

Direct Action

Emile Pouget

Direct Action is the classic statement of revolutionary syndicalism. Against the slavery that is capitalism, Pouget proposes not faith in the go-betweens of parliament (or union leaderships!) but workers' own action. Action to win small victories, strengthening and inspiring the working class for the big one: the destruction of capitalism and rebuilding society from the bottom up.

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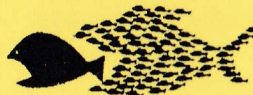
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This drive to expropriation has begun; at every step it is pursued by day to day struggles against the current master of production, the capitalist; his privileges are undermined and eaten away, the legitimacy of his leadership and mastery functions is denied, and the charge that he levies upon everyone's output on the pretext of recompense for capital investment, is considered theft. So, little by little, he is being bundled out of the workshop – until such time as he can be driven out entirely and forever.

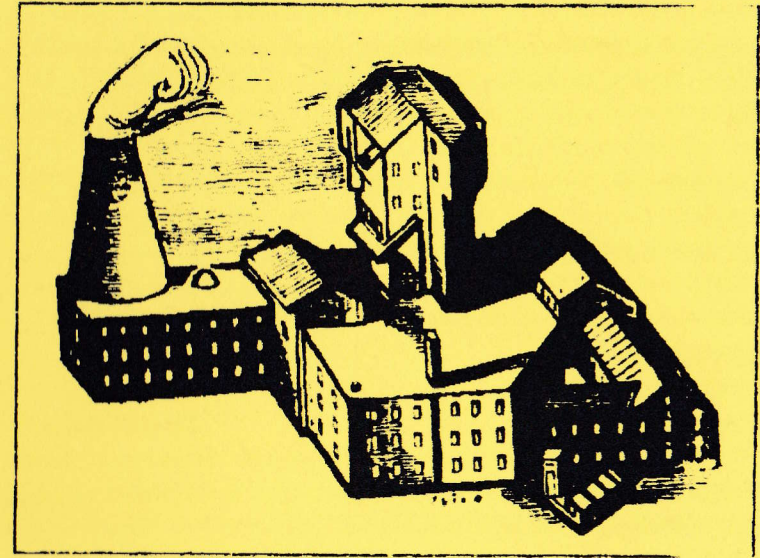
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What we mean by 'direct action'

Direct action is the very symbol of syndicalism in action. The formula speaks of the battle joined against exploitation and oppression. With inherent clarity, it announces the direction and orientation of the working class's endeavours in its relentless attack upon capitalism.

Direct action is such a plain-spoken notion of such self-evident transparency that merely to speak the words defines and explains them. It means that the working class, forever bridling at the existing state of affairs, expects nothing from outside people, powers or forces, but rather creates its own conditions of struggle and looks to itself for its methodology. It means that from now on the *producer* looms before the existing society which recognises only the *citizen*. And that producer, having grasped that any social grouping models itself upon its production system, means to mount a direct attack upon the capitalist mode of production in order to transform it by eliminating the employer and thereby achieving sovereignty in the workshop – the essential precondition for the enjoyment of real freedom.

Democratism denied

Direct action thus implies that the working class subscribes to notions of freedom and autonomy instead of genuflecting before the principle of authority. Now, it is thanks to this authority principle, the pivot of the modern world – democracy being its latest incarnation – that the human being, tied down by a thousand ropes, moral as well as material, is bereft of any opportunity to display will and initiative.

The entire syndicalist approach arises out of this rebuttal of the hypocritical falseness of democratism, this latest incarnation of authority. Direct action therefore arises as simply the fleshing out of the principle of freedom, its realisation among the masses; no longer in the form of abstract, vague, nebulous formulae, but rather as clear-cut, practical notions inspiring the pugnacity that the times require: it is the casting down of the spirit of submissiveness and resignation that degrades individuals and turns them into willing slaves – and a blossoming of the spirit of revolt, the factor fertilising human societies.

This fundamental, thoroughgoing dichotomy between capitalist society and the world of labour, as encapsulated in direct action, was articulated by the *International Working Men's Association* in its motto: 'The emancipation of the workers will be the workers' own doing.' And it made a contribution towards making a reality of this divorce by affording pride of place to economic associations. But there was still some confusion regarding the degree to which they would be preponderant. However, the IWMA did have an inkling that the undertaking of remaking society has to begin at the bottom and that political changes are merely a consequence of

amendments made to the system of production. Which is why it hailed the action of trades associations and, of course, legitimised the procedure whereby the vitality and influence appropriate to the body in question, find expression – and which cannot be anything other than direct action.

