

The policy of abstention from parliamentary action

William Morris

1887

Contents

Delivery	12
--------------------	----

All Socialists who can be considered to have any claim to that title agree in putting forward the necessity of transforming the means of production from individual into common property: that is the least that the party can accept as terms of peace with the capitalists; and obviously they are hard terms of peace for the latter, since they mean the destruction of individualist capital. This minimum which we claim therefore is a very big thing: its realization would bring about such a revolution as the world has not yet seen, and all minor reforms of civilization which have been thought of or would be possible to think of would be included in it: no political party has ever had a programme at once so definite and so inclusive: many Socialists would be satisfied if the party were to put forward nothing save this claim; and if there were no party which put forward anything else I think all Socialists would feel themselves bound to support the party that had this platform to the utmost: but the shadow of the stupendous revolution which the abolition of private property in the means of production would bring about is cast upon our present opinions and policy. We cannot help speculating on what would be the consequences of the change, and how it would affect what would be left of our civilization, not only as to the production of wealth, but also as to religion, morals, the relation between the sexes, the methods of government or administration, and in short the whole of social life: of most of these matters I shall say nothing further in this paper, but will only briefly allude to matters directly connected with industrial production, and the administration of affairs.

Now amongst Socialists there are some who think that the abolition of private property in the means of production only would bring about a stable condition of society which would carry out communism no further, that the *product* of labour working on raw material and aided by instruments which were common property, should not be common, but would be the prize of energy, industry, and talent: 'to each one according to his deeds.' In case there are any non-Socialists in the room, I may point out that this condition of things would be quite different from the present one, under which people can live idle and force others to work for them if they chance to be possessed of a share in the monopoly of the means of production, which is the privilege of their class; if it could be carried out and maintained without artificial bolstering up, it would be that real 'career open to talent' which Napoleon ignorantly supposed his bourgeois Caesarism was to sustain: but some of us suppose that without such artificial bolstering up it would lead us back again into a new form of class society; that those who developed the greatest share of certain qualities not necessarily the most useful to the community, would gain a superior position from which they would be able to force the less gifted to serve them. And in fact those who limit the revolution of Socialism to the abolition of private property merely in the means of production do contemplate a society in which production shall be in tutelage to the state; in which the centralized state would draw arbitrarily the line where public property ends and private property begins, would interfere with inheritance and with the accumulation of wealth, and in many ways would act as a master, and take the place of the old masters: acting with benevolent intention indeed, but with conscious artificiality and by means of the employment of obvious force which would be felt everywhere and would sometimes at least be evaded or even resisted, and so at last might even bring on a new revolution which might lead us backward for a while, or might carry us forward into a condition of true Communism according to the ripeness or unripeness of the State Socialist revolution: in short to some of us it seems as if this view of Socialism simply indicates the crystallization of what can only be a transitional condition of society, and cannot in itself be stable: we on the other hand consider the aim of Socialism to be equality of condition: since the production of wares and the service of the community must always be a matter of co-

operation; you cannot, if it were desirable, find out what each man's 'deeds' are; and if you could, we see no reason for setting up a higher standard of livelihood for A because he can turn out more work than B, while the needs of the two are just the same: if society is to be of use to B, it must defend him against the tyranny of nature; and if instead of defending him against nature it turns round and helps her to punish poor B for not being born of the same capacity of developing muscle as A, society is a traitor to B, and if he be a man of any spirit will be rebel against it. We Communists therefore say that it is not possible really to proportion the reward to the labour, and that if you were able to do so you would still have to redress by charity the wrongs of the weak against the strong, you would still not be able to avoid a poor-law: the due exercise of one's energies for the common good and capacity for personal use we say form the only claims to the possession of wealth, and the right of property, the only safeguard against the creation of fresh privilege, which would have to be abolished like the old privilege. All this is admitted by many who will not call themselves Communists, because they do not wish anything to be put before people at present except the transitional state of things: and many of us Communists for our part are willing to admit that the communization of the means of production will inevitably lead to the communization of the products of labour also, and that, as I began by saying, it is a programme sufficiently big to put before the people of our generation, and the consequences of its realization can for the present be left to take care of themselves. So you see there is hardly a question at issue on this point between the Socialists and Communists. I will therefore assume in this paper that the immediately object of Socialists is the transformation of the raw material and the instruments of labour from private into common property, and then go on to inquire what are the means by which that object can be carried out. I would not have spoken as to the different opinions about the aims of Socialism if I had not felt that those opinions, as I have said elsewhere, would be likely to influence people's views as to the means of realization. The opinions as to the means are not quite conterminous with the two schools of so-called Socialists and Communists, but they are nearly so, and naturally, since the former are prepared to accept as a necessity a central all-powerful authoritative government, a reformed edition, one may say, of the state government at present existing; whereas the Communists, though they are not clear as to what will take the place of that in the meanwhile, are at least clear that when the habit of social life is established, nothing of the kind of authoritative central government will be needed or endured.

