Responsibility and Solidarity in the Labor Struggle

Their Present Limits and Their Possible Extension

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Text:

(The substance of a paper read on December 5, 1899, before the Freedom Discussion Group, London by M. Nettlau.)

The following remarks, based on an article published by me in Freedom, November 1897, must not be understood as wishing to replace direct Anarchist propaganda by a "remedy or a "hobby," they simply raise a general subject which has been, as far as I know and am told, neglected up till now: the possibility of some new form and combination in the labor struggle; and I am anxious for Anarchist criticism, which, apart from the general possibility has to examine whether the means suggested are on the road to freedom or the contrary; consequently, whether they merit the support of Anarchists or not.

Progress in the labor movement seems to me to be desperately slow after all. The ideas that to us appear so clear, self-evident and acceptable, often meet with such an amount of prejudice and ignorance that it may be doubtful whether great masses will ever consciously and seriously accept them unless they see before them real changes, or at least object lessons on the largest scale. And even where such object lessons already exist to a certain degree, when the economic solidarity of labor is demonstrated not by the propaganda of free ideas but by direct material advantages, however small they are--as in the case of trade unionism and cooperation--the real bulk of the masses does not get in proper touch with them in spite of a century's agitation and propaganda.

Whether this pessimistic view is justified or not, the usefulness of finding new means, if possible, of strengthening the position of labor will not be contested; and many permanent or passing means of action have been suggested, and even tried, during late years: such as the general strike, the military strike, the international miners' strike, the march of unemployed or strikers toward the capital (in America and recently in France), the Sabotage (slow and spoiled work, "go canny," advocated in France), etc. Efforts are also made to use organized labor or the working classes as producers and consumers for direct economic action, viz., a combination of Trade Unionism and Cooperation, cooperative colonies, the labor exchange (the American expression for the direct exchange of the products of labor) etc. And it is in this connection that I venture to suggest some other means still. The position of Anarchists towards it, can only be the same as towards the other means just mentioned,
namely practical help when possible, but no deviation from the propaganda of our full and ultimate aims of free men in a free society.

What is wanted, besides the direct intellectual propaganda of Anarchist ideas and real revolutionary action which is independent of all preliminary discussion, seems to be that large and increasing masses of the people should be brought to understand and embrace the principle of human dignity and freedom and of solidarity and try to live up to these principles. It is further necessary that the inseparable connection of both principles be recognized; for the first principle alone, if superficially interpreted, may lead to individualist self-seeking, reckless advance on the shoulder of our fellows, whilst solidarity without personal dignity and freedom is just what we see around us today and what hurts us at every moment—the solidarity of the compact majority with the worst features of the present system: competition, patriotism, religion, political parties, etc. Consequently, a full and conscious combination of the feelings of freedom and solidarity is necessary, and people advanced thus far will be more inclined to accept our ideas, nay, more able to understand them than many strata of the population today. So I think I may be right in fixing this as a criterion, a touchstone of possible means of action; and means of action which do not come up to it ought to be improved upon.

Before entering on my subject proper, I must state my opinions on two subjects about which I am, I believe, a heretic front current economic creeds and, in any case, from the usual arguments in agitation. My further conclusions will be based upon these two preliminary points.

One of them deals with what is called the public, and my belief is that this factor is too little taken into consideration in labor struggles. The workers of a trade are organized and fight hard for the betterment of their economic positions; the employers of labor do the same and may be forced, by successful strikes or by the power of a strong trade union, to make concessions to labor. But the consumers of the products of that trade are, as a rule, not organized at all, do nothing to get their interest efficiently served and at the smallest possible cost; and hence it is only natural that the capitalists endeavor to, and succeed, in getting almost the full price of their concessions to labor back from the buying public. Labor, so far as I know, takes no interest in this, the final settlement of the struggle. So prices go up or the quality of the product becomes inferior; and the public pays the cost of the concessions wrung by labor from capital, as the weakest party necessarily must.

Now, who are the public? All consumers, of course; but for the present purpose I may divide them into two sections: those with large incomes whom the fluctuations of prices do not seriously affect (and they may be left out of consideration here), and the immense mass of lesser and small incomes whom the slightest alteration in prices inconveniences or really hurts, deprives and drags further down. Considerable numbers of these may cheerfully bear the new burden, the outcome of a successful strike of their fellow workers, either as convinced Socialists and Anarchists or from the instinctive feeling of solidarity and love of fair play that makes them the basis of our hopes for a brighter future; but I feel that I should delude myself if I shut my eyes to the fact that the great mass, not touched by progressive ideas and noble sentiments (if they were, how could they bear with the present system?), feel no increase of sympathy for organized labor in such cases, and remain dull, indifferent, if not prejudiced and hostile, as before. I imagine, for instance, that if during a miners' strike the husband, say a laborer, sympathizes with the strikers and even willingly subscribes a few pence towards their funds, the wife—who has to make both ends meet as before on the same wages, with coal at famine prices—will be far from sharing his sympathy in many cases and
will not fail to bring this fact home to him, and so the feelings of both will neutralize each other at the best.