Direct action is in fact the normal function of the unions and the first cause behind their establishment; it would be a glaring nonsense for such associations to restrict themselves to bring the waged together, the better to adapt to the fate reserved for them in bourgeois society – production for others. It is all too plain that persons of no particularly clear cut social outlooks band together into the trade union for the purposes of *self-defence*, in order to struggle first hand and as individuals. They are drawn to it by a community of interests; they gravitate towards it instinctively. There, in that nursery, the work of fermentation, elaboration and education proceeds; the union raises the consciousness of workers still blinkered by the prejudices inculcated into them by the ruling class; it opens their eyes wide to the overriding necessity of struggle and revolt; it schools them for social battles by marshalling their concerted efforts. It follows from such instruction that every individual ought to act without ever offloading onto others the task of acting in his place. Direct action's very powers to fertilise reside in such exercises in imbuing the individual with a sense of his own worth and in extolling such worth. It marshals human resourcefulness, tempers characters and focuses energies. It teaches self-confidence! And self-reliance! And self-mastery! And shifting for oneself!

Now, if we compare the methods in use in democratic associations or groupings, we find that they have nothing in common with this ongoing tendency to raise consciousness, nor with this adaptation to action that permeates the economic associations. And we have no reason to suppose that the methods extant in the latter can be transposed into the former. Other than on the economic terrain, direct action is a meaningless formula, in that it flies in the face of the operation of democratic groupings, the premise of which is the representative system, implicit in which is that individuals at the grassroots should be inactive. Trust to our representatives! Refer to them! Rely upon them! Leave things to them!

The autonomous and personal approach of the working class, as encapsulated by direct action, is clarified and accentuated by its being made manifest on the terrain of the economy, where all mistakes founder, where misunderstandings are out of place and where every effort serves some useful purpose. There, democracy's contrived combinations whereby persons whose social interests are mutually antagonistic are thrown together simply come apart. Here the enemy is visible. The exploiter and the oppressor cannot hope to conceal themselves behind misleading masks or bamboozle people by dressing themselves up in ideological glad-rags: class enemies they are, and they must be exposed openly and brutally as

such! Here, the struggle is face to face and no holds barred. Every effort strives for some tangible, perceptible outcome; it translates in the short term as some whittling away of the employer's authority, as a relaxation of the shackles binding the working man to the workshop, as a relative improvement in well-being. Which is why, of course, the overriding necessity of some accommodation between class brothers so that they may march into battle side by side, standing up together against the common enemy, is invoked.

So, it follows logically that, the moment that a trade association is set up, one should infer from its inception that, wittingly or unwittingly, the workers banding together there are making ready to look after their affairs for themselves; that they are determined to stand up to their masters and look only to their own efforts for success; that they mean to act directly, without intermediaries, without leaving it up to others to carry out the requisite tasks.

Direct action is, therefore, merely trade union action, stripped of all accretions, freed of all impurities, with none of the buffers that deaden the impact of belligerent upon belligerent, and with none of the deviations that vitiate the meaning and extent of the struggle; it is trade union action without capitalist compromises, without the flirtation with the bosses of which the sycophants of 'social peace' dream; it is trade union action without friends in the government and with no 'go-betweens' horning in on the debate.

Exaltation of the individual

Direct action spells liberation for the masses of humanity hitherto trained in the acceptance of imposed beliefs, their ascent towards reflection and consciousness. It is a summons to all to play their part in the common endeavour; the individual is invited to be a human cipher no more, to look no more to those above or outside of him for his salvation; he is urged to set his hand to the plough rather than submit passively to social inevitabilities. Direct action puts paid to the age of miracles – miracles from Heaven, miracles from the State – and, in contraposition to hopes vested in 'providence' (no matter what they may be) it announces that it will act upon the maxim: salvation lies within ourselves!

This incomparable radiant power of direct action has been recognised by men of varying persuasions and temperaments who have thereby paid homage to this approach, the fruitful social value of which cannot be gainsaid.

Keufer it was who in 1902, apropos of the then precarious trade union circumstances of the glassworkers, (their organisations being in disarray at the time) wrote:

We should not be surprised if politics were not unconnected with these divisions, for all too often, in the social contest, lots of comrades believe in the efficacy of the intervention of politicians to champion their economic interests.

We, on the other hand, reckon that the workers, solidly organised in their trades or industrial unions and federations will be invested with a greater power and authority enough to treat directly with industrialists in the event of disputes, with no assistance other than that forthcoming from the working class which will not be found wanting. The proletariat must look after its own affairs...

And in parliament Marcel Sembat had this to say:

'Direct action? But that is merely the banding-together of the workers into labour unions and federations so that, instead of being beholden for everything to the State, or to the Chamber, and instead of forever doffing their caps to parliament in the hope that it might from time to time scornfully spare them a morsel of its time, the workers can band together and join forces.

The workers agreed with one another, direct action upon the bosses, pressure brought to bear upon the legislator to compel him, should his intervention be required, to concern himself with the workers ...

We know – the unionised say – that mores predate the law and we wish to create the mores beforehand so that the law may the more easily be applied should we be awarded one or so that we may compel its passage should we be forced to wait unduly! For they wish also – and they make no bones about it – to force the law-maker's hand from time to time.

And we law-makers, have we ever needed anyone to force our hand? Do we always concern ourselves, unsolicited, with evils and abuses? Is it not a good thing that those who are afflicted by these evils and are injured by these abuses should protest and bestir themselves to attract attention to themselves and indeed to impose the remedy or the reform that have become necessities?