The moderate Socialists or those who can see nothing but the transitional period therefore, believe in what may be called a system of cumulative reforms as the means towards the end; which reforms must be carried out by means of Parliament and a bourgeois executive, the only legal power at present existing, while the Communists believe that it would be [a] waste of time for the Socialists to expend their energy in furthering reforms which so far from bringing us nearer to Socialism would rather serve to bolster up the present state of things; and not believing in the efficacy of reforms, they can see no reason for attempting to use Parliament in any way; except perhaps by holding it up as an example to show what a contemptible thing a body can be which poses as the representative of a whole nation, and which really represents nothing but the firm determination of the privileged or monopolist class to stick to their privilege and monopoly till they are *forced* to relinquish it.

Well there are, it seems, two policies before us, which, if you will allow me, I will call for short the Policy of Parliamentary Action, and the Policy of Abstention. But before I go further I must say that though the question as to which of the two policies is to be adopted in the long run is

doubtless a most interesting one, yet that at present there is only one policy open to us, that of preaching Socialism to as many people as we can get at. This no doubt seems to many a dull job, offering no rewards to any of us in the way of notoriety or position: but after all it is the way which all new creeds have to go on, and if we neglect it in our haste or impatience, we shall never come to the point at which more definite action will be forced upon us.

Now as to these two policies I will not dwell on the first, not because I do not agree with it, as I do not, but because it has been put before you often enough and with copious enough arguments and advocacy: to convince the voters that they ought to send Socialists to Parliament who should try to get measures passed in the interests of the working-classes, and gradually transform the present Parliament, which is a mere instrument in the hands of the monopolizers of the means of production, into a body which should destroy monopoly, and then direct and administer the freed labour of the community. That is I think a correct statement of the views of those who further the policy of parliamentary action.

Such a scheme or plan of campaign will sound practical and reasonable to many, or to most if you will: and although it is right, in considering any scheme, to consider the drawbacks to it, yet even when we admit that those drawbacks exist, we do not necessarily condemn the scheme: so I will not at present say anything about the drawbacks which after all must be patent to those even who think the policy a good and necessary one. Indeed if no other plan of campaign were possible for the attack on monopoly, we should have to accept all drawbacks, stifle all doubts and carry it out with all our might. But there is another plan of campaign possible which I must lay before you at rather greater length under the nick-name, as I said, of the Policy of Abstention.

This plan is founded on the necessity of making the class-struggle clear to the workers, of pointing out to them that while monopoly exists they can only exist as its slaves: so that the Parliament and all other institutions at present existing are maintained for the purpose of upholding this slavery; that their wages are but slaves' rations, and if they were increased tenfold would be nothing more: that while the bourgeois rule lasts they can indeed take part in it, but only on the terms that they shall do nothing to attack the grand edifice of which their slavery is the foundation. Nay more than that: that they are asked to vote and send representatives to Parliament (if 'working-men' so much the better) that they may point out what concessions may be necessary for the ruling class to make in order that the slavery of the workers may last on: in a word that to vote for the continuance of their own slavery is all the parliamentary action that they will be allowed to take under the present regime: Liberal Associations, Radical clubs, working men members are at present, and Socialist members will be in the future, looked on with complacency by the governing classes as serving towards the end of propping the stability of robber society in the safest and least troublesome manner by beguiling them to take part in their own government. A great invention, and well worthy of the reputation of the Briton for practicality — and swindling! How much better than the coarse old-world iron repression of that blunderer Bismark, which at once irritates and consolidates the working-men, and depends for its temporary success even on the absence of such accidents as a sudden commercial crisis or a defeat of the German army.