 Strikes of this kind, then, leave things unchanged economically and morally, even if the strikers be victorious. For the economic concessions are shifted by the capitalist on the shoulders of the buying public, and are most bitterly felt by the mass of the workers the poorer they are; and the moral elevation and enthusiasm of the strikers and their sympathizers are balanced by the depression and dumb hostility of the masses remaining—who must really pay the bill.

 It would, therefore, be useful if means were found by which the public (the mass of the workers) could be interested in a material, and not only in a sentimental way, as well as the strikers themselves. Once interested seriously their help may be enormous: as, besides sympathy and subscriptions, they can wield that most powerful weapon—the boycott.

 This is the first of my two preliminary points.

 The second heretical opinion of mine concerns the responsibility of the workers for the work they do. This responsibility is not recognized at present to any extent. It is customary to consider a man an honest workingman if he works for wages—never mind what he does. There is hardly any occupation which is shunned and execrated in an effective way, to make people seriously ashamed of it, however mean and infamous it may be. Apart from the drastic example of tenders for the hangman's post, when we sometimes read that persons of all occupations come forward, workers and middle class,—is it not the height of the ambition of many to be a policeman, and are not policemen as well as soldiers fed to a large extent by foolish women of the people, poor slaveys and cooks? Soldiers, who in this country enlist voluntarily, know that their usual occupation will not be to defend "their country" which nobody attacks; but to repress one after the other rebellions of poor, badly armed natives, and to do this as mercilessly as possible so that each rebellion be crushed in the beginning and may not spread. Young fellows, then, are not ashamed to enlist for this continuous police and hangman's work, nor are the masses of the people ashamed to be friends with soldiers. Again, there is never a scarcity of brokers' men, rent and tax collectors, land agents and their crowbarmen in Ireland, etc. So-called public opinion, which talks so much of humanity and civilization, seems to overlook these fiends in our midst; and, if it takes notice of them, it is to commiserate them as it is not their fault.

 I go further and say: whilst these scum of mankind enjoy little popularity after all with most people, nefarious trades and occupations are carried on by much larger bodies of men to whom no one seems to take an objection. I mean the vast mass of workers who do the manual work in producing the inferior houses, inferior clothing, inferior food and so forth, which degrade the lives, drag down the minds and ruin the bodies of their own fellow workers. Who built the slums, and—which is worse—who keeps them in a state that permits their continuous exploitation, by patching them up again and again with sham repairs? Who produces the shoddy clothes, the abominable food and drink which the poor alone buy? Who, finally, palms them off on the public, the poor—after others have made them look bright outside, if this trouble is taken at all,—by any amount of persuasion, plainly spoken by false pretenses and lies? All this is done (though inspired by the capitalists, no doubt, who alone profit by it) by large branches of the hard working, respected and well organized building, textile and mercantile trades. This is repulsive and revolting to me, and I see no excuse for it if no effort is ever made to recognize and to admit the fact at all, much less to do away with it.
At the bottom lays the old, indifferent saying: "I must do it; I cannot afford to pick my work. If I do not do it, somebody else will. I do not profit by it; I would myself prefer to do really useful work. But I am not responsible for it: the responsibility rests on the employer who orders me to do as I do."

My opinion is that as long as this shirking, mercenary excuse is recognized and generally accepted, things must continue as at present and a brighter future will never come. Capitalists, according to this view, will always be able to hire one half of the workers to repress the other half. They will, moreover, continue to keep the bulk of the workers in mental and physical degradation, weakened, void of energy, ignoring even most of the endless joys of life, through their dull, depressing surroundings, the poorness of the food which builds up their bodies and brains. And the practical, manual work of doing this is done by the workers themselves--who suffer from it personally as well as the rest. Direct murder, say by soldiers who shoot strikers, and this indirect murder by producing with their own toil the horrible surroundings, food, etc., which wreck their fellow workers--both actions are equally detrimental in their consequences and must be recognized as such before an improvement is to be thought of.