That, gentlemen, is why it would be wrong to attempt to depict to you as disreputable these men who preach direct action: if they do their utmost to get by without recourse to deputies, remember that they do so with reluctance ...

There are enough people who do not manage sufficiently without you for you to seek satisfaction in the sight of workers striving to bring their class together along trade union lines into economic organisations and doing their utmost to look to their affairs for themselves.'

And, writing in *Le Peuple* in Brussels, Vandervelde wrote:

'If a bone with there merest morsel attached to it is to be wrested from capitalism, it is not enough for the working class to give a mandate to its representatives to campaign in its place and stead.

We have told it so time out of number, but we could scarcely say it often enough, and there is a lot of truth to the theory of direct action, that far-reaching reforms are not obtained through go-betweens.

Now, if we may offer a criticism of this Belgian working class which, abandoned by its exploiters and masters to ignorance and misery, has, for the past twenty years, furnished enough evidence of its valour and spirit of sacrifice, it would be, maybe, that it has been unduly reliant upon political action and co-operative activity, which required the least exertion: that it has not done enough in the way of trade union action; that it has surrendered

a little unduly to this dangerous illusion that, come the day when it has returned its representatives to the Chamber, reforms will fall from the sky like gobbets of roast lark.'

So, in the estimation of the men cited above – and in our own view as well – direct action develops the feeling for human personality as well as the spirit of initiative. In contrast with the spinelessness of democracy which makes do with shepherds and followers, it shakes people out of their torpor and steers them to consciousness. It does not regiment nor does it number the workers.

Quite the opposite! It opens their eyes to self-esteem and a sense of their own strength, and the groupings it forms at its prompting are living, vibrant associations where, numerical strength cannot overrule merit by dint of mere weight or the inertia of the unconscious. Men of initiative there are not stifled and minorities which are – and always have been – the factors for progress, can exercise themselves without hindrance and, through their propaganda activity, engage in the coordinating activity that leads on to action.

Thus, direct action has an unmatched educational value: It teaches people to reflect, to make decisions and to act. It is characterised by a culture of autonomy, an exaltation of individuality and is a fillip to initiative, to which it is the leaven. And this superabundance of vitality and burgeoning of 'self' in no way conflicts with the economic fellowship that binds the workers one with another and far from being at odds with their common interests, it reconciles and bolsters these: the individual's independence and activity can only erupt into splendour and intensity by sending its roots deep into the fertile soil of common agreement.

Direct action thus releases the human being from the strangle-hold of passivity and listlessness wherein democratism tends to confine and paralyse him. It teaches him will-power, instead of mere obedience, and to embrace his sovereignty instead of conferring his part upon a deputy. By so doing, it shifts the axis of social orientation, so that human energies, instead of being squandered upon pernicious and depressing activity, derive from their legitimate expenditure the necessary sustenance for their continued growth.

Education for expropriation

Fifty years ago, in the time around 1848, back in the days when republicans still believed in something, they admitted how much of an illusion, how much of a lie and how powerless the representative system was and they searched for ways to overcome its defects. Rittinghausen, unduly mesmerised by the political frippery which he imagined was crucial to human progress, reckoned that he had come up with a solution in the shape of 'direct representation'. Proudhon, on the other hand, presaging syndicalism, spoke of the coming economic federalism that would bypass, with all of life's superiority, the sterile notions of the whole political set-up; the economic federalism being hatched within the workers' organisations implies the recuperation by trades bodies of certain useful functions. Thanks to which the

State conjures up illusions as to its *raison d'être*, and at the same time, the elimination of those of its noxious, restrictive and repression functions to which capitalist society is indebted for its perpetuation.

But for this burgeoning of society to become a possibility, preparatory work must first have drawn together within the existing society those elements whose role it will be to make it happen. This is the task assumed by the working class. Just as a building is built from the foundations up, so this internal undertaking which involves both the dismantling of the factors making up the old world and incubating the new edifice starts from the bottom up. No longer is it a matter of taking over the State, nor of tinkering with its cogs or changing its personnel: the point is to transform the mechanism of production, by doing away with the boss in workshop and factory and replacing production for their benefit with production in common for the benefit of all ... and the logical consequence of this is the ruination of the State.

This drive to expropriation has begun; at every step it is pursued by day to day struggles against the current master of production, the capitalist; his privileges are undermined and eaten away, the legitimacy of his leadership and mastery functions is denied, and the charge that he levies upon everyone's output on the pretext of recompense for capital investment, is considered theft. So, little by little, he is being bundled out of the workshop – until such time as he can be driven out entirely and forever.

All of this, this burrowing from within, escalating and intensifying by the day, is direct action rampant. And when the working class, having grown in strength and consciousness, is ready to take possession and gets on with doing just that, that too will be direct action!

