

About a Strike

Errico Malatesta

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One issue that rightly preoccupies revolutionaries is how the revolution will come about.

The established society cannot last, they say, but still it does reflect huge interests, is backed by a heap of time-honored prejudices, and, above all, is defended by a mighty military organization that will fall apart just as soon as the spell of discipline is broken, but in the meantime is a redoubtable guard dog and means of repression. Where are we going to find the strength and the unity of action required to win? Plots and conspiracies are fine when it comes to mounting a specific action needing only a handful of people, but they are generally unable to determine a popular upheaval sufficiently widespread to stand a chance of winning. Spontaneous movements are nearly always too small and too localized, they erupt too recklessly and are all too easily smothered to give any hope of turning them easily into a general uprising.

Reasoning along these lines, the conclusion almost always reached is that the best occasions for attempting a social revolution is provided by some political movement mounted by the bourgeoisie, or a war.

Though we are always ready to take the opportunity that wars and political upheavals may offer us for expropriation and social revolution, we do not believe that those are the most likely, nor the most desirable of circumstances.

A war can trigger a revolution, at least in the defeated country. But war arouses the evil seed of patriotic feelings, inspiring hatred of the country that won, and the revolution to which this might give rise—being largely prompted by the wish for revenge and confronted with the necessity of resisting invasion—has a tendency to go no further than a political to-do. There is even a danger that the people, irked by the depredations and bullying of foreign soldiery, might forget about the fight against the bourgeois and fraternize with the latter in a war against the invader.

A political upheaval carries the same sort of dangers, albeit on a smaller scale; the people blithely accept as friends all who are fighting against the government, and the socialists, who naturally would be trying to turn the turmoil into social revolution, would stand accused of placing victory in jeopardy and serving the government's interests.

Such events are becoming increasingly unlikely. The bourgeoisie has grown somewhat inured to uprisings ever since the emergence of the socialist party that threatens to dash victory from its hand, and the people, enlightened by experience and propaganda, are no longer so eager to let themselves be slaughtered for the glory and profit of their bosses. Then again, the bourgeoisie

has no real incentive to make revolution—in the western European countries and in the Americas at any rate. In those countries, it is the bourgeoisie that actually governs. The fact that part of it finds itself in dire straits and facing bankruptcy and poverty does not depend on the political institutions and cannot be altered by a mere change of government. It is, rather, the outcome of the very capitalist system to which the bourgeoisie owes its existence. And, no matter how inevitable and imminent war may appear for a thousand economic and political reasons, it is always put off and becomes more and more unlikely to happen as the advances of international socialism make rulers frightened to plunge into the darkness that follows a great European war.

Anyway, wars and political upheavals are not dependant on us, and our propaganda, by its very nature, tends to make them increasingly harder and unlikely. It would therefore be very bad tactics on our part if we were to base our plans and hopes on events that we cannot and wish not to trigger.

In fact, we believe that the prejudice of waiting for opportunities that we cannot bring about ourselves is largely to blame for the sort of inertia and fatalism to which some among us sometimes succumb. Of course, he who cannot do anything or thinks he cannot do anything, is inclined to let things take their course and to leave it to the course of nature to sort matters out. And that very same prejudice may well be to blame for the fact that lots of sound socialists, whose warm love for the people and ardent revolutionary spirits we could not deny, believe they are obliged to lay down their weapons and wait for something to fall from the sky. Unable to bear such idleness, they throw themselves, just for something to do, into the electoral contest and then, bit by bit, abandon the revolutionary route altogether and discover that they have, against their wills, turned into vulgar politicians. How often what looks like—and may well have turned out to be—treachery has started out as zeal and impatience that have lost their way!

Luckily there are other avenues by which revolution can come about, and among these it seems to us that labor agitation in strike form is the most important one.

The great strikes that have occurred over recent years in a number of European countries were already pointing revolutionaries towards that somewhat neglected method; but, of them all, the colossal strike by dock workers in London a short while ago has proved especially instructive.¹

Here are the facts:

Following a short but busy propaganda campaign, the casual laborers of London docks, numbering in the region of 50,000, organized themselves into a union and quickly came out on strike. Casuals are jobbing workers who report to the gates of the yards each morning and, if there is work for them, are employed for the day or indeed for just several hours at a stretch. These are poor laborers living in cramped and fetid slums, feeding themselves or rather keeping their hunger at bay with waste food and tainted spirits, and dressing in rags. Living day to day, their work always uncertain, exposed to competition from all the starvelings pouring in from every part of England and the rest of the world, well used to vying with one another for a bit of work,

¹ Malatesta is referring to what has come to be known as the Great Dock Strike, which took place in London from 14 August to 16 September 1889. This is generally acknowledged as the start of British “new unionism,” which differed from the older craft unionism for its effort to achieve a broad base of unskilled and semi-skilled workers and its focus on industrial action. There is evidence that Malatesta, recently returned from South America, was in London at the time, before moving to Nice to edit *L’Associazione*. Therefore he was a direct witness of the strike.

scorned by workers from the better-off trades, they certainly satisfied every condition necessary to be regarded as unsuited to organization and a conscious revolt against the exploiters. Yet it took only two years of propaganda carried out by a handful of willing men capable of addressing them in intelligible terms for these men to prove that they are well able to join forces, stand straight, and command the attention of the entire civilized world. Which just goes to show that the people are actually more advanced than some would believe, and that a slow but dogged elaboration is under way among the masses of the people, all unbeknownst to the philosophers, preparing them for the great day that will alter the face of the world.