The Policy of Abstention then is founded on this view: that the interests of the two classes, the workers and the capitalists, are irreconcilable, and as long as the capitalists exist as a class, they have the monopoly of the means of production, have all the power of ordered and legal society; but on the other hand that the use of this power to keep down a wronged population, which feels itself wronged, and is organizing itself for illegal resistance when the opportunity

shall serve, would impose such a burden on the governing classes as they will not be able to bear; and they must finally break down under it, and take one of two courses, either of them the birth of fear acting on the instinct to prolong and sustain their life which is essential in all organisms. One course would be to try the effect of wholesale concessions, or what seemed to be such in order to diminish the number of the discontented; and this course would be almost certain to have a partial success; but I feel sure not so great a success in delaying revolution, as it would have if taken with the expressed agreement of Socialist representatives in Parliament: in the latter case the concessions would be looked upon as a victory; whereas if they were the work of a hated government from which the people were standing aloof, they would be dreaded as a bait, and scorned as the last resource of a tyranny growing helpless. The other course which a government recognized as a mere tyranny would be driven to by a policy of abstention, would be stern repression of whatever seemed to be dangerous to it; that is to say of the opinions and aspirations of the working classes as a whole: for in England at least there would be no attempt to adopt this course until opinion was so grown and so organized that the danger to monopoly seemed imminent. In short the two courses are fraud and force, and doubtless in a commercial country like this the resources of fraud would be exhausted before the ruling class betook itself to open force.

Now I say that either of these courses will indicate a breakdown of the class government, and in my belief it would be driven to them more speedily by abstaining from rendering it any help in the form of pushing palliative measures in parliament, and thereby pointing out to it a way to stave off revolution; but it is a matter of course that this abstention which we put forward as a weapon to drive the ruling class to extremities must be backed up by widespread opinion, by the conviction of a vast number of persons that the basis of society must be changed, and labour set free by the abolition of monopoly in the means of production, which monopoly is at present the basis of our society. But of course the necessity for obtaining this body of opinion is not confined to those Socialists that advocate abstention from parliamentary action: the making of Socialists must be a preliminary to the settling of the question, What are Socialists to do? Now it is clear that the first step towards this end is the putting forward of the principles of Socialism, preaching them as widely as possible; this is practically all that up to the present we have been able to do, and whatever success we have had in the undertaking (people will have different opinions about that) we have worked at it with very considerable energy. But it has been said that the mere preaching of principles, however much the acceptance of them may involve definite action in the future, is not enough; that you must offer your recruits something to do beyond merely swelling the army of preachers in one way or another. Well I agree with that, so far as this, that the time comes in such a movement as ours when it is ready to change from a mere intellectual movement into a movement of action, and that that time must be taken advantage of, and if there is no good plan of action ready the movement will certainly take up a bad one in default of none at all. The plan offered by some of our friends I have stated before as an attempt to get hold of Parliament by constitutional means in order to use if for unconstitutional purposes: that plan I think a bad one for reasons that I have hinted at already and shall try to state more fully and consecutively before I have done. Yet if the plan has its birth from anything more solid than impatience, and the weariness that is sure to beset a small minority preaching revolution, it is a hopeful sign that it should be put forward, and it being put forward in a manner that compels us who do not agree with it to put forward some alternative to it, even though we think, as I confess I for one do, that all plans of action are at present premature.

Well, I have put forward one part of our plan, viz. a strict holding aloof from taking part in a government whose object is the maintenance of monopoly: you will say of course that is not action: but I say that it is, if combined as it is sure to be, with the resolute preaching of principles with a view to action when that becomes possible without sullyng it by alliance with the very tyranny which we are leagued to destroy: it then becomes the foundation of that great instrument of attack on a majority of brute force known as 'the boycott.' For before we can begin to use that we must be bound together by the full consciousness that we are oppressed by a class who cannot help oppressing us and whose oppression we cannot help resisting.