Once the expropriation of capital is underway, and when the railway companies find their shares – the 'diplomas' of the financial aristocracy – rendered worthless, and when the parasitical retinue of rail directors and other magnates can no longer survive in idleness, the trains will continue to operate ... And this is because the railway workers will have taken things into their own hands; their trade union having turned from a fighting group into a production association, will thereafter take charge of running operations – and not now with an eye to personal gain, nor yet for plain and simple corporative motives, but for the common good.

And what will be done in the case of the railways will be replicated in every sphere of production.

But if this task of liquidating the old world of exploitation is to prosper, the working class has to be familiarised with the wherewithal of making a reality of the new context and must have acquired the capacity and will to see to this for itself: it must rely, in facing up to the difficulties that will crop up, solely upon its own direct efforts, on the capabilities that it possesses within itself, rather than on the graciousness of 'go-between's', providential men, these new-style bishops. In the

latter case, exploitation would not be eradicated and would persist under a different guise.

The revolution is the handiwork of day-to-day action

Thus, if the way is to be prepared, the restrictive notions and dead formulae that stand for a persistent past must give way to ideas that point us in the direction of crucial exercises of the will. Now, these new ideas cannot but derive from systematic implementation of direct action methods. From, in fact, the underlying current of autonomy and human solidarity, intensified by practical action that erupts and fleshes out the idea of replacing the existing social disorder with a form of organisation wherein labour alone has a place and every individual will be free to give expression to his personality and his faculties.

This task of laying the groundwork for the future is, thanks to direct action, in no way at odds with the day to day struggle. The tactical superiority of direct action resists precisely in its unparalleled plasticity. Organisations actively engaged in the practice are not required to confine themselves to beatific waiting for the advent of social changes. They bring all possible combativity to the here and now, sacrificing neither the present to the future, nor the future to the present. It follows from this, from this capacity for facing up simultaneously to the demands of the moment and those of the future and from this compatibility in the two-pronged task to be carried forward, that the ideal for which they strive, far from being overshadowed or neglected, is thereby clarified, defined and made more discernible.

Which is why it is both inane and false to describe revolutionaries drawing their inspiration from direct action methods as 'advocates of all-or-nothing'. True, they are advocates of wresting EVERYTHING from the bourgeoisie! But, until such time as they will have amassed sufficient strength to carry through this task of general expropriation, they do not rest upon their laurels and miss no chance to win partial improvements which, being achieved at some cost to capitalist privileges, represent a sort of partial expropriation and pave the way to more comprehensive demands.

From which it is plain that direct action is the plain and simple fleshing-out of the spirit of revolt: it fleshes out the class struggle, shifting it from the realm of theory and abstraction into the realm of practice and accomplishment. As a result, direct action is the class struggle lived on a daily basis, an ongoing attack upon capitalism.

Which is why it is so despised by the politicians – a breed apart – who had set themselves up as the 'representatives' or 'bishops' of democracy. Now, should the working class, scorning democracy, go a step further and look for some alternative path, on the terrain of economics, what is to become of the 'go-between's' who used to pose as the proletariat's spokesmen?

Which is why it is even more despised and upbraided by the bourgeoisie! The latter sees its demise rudely accelerated by the fact that the working class, drawing strength and increasing confidence from direct action, and breaking once and for all with the past, and relying upon its own resources to espouse a whole new mentality, is on its way to constructing a whole new environment.

The necessity of effort

It is such a commonplace that there has to be struggle against the all manner of obstacles placed in the way of mankind's development that it may seem paradoxical to have to extol the necessity of effort.

Besides action, indeed, what else is there but inertia, spinelessness and passive acceptance of slavery? In times of depression and inertia, men are degraded to the status of beasts of burden, slaves trapped in hopeless toil; their minds are stultified, constipated and thoughtless; their prospects are limited; they cannot imagine the future, nor suppose that it will be any improvement upon the present.

But up pops action! They are shaken from their torpor, their decrepit brains start to work and a radiant energy transforms and transfigures the human masses.

Because action is the salt of life ... Or, to put it more plainly and simply, it is life itself! To live is to act ... To act is to be alive!

The catastrophic miracle

But these are banalities! Yet, the point has to be laboured, and the effort glorified, because stultifying education has washed over the older generation and planted debilitating notions in its ranks. The futility of effort has been elevated to the status of a theory and it has been given out that any revolutionary achievement would flow from the ineluctable course of events; catastrophe, it was proclaimed, would come to pass automatically. Just as soon as, in the ineluctable course of events, capitalist institutions would reach a point of maximum tension. Whereupon they would explode by themselves! Effort by man in economic terms was proclaimed redundant and his kicks against the restrictive environment besetting him were decreed futile. He was left but one hope: that he might infiltrate his own into the bourgeois parliaments and await the inevitable unleashing of catastrophe.

We were taught that this would come to pass mechanically and inescapably when the time was ripe: with concentration of capital being effected through the immanent laws of capitalist production itself, the number of the capitalist potentates, usurpers and monopolists was spiralling ever downwards ... so that a day would come when, thanks to the conquest of political power, the people's elected representatives would use law and decree to expropriate this handful of great capitalist barons.