The strikers were demanding six pence an hour (rather than five) for a day's work; and eight pence an hour for labor before 8 o'clock in the morning and after 6 o'clock in the evening; the abolition of the arrangement whereby work was sub-contracted to second-level exploiters who, in turn, often sub-contracted further; a minimum of four-hours work for those hired on, and a few other regulatory changes.

The strike of the casual workers had scarcely been declared when all the other unions connected with the loading and unloading of cargo ships—stevedores, coal porters, lightermen, carters, etc.—also stopped work, some of them not even seeking any improvements but just out of solidarity with the casuals. They rejected all compromise and any concessions until the casuals got what they wanted.

Carried away by example, other unions unrelated to the docks simultaneously tabled their own demands and went on strike.

And London, that great capital of monopolies, witnessed as many as 180 thousand people on strike, and impressive demonstrations by men with gaunt faces, dressed in rags, whose severe glowering struck terror into the souls of the bourgeoisie.

But there was more:

Workers employed in the gas plants offered to come out on strike. London would have been left in darkness come nightfall and the homes of the bourgeois would have been exposed to grave danger. The same offer was made by the tram-drivers, the steelworkers, and the woodworkers.

In short, there was quite an upsurge in enthusiasm, a rapture of solidarity, a reawakening of dignity that looked like bringing about a general strike; with production, transport and public services brought to a halt in a city of some 5 million inhabitants!

Other cities in England felt the impact of the example set, and more or less large strikes were erupting here and there. At home and abroad, the proletariat realized that the London workers were fighting in the common cause, and extraordinary assistance flooded in from everywhere.

The strikers were to be admired for the steadfastness with which they endured the harshest privations, and for the fortitude with which they rejected any suggestion of compromise, for the intelligence they displayed in anticipating what would be needed for the struggle, and for the spirit of solidarity and sacrifice that prevailed in their ranks.

They strove to feed a population, women and children included, of upwards of half a million people; to raise subscriptions and collections across the city; to keep up with vast correspondence by letter and telegram; to organize meetings, demonstrations, and talks; to keep an eye out, put pen to paper, and stay alert lest the bosses successfully trick English or foreign poor into blacklegging; to monitor all the docks' entrances to see if there were people going to work and how many. All of this, stunningly well done by unsolicited volunteers.

There was one noteworthy incident: a shipload of ice arrived and a rumor was rife that this ice was meant for the hospitals. The strikers raced in such numbers to help unload it without a

care for whether they would be paid for the job or not. The sick—and especially the patients in the hospitals—were not to suffer on account of the strike.

No doubt about it; such folk deserve to and are capable of looking after their affairs for themselves and, if free, would be guided in their labors by this care for the general good—something entirely absent from the bourgeois system of production!

Those workers possessed a wide-ranging, often instinctive, cognisance of their rights and their usefulness to society, and had the combative mentality required to make a revolution; they felt a vague yearning for more radical measures that might end their suffering once and for all, and erase from production all the bosses and go-betweens who, though they produce not a thing, claim the greater part of what is produced, and turn work, which should be an obligation—something to glory in and derive satisfaction from—into a hell of pain and a badge of inferiority.

The city was in uproar, provisions had largely been exhausted, many factories had been closed down due to coal shortages or lack of raw materials, and with the growth in discomfort, irritation was on the rise. On the street corners, talk was beginning to turn to raiding the wealthier districts.

A blast of social revolution was blowing down the streets of the great city.

Unfortunately the masses are still imbued with the authority principle and believe that they cannot and should not to do anything without orders from above. And so it was that the strikers were swayed by a committee of men who certainly deserve praise for the part that they had played in the laying of the groundwork for the strike or for previous services, but who were plainly not suited to the position into which they had been hoisted by circumstances. Faced with a brand new situation that had moved beyond anything they had aspired to and for which they had no heart, they could not grapple with the responsibilities incumbent upon them and drive things forward, and they did not have the modesty and intelligence to stand aside and let the masses act. They began by hobbling the strike with an anti-general strike demonstration, and carried on doing all in their power to keep the peace and keep the strike within the parameters of the law. Later, after the moment of opportunity had passed, and weariness had begun to undermine the enthusiasm, they pressed for what they had previously rejected and issued a call for a general strike, only to retract it due to fresh fears and pressures.

The city's mayor and high clergy, who had been standing idly by, caring nothing for the workers' suffering, poured back into the city once they saw that things were dragging out too long and that business was in difficulty and facing ruination. Overcome as they were by tender feelings for the dearly beloved good folk, they offered to mediate... And after five weeks of heroic effort, the whole thing ended in a compromise, in the wake of which the workers returned to work with the promise that their demands would be met beginning on 4 November.