This is what I call the responsibility of the workers for what they do. And I further say that the absence of this feeling of responsibility degrades these workers themselves, as well as their victims. No one will deny that policemen and soldiers are degraded and brutalized by their continuous exercise of professional man-hunting, treachery and murder on sight. I do not hesitate to say that the same happens to workers who exercise crafts and trades based on deceit. Take, for example, the plumber who continually makes people believe that he repairs the pipes and drains, yet never does such a thing, or the shop-assistant who spends the day in making people buy, not what they want, but what the shopowner wants to get rid of first because it brings the largest profit, or because it won’t keep any longer. I do not think that the character of these men--honest, hard-working and personally kind though they may be at the beginning--improves in the long run and it is more likely to become callous and indifferent than free and enthusiastic. In the same way, the multitude of producers of inferior and indifferent goods cannot possibly take an interest in their work. But no man can live without such an interest in his work or his faculties will be stunned, his intellect will shrink and he will, in the end, become unable to grasp even the ideas of freedom and revolt, much less to act on them. Compare these men with those depicted by William Morris in the Revival of Handicraft, News from Nowhere, etc., and it becomes clear what I mean.

So everybody is bound to be it victim of this, as the perpetrators of unsocial acts never fail to be victims thereof themselves. All workingmen execrate spies and informers; most of them execrate blacklegs: unless this feeling is extended to all who do unsocial work, work that is injurious to their fellow men, I cannot see hope in the future.

This is the second preliminary point, and I have at last arrived at the main subject, which will be dealt with more briefly is the ground has been cleared by these remarks.

I wanted to find a means of action which would lead large masses of the people to a conception and acceptance of a real and serious combination of the inseparable feelings of human dignity and freedom and solidarity; I believe one such means to be obtainable, if the two elements just discussed are properly combined and utilized, namely: the necessity to interest the public (the mass of the workers) economically in strikes as well as strikers themselves,--and the necessity for the workers of a feeling of responsibility for what they do, making them use their efforts to cease to injure their fellow men by unsocial work.
Such means would give an impetus to the feelings of self-respect and of solidarity and would consequently lead large masses on the road to freedom, making them amenable to farther propaganda, as the teachings of propaganda would no longer to such a degree be contradicted by their and our own lives as is the case at present.

The main outlines of such means are, in my opinion, for the workers: to refuse to do work detrimental to the public, strengthening their position by exposing to the public plainly how they are deceived and defrauded; and for the public: to support such movements, strikes based on such grounds, by active sympathy and the boycott. Such strikes may end by a gain to the strikers and to the public, this time really at the cost of the capitalist, reducing his rate of profit. They cannot destroy the root of the system, as no strike can unless it be the determined refusal to work for others, the general strike, the social revolution; but they can link together the working classes to a greater extent than they are at present; strikes would lose their individualist character and become matters of collective interest, which they are today only by sentiment and the personal conviction of some, not by their economic basis.

In practice those tactics may assume, of course, manifold forms. They ought to form part and body of the conscience of trades unionists and Socialists before all; after this, practical efforts will not be wanting.

If for example the organized building trades would resolve that no unionist may touch slums--helping neither to erect nor to repair them--at the same time exposing to the public the hopelessly unsanitary character of all patchwork in this direction, the question of housing would come before the public in a larger sense than it ever has previously in spite of all committees, meetings, newspaper campaigns etc. No wonder that the people remained indifferent to all this agitation, as they saw that in reality all goes on as before; their own friends and neighbors, if in the building trade, perpetuating the housing misery by their ridiculous repairs, whilst they themselves, perhaps, if in the retail trade, return the compliment by selling poisoned stuff to eat and to drink to the builders, laborers, etc. One cuts the other's throat and the capitalist pulls the strings. If house property is condemned at last, this is done neither by the people who inhabit it and need but leave it alone, nor by the workers who repair it and need but leave it alone also, but by the sanitary authorities, who act in solidarity with the rich classes, protecting them from infection by centers of disease! Initiative and self-respect are little known among the victims of this system, and no effort ought to be spared to create them, and the feeling of responsibility is one of the means to this effect.

If the building trades of London resolved, not to lay their hands on the immense areas of slums in the East and the South of London, by one stroke the question not only of housing but also of landlordism would come to the front. The cry of the public in reply would be: No Rent! and the shop assistants might help by coming out, refusing to handle further the abominable food which they now sell. This might give to some East Enders the idea to inspect the housing accommodation in the West End closer or to study the food supply at the docks. In any case there would be a slight chance of getting rid of the worst features of the East End--which is something--and the amount of new and clean work which the building trade would get to do in better surroundings would repay them for the sacrifice of such a strike.

Let the textile trades expose the shoddy clothes production and refuse to produce them any longer. Even smaller sections--who might be occupied in making such goods look bright, smooth and durable on the outside, could do something to lay this before the public
and set things going.

Again, as to chemical works, white lead hells and the like, where the work itself, not the product, is ruinous to health, no amount of commiseration and pity nor legislation seems effective; to make these places deserted, shame ought to be heaped on those who allow themselves to be murdered there, considering them worse than blacklegs as they really are; for they keep these places going, and as long as they are worked, new victims—ignorant, sometimes, on entering work—are attracted day by day to fill the ranks thinned by the collapse of these inevitable victims.