What a perilous and stultifying illusion such passive waiting for the coming of the Messiah-revolution represents! And how many years or centuries will it take to

capture political power? And even then, supposing that it has been captured, will the number of capitalist magnates have fallen sufficiently by that point? Even allowing that the expansion of trusts may have swallowed up the medium bourgeoisie, does it follow that they will have been thrust down into the ranks of the proletariat? Will they not, rather, have carved themselves out a place in the trusts and will the numbers of parasites living without producing a thing not be at least the same as they are today? If the answer is yes, can we not suppose that the beneficiaries of the old society will put up a fight against the expropriating laws and decrees?

An equal number of problems would be posed, before which the working class would be powerless and bewildered as to what to do, should it have made the mistake of remaining mesmerised by the hope of a revolution's coming to pass in the absence of any direct effort on its part.

The so-called 'iron law'

Even as we were being bamboozled with this messianic faith in the Revolution, to stultify us even further and the better to persuade us that there was nothing that could be attempted, nothing to be done, and in order to plunge us even deeper into the mire of inaction, we were indoctrinated with the '**iron law of wages**'. We were taught that, under this relentless formula (primarily the work of Ferdinand Lassalle), in today's society any effort is a waste of time, any action futile, in that the economic repercussions soon restore the poverty ceiling through which the proletariat cannot break.

Under this **iron law** – which was then made into the keystone of socialism – it was proclaimed that 'as a general rule, the average wage would be no more than what the worker strictly required for survival'. And it was said: 'That figure is governed by capitalist pressure alone and this can even push it below the minimum necessary for the working man's subsistence ... The only rule with regard to wage levels is the plentiful or scarce supply of man-power...'

By way of evidence of the relentless operation of this **law of wages**, comparisons were made between the worker and a commodity: if there is a glut of potatoes on the market, they are cheap; if they are scarce, the price rises ... It is the same with the working man, it was said: his wages fluctuate in accordance with the plentiful supply or dearth of labour!

No voice was raised against the relentless arguments of this absurd reasoning: so the law of wages may be taken as right – for as long as the working man is content to be a commodity! For as long as, like a sack of potatoes, he remains passive and inert and endures the fluctuations of the market ... For as long as he bends his back and puts up with all of the bosses' snubs, ... the law of wages obtains.

But things take a different turn the moment that a glimmer of consciousness stirs this worker-potato into life. When, instead of dooming himself to inertia,

spinelessness, resignation and passivity, the worker wakes up to his worth as a human being and the spirit of revolt washes over him: when he bestirs himself, energetic, wilful and active; when, instead of rubbing shoulders absently with his neighbours (like a potato alongside other potatoes) and comes into contact with them, reacts with them, and they in turn respond to him; once the labour bloc comes to life and bestirs itself ... then, the laughable equilibrium of the law of wages is undone.

A novel factor: the will of the worker!

A novel factor has appeared on the labour market: **the will of the worker!** And this factor, not pertinent when it comes to setting the price of a bushel of potatoes, has a bearing upon the setting of wages; its impact may be large or small, according to the degree of tension of the labour force which is a product of the accord of individual **wills** beating in unison – but, whether it be strong or weak, there is no denying it.

Thus, worker cohesion conjures up against capitalist might a might capable of standing up to it. The inequality between the two adversaries – which cannot be denied when the exploiter is confronted only by the working man on his own – is redressed in proportion with the degree of cohesion achieved by the labour bloc. From then on, proletarian resistance, be it latent or acute, is an everyday phenomenon: disputes between labour and capital quicken and become more acute. Labour does not always emerge victorious from these partial struggles: however, even when defeated, the struggle workers still reap some benefit: resistance from them has obstructed pressure from the employers and often forced the employer to grant some of the demands put. In which case the high solidarity content in syndicalism is vindicated: the outcome of the struggle brings benefits to untrustworthy, less conscious brothers, and the strikers relish the moral delights of having fought for the welfare of all.

That labour's cohesion leads to wage increases is acknowledged with quite good grace by the theoreticians of the 'iron law'. The facts are so palpable that they would be hard put to it to offer a serious rebuttal. But they protest that, in parallel with the wage increases, there is an increase in the cost of living, so that there is no increase in the worker's purchasing power and the benefits of his higher pay are thereby nullified.

There are circumstances in which we do find such repercussions: but the rise in living costs in direct association with the rise in pay is not so constant that it can be taken as axiomatic. Moreover, when such rises occur, this is – in most instances – proof that the worker, after having struggled in his **producer** capacity against his boss, has neglected to look to his interests in his capacity as **consumer**. Very often it is the passivity of the purchaser vis a vis the trader, of the tenant vis a vis the landlord, etc., that allows the landlords, traders, etc., to claw back from added

levies upon the working man as consumer the benefit of the improvements that he has extracted as producer.