But again you may say before we can begin boycotting we must have numbers; how are they to be obtained otherwise than by interesting a large body of people in reforms which will have a plausible look of bettering their position? This is a shrewd question, but I hope I can answer it satisfactorily. It will be our business to give a new turn to all the smouldering discontent of the workers and the perpetual struggle of labour against capital which is now feebly and incompletely organized by the Trades Unions. Those bodies, which grew into power at a time when the principle of capitalism was not attacked, can until they are radically altered only deal with its accidental abuses; and they have also the essential quality of being benefit societies, which would be all very well if they denied the rights of capital altogether and were complete fighting bodies; because the benefit society business would then mean just the army chest; but at present when the rights of capital are admitted and all that is claimed is a proportional share in the profits, it means a kind of relief to the employers, an additional poor-rate levied from the workers. As things now go the position of the Trades Unions, as anything but benefit societies, has become an impossible one; the long and short of what they say to the masters is this: We are not going to interfere with your management of our affairs except so far as we can reduce your salary as our managers. We acknowledge that we are machines and that you are the hands that guide us; but we will pay as little as we can help for your guidance and fight you on that point. Well the masters can and do reply: My friends, you are making an end not of our profits only but of our function of guidance, and since you are, as you admit, our machines, when our guidance is gone, gone also is your livelihood. No, we know your interests better than you do yourselves, and shall resist your feeble attempts to reduce our salaries; and since we organize your labour and the market of the world which it supplies, we shall manage your wages amongst other matters.

Now that's the blind alley which the Trades Unions have now got into: I say again if they are determined to have masters to manage their affairs, they must expect in turn to pay for that luxury. To go any further they must get out of that blind alley and into the open highway that leads to Socialism. They must aim at managing their own business, which is indeed the business of the world: remembering that the price they pay for their so-called captains of industry is no mere money-payment — no mere tribute which once paid leaves them free to do as they please, but an authoritative ordering of the whole tenor of their lives, what they shall eat, drink, wear, what houses they shall have, books, or newspapers rather, they shall read, down to the very days on which they shall take their holidays like a drove of cattle driven out from the stable to grass.

Well, I say that the real business of us propagandists is to instil this aim of the workers becoming the masters of their own destinies, their own lives, and this can be effected when a sufficient number of them are convinced of the fact by the establishment of a vast labour organization — the federation according to their crafts, if you will, of all the workmen who have awoke to the fact that they are the slaves of monopoly, and therefore being awaked, its rebels also; men who are convinced that the raw material and instruments of labour can only belong to those who can

use them: let them announce that transformation of these things into common property as their programme, and look upon anything else they may have to do before they have conquered that programme, as so much necessary work by the way to enable them to live till they have marched to the great battlefield. Let them settle e.g. what wages are to be paid by their temporary managers, what numbers of hours it may be expedient to work; let them arrange for the filling of their military chest, the care of the sick, the unemployed, the dismissed: let them learn also how to administer their own affairs. Time and also power fails me to give any scheme for how all this could be done; but granting the formation of such a body I cannot help thinking that for the two last purposes they might make use of the so-called plan of co-operation.

Well now, as to this great labour body I expect all Socialists to agree with me in advocating its formation, and also to admit that the furtherance of such a body is very great work and worth all our efforts to bring about; where some Socialists will differ from me will be that they will not be able to see why all this should not go on *pari passu* with Parliamentary action.

Well, I also expect them to agree with me in thinking it necessary in pointing out to the workers the irreconcilability between true free labour and individualist capitalism; surely in order to drive this fact home, it is necessary to keep the two camps of labour and monopoly as distinct as possible.

