniquity and oppression, denies us this. In order not to die of hunger we are forced to have recourse to various expedients: accept the stupefying and demoralizing existence of the wage earner: work, or the dangerous existence of the illegal: steal, and get ourselves out of our mess through means on the margin of the law.

¹ Clement Duval (1850-1935) – leader of a group of illegalist anarchists called “La Panthère des Batignolles.” Pini (1850-189?) – anarchist shoemaker and partisan of “individual expropriation.” Marius-Alexander Jacob (1879-1954) – Thief and head of a band of anarchist criminals.

Let this be known! In order to wrest an existence, working – submitting ourselves to the slavery of the workshop – is as much an expedient as stealing. As long as we haven't conquered the ample and large life for which we fight, the various means which the social organization will force us to have recourse to will be nothing to us but a last resort. And so we choose, in keeping with our temperaments and the circumstances, those that are most appropriate to us.

Your codes, your laws, your "honesty": you can't imagine how we laugh at them!

This is why, in the face of the fuming bourgeoisie, in the face of those who judge, of honest brutes, of the prostitutes of journalism, we insist on proclaiming: "The bandits of London are ours!"

They are also, incidentally, noble bandits, and we can be proud of them. We won't have vain words of regret, vain tears for them. No! But may their deaths be an example and etch in our memories the sublime motto of the Russian comrades: "Anarchists never surrender!"

Anarchists don't surrender! No more under policemen's bullets than before the shouts of the crowd or the condemnation of those who judge! Anarchists don't surrender!

Resolved to live as rebels and to pitilessly defend themselves to the bitter end, they know, when it's necessary, to accept the epithet of "bandits."

I can guess, dear reader, the sentimental objection that is on your lips: But the 22 unfortunates wounded by your comrades' bullets were innocent! Have you no remorse?"

No! For those who pursued them could have been nothing but "honest" citizens, believers in the state, in authority. Perhaps oppressed, but oppressed who, by their criminal weakness, perpetuate oppression. Enemies!

Unthinking, you will answer. Yes, but the ferocious bourgeois is also unthinking. For us the enemy is he who prevents us from living. We are under attack, and we defend ourselves.

And so we don't have words of condemnation for our daring comrades fallen in Tottingham, rather much admiration for their peerless bravery, and much sadness this evening to have thus lost, in the fullness of their vigor, men of an exceptional courage and energy.