Furthermore, the irrefutable proof that wage levels need not necessarily result in parallel increases in the cost of living is furnished by countries where working hours are short and wages high: Life there is less expensive and less restricted than in countries where working hours are long and wages low.

Wages and the cost of living

In England, the United States and Australia, the working day often lasts eight hours (nine at most), with weekends off, yet wages there are higher than among us. In spite of which life is easier there. First because, over six working days, or better yet, over five and a half (work grinding to a halt by the Saturday afternoon in most cases), the worker earns enough to support himself through the seven days of the week: then because, as a general rule, the cost of basic necessities is lower than in France, or at any rate more affordable, in terms of wage levels.¹

Such findings invalidate the 'iron law'. Especially so as it cannot be argued that the high pay rates of the countries in question are merely the consequence of man-power shortages. In the United States as well as in Australia, and in England too, unemployment bites deep. So it is plain that if working conditions in those countries are better, it is because in the establishment thereof there is a factor at work other than plentiful or restricted supply of labour: the will of the workers! Such improved conditions are the results of workers' efforts, of the determination of the worker to refuse to accept a vegetative, restricted life, and they were won through the struggle against Capital. However, no matter how violent the economic skirmishing that improved these conditions may have been, they have not created a revolutionary situation: they have not pitted labour against capital in a face to face confrontation between enemies. The workers have not – at any rate not as a body – attained class consciousness: thus far their aspirations have been unduly modest, at the aspiration to accommodation with the existing society. But times they are a-changing! The English, the Yanks and the rest are in the process of acquiring the class consciousness that they were lacking.

If we move on from examining high-wage, shorter-hours societies to look at our own peasant regions where, confident of finding an ignorant, compliant

¹ On the say so of superficial observers, many people unquestioningly swallow and repeat the story that 'life is expensive' in the aforementioned countries. The truth of the matter is that luxury items are very expensive there: 'society' living is very burdensome there: on the other hand, basic necessities are affordable. Moreover, don't we know that, from, say, the United States, we get wheat, fruit, canned goods and manufactured products, etc., which (in spite of the additional costs imposed by transport costs and in spite of customs levies too) can compete with similar items on our market here? It must therefore be self-evident that in the United States those goods are not on sale at higher prices ... We could cite many other conclusive proofs. But the confines of a pamphlet make that impracticable.

population, a number of industrialists have set up their factories, we find the opposite phenomenon: wages there are very low and working conditions unduly demanding. The reason is that since the will of the workers there is lethargic, it is capitalist pressure alone that determines the working conditions; the working man, still ignorant of and unfamiliar with his own strength, is still reduced to the status of a 'commodity', so that he is prey to the unmitigated operation of the supposed 'law of wages'. But should a spark of revolt quicken the victim of exploitation, the situation will be changed! The dust of humanity, which is what the proletarian masses have been up to now, need only be compacted into a trade union bloc and the pressures from the bosses will be countered by a force that may be weak and clumsy in its beginnings but which will soon increase in might and consciousness.

And so the light of experience shows just how illusory and false this alleged 'iron law of wages' is. 'Iron law' is it? Get away! It is not even a rubber law!

The unfortunate thing is that the consequences of the penetration of the world of labour by that fateful formula have been more serious than mere flawed argument. Who can say how much suffering and disappointment it has given rise to? For too long, alas, the working class has reclined and dozed upon this false pillow. There was a logical connection: the theory that effort was futile spawned inaction. Since the pointlessness of action, the futility of struggle, the impossibility of immediate improvement had been proclaimed, every vestige of revolt was stifled. Indeed, what was the point of fighting, once effort had been identified in advance as pointless and unproductive, when one knew that one was doomed to failure? Since struggle promised only blows – with no hope of even slight benefit – was it not the wiser course to remain calm?

And that was the argument that ruled the roost! The working class accommodated itself to an apathy that played right into the hands of the bourgeoisie. Thus, when, under pressure of circumstance, the workers were driven into a dispute, it was only with a heavy heart that the gauntlet was picked up: striking even came to be reputed as an evil to be endured if it could not be averted and one to which one resigned oneself with no illusion that any real improvement might issue from a favourable outcome.

Overwhelming evil is not the seed of rebellion!

Alongside this crippling belief in the impossibility of breaking through the vicious circle of the 'iron law of wages', and by way of a warped deduction from this 'law' that trusting to the revolution's coming to pass as events unfolded without assistance, without any intervening effort on the part of the workers, some people rejoiced if they could detect any increase in 'pauperisation', the worsening of misery, employer arbitrariness, government oppression, and the like. To listen to these poor logicians, the Revolution just had to sprout from overwhelming evil! So

every upsurge in misery and calamity, etc., struck them as good thing, hastening the fateful hour.

A crack-brained error! A nonsense! The only thing that abundance of evils – no matter what form these may assume – achieves is to wear down those who suffer them even more. And this is readily appreciated. Instead of bandying words, one need only look around and take it all in.