If such a labour organization as I have been putting before you were set on foot, and it took root and grew, and spread as it would if things were ripe either for that or another form of preparation for action, what would be the condition of things in the country? On the one hand the useful classes banded together for the purpose of a change in the basis of society which would acknowledge their usefulness and the usefulness of all others; which would abolish classes altogether; on the other hand a committee of the useless or monopolist class, authoritative because it holds the sway over the army, navy and police, but with no power of doing anything but launching that power of destruction at those who make all that is made, and so destroying their own livelihood along with that of their enemy; with no power of bribing them by concessions, because the popular party claim one thing only, the abolition of the class that on its side claims to rule. What could come out of the opposition of these two forces, the useful working society, and the useless class that claims nothing but to live on the former? What could come of this opposition but destruction of the useless? Could armed reaction triumph? Certainly only for a while; that at the worst; but probably it would not even appear to conquer: there would be perhaps some feeble attempt at putting down the popular combination by force; but it would be half-hearted and would soon come to an end if that party were true to itself and felt its power in combination. What would be the use of the authoritative government making laws for people who denied its right, and felt it to be their duty to evade or resist them at every point? Nothing would come of them, they would simply drop dead. And now mark that this movement, this force for the revolution that we all call for can only be fully evolved from this conscious opposition of the two powers, monopolist authority and free labour: everything that tends to mask that opposition, to confuse it, weakens the popular force, and gives a new lease of life to the reaction, which can indeed create nothing, can only hang on a while by favour of such drags on such weaknesses of the popular force. If our own people are forming part of parliament, the instruments of the enemy, they are helping to make the very laws we will not obey. Where is the enemy then? What are we to do to attack him? The enemy is a principle, you say: true, but the principle must be embodied; and how can it be better embodied than in that assembly delegated by the owners of monopoly to defend monopoly at all points? to smooth away the difficulties of the monopolists even at

the expense of apparent sacrifice of their interests 'to the amelioration of the lot of the working classes'? to profess friendship with the so-called moderates (as if there could be any moderation in dealing with a monopoly, anything but for or against)? in short to detach a portion of the people from the people's side, to have it in their midst helpless, dazed, wearied with ceaseless compromise, or certain defeat, and yet to put it before the world as the advanced guard of the revolutionary party, the representative of all that is active or practical of the popular party?

This is the advantage not speculative but certain which sending Socialist members to Parliament would hand over to the reactionists: let us try rather, I say once more, to sustain a great body of workers outside Parliament, call it the labour parliament if you will, and when that is done be sure that its decrees will be obeyed and not those of the Westminster Committee. And whatever may be said of the possibility of such a plan in other countries, in Britain it is possible, because the mere political position of the workers is better here than elsewhere in Europe; even though there are countries in which the suffrage is more extended: the habit of democracy has gained sway over those persons and parties even who in feeling and aspiration are least democratic; and they cannot do what they would, so that any English government Tory as well as Liberal is hampered in its reactionary attempts and does not dare to attack the expression of opinion openly unless driven to despair; the Labour Combination I have been putting before you will not be openly attacked by its enemy the Parliament till it is too late, till it has done the first part of its work by instilling hope in the whole of the workers, the hope of their managing their own affairs and freeing themselves from Monopoly.

Now it will be said and of course truly that the advocates of parliamentary action amongst us are just as desirous of seeing this great labour organization established as we are: but in the first place I cannot help thinking that the scheme of parliament would be found in practice to stand in the way of the formation of that widespread organization with its singleness of aim and directness of action which it seems to me is what we want: that the effort towards success in parliament will swallow up all other effort, that such success in short will come to be looked upon as the end. However, you may say that this mistake can be guarded against and avoided; I am far from sure that it can be, but let that pass: the organization I am thinking of would have a serious point of difference from any that could be formed as a part of a parliamentary plan of action: its aim would be to act directly, whatever was done in it would be done by the people themselves; there would consequently be no possibility of compromise, of the association becoming anything else than it was intended to be; nothing could take its place: before all its members would be put but one alternative to complete success, complete failure, namely. Can as much be said for any plan involving the representatives of the people forming a part of a body whose purpose is the continuous enslavement of the people?