Or might not the shop assistants win many of their immediate demands if they seriously resolved to consider it as dishonorable to tell lies to the public as they do now to make large sales to maintain or to better their position? The public would stand by them naturally, boycotting the obstinate shopkeeper who would be left alone with his discredited inferior stuff. It is really hard for the public at large to feel sympathy with this class of workers as they are at present: we may be sorry for their long hours of work and submit in good humor to the inconvenience caused sometimes to us by early closing, but we know that our sympathy will not prevent the salesmen selling us stale food for fresh, if the shopkeeper expects them to do so.

In short, as consumers we cannot feel sympathy with the tools of the capitalist and as the great masses in both cases are workers, they remain divided and hostile among themselves and only practical action, mutual solidarity can overcome this existing hostility; conviction and sentiment are good factors also, but do not meet all cases.

I think that these examples, well or ill chosen as they may be, illustrate at any rate my meaning, which does not stand or fall with the value of these examples, however. I fully see the difficulty of making a start in this direction, and suggest the discussion of the subject of Responsibility as the first step. Once a principle is understood and accepted by however few, men come forward, uncalled, unprepared, unorganized, to act upon it. A movement may start in the smallest shop by the workers throwing down their tools and refusing to do any longer their worthless, unsocial work; or it may be inaugurated in the orthodox way by resolutions of congresses, etc. The idea is, after all, only a small step forward in altruism: if a man who helps to lower the wages, etc., of his fellow-workers is despised as a blackleg on account of his unsocial act in this question, let this be extended to all unsocial work; and, if the particular workers will not see this first, let the public see it and act upon it.

All this may sound hard and heartless, but I see only two alternatives: either be purely sentimental, shut your eyes to reason, pity everybody, excuse everything and you must end by crying over the soldier killed and wounded or the policeman sometimes come to grief in the exercise of their duties. Or be logical--and then you cannot find an excuse for all this, except the altogether untrained state of public opinion on this matter and your next step will be to try to raise public opinion on the question. In ignoring or denying the principle of responsibility one simply follows either the fallacious ways of superficiality and cowardice, saddling somebody else with what we shirk ourselves, or of mere sentimentalism, instead of accepting at last an unwelcome truth. Unwelcome I call it, because it apparently increases the work that remains to be done before a real change can be expected,—but as I said before if the people remain as they are, a change will never come.

It will be clear from the preceding that my suggestion is twofold: of raising the feeling of responsibility and of utilizing it for the, so to speak, collectivist strikes in the public interest as described. If the latter are judged to be impracticable, the former proposal remains unshaken and other means ought to be found to create and to utilize this all important
feeling. I strongly feel that it is unworthy of men to do to their fellow men whatever harm the capitalist bids them to do, justified in their belief by the shallow excuse of: I am only a tool. This may do for those who accept the present system and are satisfied to be the tools of the capitalists and the enslavers of their fellow men. But those who do such unsocial acts and yet reject the present system are, unconsciously, cowards, who will never really overthrow it. I want men to become free in their own minds first, then refuse to do work that perpetuates the misery and slavery of their fellowmen and by this to create a broad current of sympathy and solidarity, the proper basis for further action.

This economic action seems to me to be nearest to a man who feels free himself and finds the basis of his freedom in the freedom and wellbeing of all others. If he cannot, by refusing to work for the capitalist altogether, make an end to the present system, he will try at any rate not to work to the detriment of his fellowmen, impelled by his own self-respect and unheeding even whether their solidarity responds immediately or not. This is the Anarchist way of doing ourselves what we wish to see done.

The old political and authoritarian way is that of washing our hands of it, proclaiming these things as inevitable and thereby perpetuating them, trusting that others will do something for us which we ourselves will not or cannot do (terms but too often interchangeable!). Not accepting this finest principle in politics, we ought to reject it in social matters in the largest degree and hence emphasize the responsibility of everyone for what he does.

I will but add that in discussing this subject the term morality should not be used in the sense of my requiring the workers to become more moral. I have not used this word in this connection and it is open to misunderstanding. I want them to become self-respecting, dignified, free before all; and then their own feeling will tell them to refuse unsocial acts in the widest sense as they refuse to become informers and blacklegs. It is very well to say: first destroy the capitalist system and then they will acquire these qualities; but who is to destroy this system, we must ask, since Marx's dogma that the capitalists will swallow one another until none are left, no longer comforts us it did so long the Social-Democrats?

In conclusion, I repeat that I do not wish to lessen the importance of any existing method of propaganda, but would like to see the present method discussed, especially when Anarchists meet trades unionists. An extension of trades union action from mere trade matters to efforts for public emancipation might be an ultimate outcome and would win the sympathies of all who feel free themselves and want all others to be free as well.

I should also like to see previous efforts in the same direction which I omit, communicated here.

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