Which are the trades where trade union activity is most pronounced? The ones where, not having to put in unduly long working hours, the comrades can, when their shift is finished, enjoy a social life, attend meetings, and take an interest in matters of common concern: the ones where wages are not slashed to such an extent that any deduction for dues or a newspaper subscription or the purchase of a book amounts to one loaf less upon the table.

By contrast, in the trades where the length and intensity of the work are excessive, once the worker leaves penal servitude to his boss behind him, he is physically and mentally 'spent'; so his only ambition, before making his way home to eat and sleep, is to down a few mouthfuls of alcohol to buck himself up, lift his spirits and stiffen his resolve. It never enters his head to drop by the union, attend meetings, such is the toll taken upon his body by weariness and such is the difficulty his exhausted brain finds in working.

By the same token, what effort could one expect of the wretch fallen upon endemic impoverished circumstances, the ragamuffin ground down by lack of work and deprivation? Maybe, in a fit of rage, he will venture a gesture of revolt ... but that gesture will not bear repetition! Poverty has drained him of all will, of all spirit of revolt.

These observations – which any one of us is free to verify and of which we can find our own examples – amount to a rebuttal of this queer theory that misery heaped upon misery and oppression heaped upon oppression sows the seeds of revolution. The very opposite is the case, is true! The weakling, at the mercy of fate, his life restricted and himself materially and morally a slave, will not dare to bridle under oppression: for fear of worse to come, he will draw in his horns and refuse to budge or make any effort and will wallow in his wretchedness. It is different with someone who achieves manhood through struggle, someone who, having a less narrow life and a more open mind and having looked his exploiter in the face, knows that he is the match for him.

Which is why partial improvements do not have the effect of lulling the workers to sleep: instead they act as a reassurance and a spur to him in staking further claims and making further demands. The result of well-being – which is always a consequence of the display of proletarian might – whether the interested parties wrest it from the struggle, or the bourgeoisie deems it prudent and politic to make concessions, in order to take the edge off clashes which it foresees or fears – is to add to the dignity and consciousness of the working class and also – and above all

else! – to increase and hone its appetite for the fight. As it shrugs off its physiological and intellectual poverty, the working class matures: it achieves a greater sensitivity, grows more alive to the exploitation it endures and its determination to break free of this is all the greater: it also gains a clearer perception of the irreconcilable contrast between its own interests and those of the capitalist class.

But, no matter how important one may suppose them to be, piecemeal improvements cannot take the place of the revolution, or stave it off: the expropriation of capital remains a necessity if thoroughgoing liberation is to be feasible.

Indeed, even supposing that capital's profiteering could be heavily handicapped and that the State's poisonous role could be partly done away with, it is unlikely that these handicaps could extinguish them entirely. None of it would have altered the relationships: there would still be, on the one side, the waged and the governed, and, on the other, the bosses and the leaders.

Obviously partial gains (no matter how important we may suppose these to be and even if they should largely whittle away at privileges) do not have the effect of altering economic relationships – the relations obtaining between boss and worker, between leader and led. Therefore the worker's subordination to Capital and the State endures. From which it follows that the social question looms as large as ever and the 'barricade' dividing the producers from the parasites living off them has not been shifted, much less flattened.

No matter how much the hours of work may be reduced, no matter how high wage rates may climb, no matter how 'comfortable' the factory may become from the point of view of hygiene, etc. as long as the relationships of wage-payer to waged, governor to governed persist, there will be two classes, the one struggling against the other. And the contest will grow in degree and scale as the exploited and oppressed class, its strength and consciousness expanding, acquires a truer appreciation of its social worth; as a result, as it improves itself and educates itself and betters itself, it will bring ever more vigour to its undermining of the privileges of the opposing, parasite class.

And this will carry on until all hell breaks loose! Until the day when the working class, after having steeled itself for the final break, after having hardened itself through continual and ever more frequent skirmishes against its class foe, will be powerful enough to mount the crucial assault ... And that will be direct action taken to its ultimate: the General Strike!

Thus, to sum up, careful scrutiny of social phenomena allows us to set our faces against the fatalistic theory that proclaims the futility of effort and against the tendency to suppose that better times can spring from bad ones run riot. Instead, a clear-sighted appreciation of these phenomena throws up the notion of a process of unfolding action: we find that the reverses suffered by the bourgeoisie, the piecemeal gains wrested from it fan the flames of revolt: and we find, too, that just as life springs from life, so action inspires action.

Force and Violence

Direct action, the manifestation of the workers' strength and determination, shows itself in accordance with circumstance and setting, through acts that may well be very anodyne, just as they might as easily be very violent. It is simply a matter of what is required.

Thus, there is no specific form of direct action. Some people, with a very superficial grasp of things, explain it away in terms of an orgy of window breaking. Making do with such a definition – which brings joy to the hearts of the glaziers – would be to take a really narrow view of this exercise of proletarian might: it would be to reduce direct action to a more or less impulsive act, and that would be to ignore what it is in it that constitutes its greatest value and to forget that it is the symbolic enactment of workers' revolt.

Direct action, is workers' might applied to creative purposes: it is the force that acts as midwife to a new law – enshrining social entitlement!