I think I can explain better what is in my mind as to these two plans of action if I give a sketch of what I think would happen if either were adopted: only understand I don't mean to prophesy, only to try to draw out the logical consequences of that adoption. Take the policy of abstention first, and start from where we are now, the Socialist movement still in its intellectual stage: a stage at which only those who have thought about the matter see the necessity of placing society on a new basis; a time in which the necessity is not forced upon them by their immediate needs. While this lasts only those will join the movement with sincerity who have intelligence enough to accept principles and to forecast events from them; but they will form a solid body impossible to suppress or to be discouraged by hope deferred just for that reason; they will teach others, and be taught by the teaching; and as the approaching break-down of the monopolist system comes

closer conviction will be forced on the minds of more and more people, till at last the mere necessities of life will force the main part of the workers to join them; and they will find in them no mere aggregation of discontent, but a body of persons who can teach the aims of Socialism and consult coolly about its methods. They will then be grown into that powerful body I have spoken of, the representative of the society of production, the direct opposition to the society of exploitation which will be represented by the constitutional government, the laws it has made and supports and the organized brute force which it wields. The revolutionary body will find its duties divided into two parts, the maintenance of its people while things are advancing to the final struggle, and resistance to the constitutional authority, including the evasion or disregard of the arbitrary laws of the latter. Its chief weapons during this period will be co-operation and boycotting, the latter including all strikes that may be necessary: whether it will be driven to use further weapons depends on the attitude of the Reaction: that party will probably be paralysed before the steady advance of revolution, and will, as in France in the earlier revolution, use its mechanical brute-force in a wavering undecided half-hearted manner: it is by no means certain now, as it was in the Chartist times, that the threat of the imminence of a general strike would be the signal for the reaction to launch its army upon the people. Indeed supposing such a crisis at hand, the revolutionists might forestall the actual battle by using for once and for a definite purpose its enemy parliament by sending members to outvote the reactionists on that occasion: by doing which if they did not get actual command of the army &c. they would at least paralyse its action by making that action of doubtful legality: for though a revolutionist may fight well with a rope round his neck, such a necklace is an awkward adornment for your counter-revolutionist. I have nothing further to say of the revolutionists beyond this stage except that the long experience they would have had in their earlier stage of a labour organization, of administering the affairs of the real producers, and still more the experience of administration they would have spread during that period would make the Morrow of the Revolution a much easier time to them than it would be to a party that had not already learned to help itself. For the rest I should say that our friend Paul Lafargue's late article in *Commonweal* points out clearly enough the direction of the steps to be taken in the re-organization of society.

Now for a brief history of the plan of parliamentary action: Starting from the same point as the abstentionists they have to preach an electioneering campaign as an absolute necessity, and to set about it as soon as possible: they will then have to put forward a programme of reforms deduced from the principles of Socialism, which we will admit they will always keep to the front as much as possible; they will necessarily have to appeal for support (i.e. votes) to a great number of people who are not convinced Socialists, and their programme of reforms will be the bait to catch these votes: and to the ordinary voter it will be this bait which will be the matter of interest, and not the principle for whose furtherance they will be intended to act as an instrument: when the voting recruit reads the manifesto of a parliamentary body, he will scarcely notice the statement of principles which heads it, but he will eagerly criticize the proposals of measures to be carried which he finds below it: and yet if he is to be honestly dealt with, he will have to be told that these measures are not put forward as a solution of the social question, but are — in short, groundbait for him so that he may be led at last to search into and accept the real principles of Socialism. So it will be impossible to deal with him honestly, and the Socialist members when they get into Parliament will represent a heterogeneous body of opinion, ultra-radical, democratic, discontented non-politics, rather than a body of Socialists; and it will be their opinions and prejudices that will sway the action of the members in Parliament. With these