Behold how easily a revolution may come about and, alas! How easily the opportunity can be allowed to slip away.

If only in London the general strike had been encouraged and allowed to proceed, the situation would have become very problematic for the bourgeoisie, and revolution would have quickly occurred to the people as the simplest solution. Factories closed; railways, trams, buses, carriages and cabs brought to a standstill; public services cut off; food supplies suspended; nights spent without gaslight; hundreds of thousands of workers on the streets—what a situation for a group of men, had they but had a little grey matter and a modicum of gumption!

If only a little plain and clear-cut propaganda on behalf of violent expropriation had been mounted beforehand; if some gangs of valiants had set about seizing and handing out foodstuffs, clothing, and the other useful items with which the warehouses were so packed and of which proletarians were in such dire need; if only other groups or isolated individuals had forced or tricked their way into the banks and other government offices in order to set them alight, and others had entered the homes of the gentry and billeted the people's wives and children there; and if others had only given their just deserts to the most grasping bourgeois and others put out of action government leaders and any who, in time of crisis, might take their places, the police commanders, the generals and all the upper echelons of the army, taken by surprise in their beds or as they set foot outside their homes: in short, if only there had been a few thousand determined revolutionaries in London, which is so huge, then today the vast metropolis—and with it, England, Scotland, and Ireland—would be facing into revolution.

And such things, so very problematic and almost impossible to pull off—should they be put in readiness and prepared by some central committee—turn instead into the easiest thing in the world if revolutionaries, agreed on their aims and methods, act together with their comrades to push things in the direction they think best when the opportunity comes along, rather than waiting for anybody's opinions or orders.

There are more than enough people of courage, men of determination, in every city and town. If nothing else, the high crime rate would suggest as much; it is very often nothing but the unruly eruption of penned-up energies that can find no useful outlet in the present state of affairs. What is missing is the propaganda: when someone has a clear picture in his mind of the goal to be achieved and the means leading to it, he will act unsolicited and in the confidence that he is doing good and will feel no fear and no craven hesitancy.

Let us own up to having made mistakes:

Back in the days when anarchist ideas were starting to gain ground within the International, two schools of thought regarding the strike were extant among the proletariat. Some, who did not subscribe to any broad ideals of wholesale emancipation and social change, reckoned that the strike was the best means available to the working man in bettering his circumstances and they reckoned that this, plus the cooperative, ought to be the last word as far as the workers' movement goes.

The others, the authoritarian socialists, grasped and spelled out plainly that the strike was an economic nonsense and that it was powerless to bring any lasting improvement, let alone emancipate the proletariat; but they conceded that it is a fine weapon of propaganda and agitation, made frequent use of it and advocated the general strike as a means of starving the bourgeoisie out and forcing them to surrender. The only thing was that, by virtue of their being authoritarians, they imagined that a general strike could be organized in advance to break out on a specified date scheduled on the agenda of some central committee, once the majority of workers had joined the ranks of the International, and bourgeois exploitation brought to a pretty much peaceful end.

We anarchists, sandwiched between the bourgeois prejudices of one faction and the authoritarian utopianism of the other, were ourselves perhaps somewhat imbued with the old Jacobin mentality that paid small heed to the actions of the masses and thought the latter might be emancipated using the very same methods employed to enslave them, and we were quick to criticize

the strike as an economic weapon and failed to give it its due as an index of moral rebellion. Gradually we surrendered the entire labor movement into the hands of reactionaries and moderates.

We, who mean to engage with any insurrection, no matter how small, we who will feel ashamed if, once the barricades begin to go up somewhere, we do not do all in our power to echo the upheaval or rush to fill the breach, have witnessed tens of thousands of men turning their shields against capital, seen the struggle grow more embittered and taking revolutionary turns... and we have stood idly by, leaving the field open to that class of self-styled revolutionaries who show up primarily to preach restraint and tranquillity and turn everything into an opportunity for them to put forward a candidate.

It is high time we re-examined ourselves. We are certainly not swearing off other means of action at our disposal or that might suit us—but above all else, let us get back among the people.

The masses are led to big demands by way of small requests and small revolts: let us blend with them and spur them forwards. Right across Europe, minds are at present inclined to big strikes by agricultural or industrial workers, strikes that involve vast areas and unions galore. Well, then, let us spark and let us organize as many strikes as we can; let us see to it that the strike becomes a contagion and that, once one erupts, it spreads to ten or a hundred different trades in ten or a hundred towns.

But let every strike carry its revolutionary message: let every strike summon up men of vigor to chastize the bosses and, above all, to commit trespasses against property and thus show the strikers how much easier it is to take than to ask.

A revolution that grows out of a huge proliferation of strikes would have the merit of finding the question already posed in economic terms and would more securely lead to the comprehensive emancipation of humanity.

The tactics we propose will bring us into direct and unbroken contact with the masses, will provide us with a bridgehead for importing and spreading our propaganda everywhere, and will allow us to set those examples and carry out that *propaganda by deeds*, which we are forever preaching but so rarely practise, not because of any lack of determination or courage, but for want of opportunity.

So let us be off in search of such opportunities.

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