fetters on them the Socialist members will have to act, and whatever they propose will have to be a mere matter of compromise: yet even those measures they will not carry: because long before their party gets powerful enough to form even a formidable group for alliance with other parties, one section or other of ordinary politicians will dish them, and will carry measures that will pass current for being the very thing the Socialists have been asking for; because once get Socialist M.P.s, and to the ordinary public they will be the representatives of the only Socialists. Now the result of such a 'success' will be the necessity of a new Socialist programme on the one hand and on the other an accession of strength to the moderates; and this kind of thing will go on again and again with at least an appearance of defeat every time; and every time a temporary gain not for the Socialists but either for the reactionists or at least for the progressive Democratic party. Which latter (always a weak and inefficient party in this country) will be to a certain extent permeated with a kind of semi-Socialism, but will by that very fact lose many of their members to the 'moderate' reactionists on one hand, though on the other they will offer a recruiting ground for the Socialists. Well so it will go on till either the Socialist party in Parliament disappears into the advanced Democratic party, or until they look round and find that they, still Socialists, have done nothing but give various opportunities to the reactionists for widening the basis of monopoly by creating a fresh middle-class under the present one, and so staving off the day of the great change. And when they become conscious of that and parliamentary action has been discovered to be a failure, what can they do but begin all over again, and try to form the two camps, each of them conscious of their true position of being the one monopolists, and the other the slaves of monopoly.

Yet even supposing that they succeed and by means of tormenting the constitutional Parliament into cumulative reforms manage to bring us to the crisis of revolution, their difficulties would be far from an end then: for they would then have to govern a people who had rather been ignorantly betrayed into Socialism than have learned to accept it as an understood necessity: and in governing such a people they would have this disadvantage, that they would not have the education which their helping in the organization of the society of production would have given them, teaching them as it were by the future and forming the habits of social life without which any scheme of Socialism is but the mill-wheel without the motive power. Their very success would lead to counter revolution; because they would have to repress the ignorance which they had not grappled with in their militant times, by brute force. Doubtless this counter revolution would lead us in the long run into a condition of true society again: but need we go through all that trouble, confusion and misery? let us begin to work against the counter revolution, by being sure that we who call ourselves Socialists understand what we are aiming at, and should feel at home in our new country when we get there — we and all that we lead into the new country.

But I will say no more at present against that parliamentary action, which some of our friends think the step now necessary to the furtherance of Socialism, but will rather try to sum up what I have had to say in favour of the plan of abstention from that action. It is above all things necessary that the working-classes should feel their present position, that they understand that they are in an inferior position not accidentally but as a necessary consequence of the position of the classes that live by monopoly. When they have learnt this lesson they will learn with it the necessity for a change in the basis of society: they are strong enough if they combine duly to bring that change about; but their due combination depends on their knowing that from the present rules of society they will get nothing but concessions intended to perpetuate their present

slavery: they must know they are invited to vote and take some part in government in order that they may help their rulers to find out what must be conceded, and what may be refused to the workers; and to give an appearance of freedom of action to them. But the workers can form an organization which without heeding Parliament can force from the rulers what concessions may be necessary in the present and whose aim would be the total abolition of the monopolist classes and rule. The action such an organization would be compelled to take would educate its members in administration, so that on the morrow of the revolution they would be able, from a thorough knowledge of the wants and capabilities of the workers, to carry on affairs with the least possible amount of blunders, and would do almost nothing that would have to be undone, and thereby offer no opportunity to the counter revolution. This seems to me the direct way to the realization of Socialism, and therefore in the long run the shortest way. I admit that it will ask for qualities of patience, devotion and forgetfulness of self in its pioneers, but it is a commonplace to say that impatience, carelessness and egotism are hindrances to any cause, and have to be fought against; and if Socialism militant cannot reckon on enlisting persons who are somewhat above the average, and on staving off others who are a good deal below it, there is nothing to be done but to sit still and see what will happen. That however we shall not and cannot do; something we must do however fatalistic we may be: my hope is that what we shall do will show us to be Socialists in essence and in spirit even now when we cannot be Socialists economically.

Delivery

1. *30th July 1887* at a meeting of the Hammersmith Branch of the Socialist League at Kelmscott House
2. *24th August 1887* at a meeting of the Clerkenwell (Central) Branch of the Socialist League at the Socialist League Hall, 13 Farringdon Street

The Anarchist Library
Anti-Copyright



William Morris
The policy of abstention from parliamentary action
1887

Retrieved on 7 August 2011 from www.marxists.org

theanarchistlibrary.org