Force lies at the back of every movement and every action and, of necessity, it is the culmination of these. Life is the exercise of force and, beyond force, there is only oblivion. Nothing is made manifest, nothing is materialised in its absence.

The better to pull the wool over our eyes and keep us under their yoke, our class enemies have drummed it into us that immanent justice need not resort to force. Nonsensical exploiters of the people! In the absence of force, justice is nought but tomfoolery and lies. The grievous martyrdom of the people down through the centuries bears witness to this: though theirs were just causes, force, in the service of the religious authorities and secular masters crushed and trampled the peoples: all in the name of some supposed justice that was nothing but a monstrous injustice. And that martyrdom goes on!

Minority versus majority

The labouring masses are always exploited and oppressed by a parasitical minority which, had it only its own resources to rely upon, could not preserve its rule for a single day, for one single hour! This minority draws its power from the bovine acquiescence of its victims: it is the latter – the source of all strength – who, in sacrificing themselves for the class that lives off their backs, create and perpetuate Capital and uphold the State.

Now, if this minority is to be unseated, it cannot be enough (today any more than in the past) to dissect the social falsehoods that serve as its principles, expose its iniquity or detail its crimes. Against brute force, an idea, reduced to its powers of persuasion alone, is beaten before it starts. The fact is that, no matter how beautiful it may be, an idea is only a soap-bubble unless sustained by force, unless rendered fertile by it.

So what will it take to put paid to the unwitting sacrifice of majorities to a sensual, rascally minority?

The establishment of a force capable of counter-balancing what the propertied and ruling class extracts from the people's delusion and ignorance. It is up to conscious workers to make just such a force a reality: if those desirous of shrugging off the yoke fashioned for them by the majorities, the problem consists of reacting against so much passivity and seeking one another out, coming to some accommodation and reaching agreement.

This vital task of revolutionary coalescence is carried out inside the trade union organisation: there a growing minority is formed and grows, its aim to acquire sufficient strength, first, to counter-balance and then to annihilate the forces of exploitation and oppression.

This potential for propaganda and action strives first to bring enlightenment to the unfortunates who, by acting as the defenders of the bourgeois class, perpetuate the depressing saga of slaves armed by their masters to fight against the rebels promising liberation. It would be impossible to focus too much effort on this preparatory task. In fact, we must get the full measure of the dampening potential represented by militarism. The people in arms are always pitted against their own, better armed, offspring. Now there is historical proof aplenty to show that all popular uprisings that have not enjoyed either neutrality or support from the people in greatcoats – to wit, the army – have foundered. So our continual object must be to stymie the unwitting strength afforded to rulers by a segment of the working class.

That done, there still remains the matter of breaking the power of the parasitical minority proper – and it would be a grave error to regard it as negligible.

This, in broad outline, is the task that falls to the conscious workers.

Ineluctable violence

As for anticipating the circumstances and timing of the decisive clash between the forces of the past and the forces of the future, that belongs to the realm of hypothesis. What we may be sure of, is that it will have been prefaced and prepared by more or less sudden sniping, clashes and contacts. And another thing of which we may be sure is that the forces of the past will not be resigning themselves to abdication or bowing the knee. Now, it is precisely this blind resistance to progress which has, in the past, all too often marked the achievement of social progress with brutality and violence. And it cannot be emphasised too strongly: the responsibility for such violence does not lie with the men looking to the future. For the people to determine upon the final uprising, they must be driven to it by necessity: they resolve upon it only after a lengthy series of experiences have demonstrated the impossibility of following the peaceable route and – even in those circumstances – their violence is merely a benign and humane retort to the excessive and barbaric violence from their masters.

Were the people violent by instinct, they would not endure the live of misery, privation and hard slog – studded with rascality and crime – which is the existence foisted upon them by the parasitical, exploitative minority for another twenty four hours. Here we need have no recourse to philosophical explanation to demonstrate that men are born 'neither good nor bad' and become one or the other according to their environment and circumstances. The matter can be resolved by everyday observation: it is beyond doubt that the people, sentimental and soft-hearted, display nothing of the endemic violence that characterises the ruling classes and which is the mortar holding their rule together – legality being only the thin white-wash of hypocrisy designed to screen this deep-seated violence.

The people, held down by the education inculcated into them, awash with prejudices, are obliged to make considerable effort to raise themselves to consciousness. Now, even when they pull it off, far from letting themselves be swept along by a justified wrath, they abide by the principle of least resistance: they seek out and stick to the path that looks to them the shortest and least fraught with difficulties. They are like waters following the slope to the sea, peaceable here and thundering there, according to whether they meet with few obstacles or many. To be sure, they are bound for the revolution, regardless of the impediments placed in their way by the privileged: but they proceed by the fits and starts and hesitations which are the products of their peaceable disposition and their wish to fight shy of extreme solutions. So, when the people's force, smashing through the obstacles raised against it, sweeps over the old societies like a revolutionary hurricane, this is because it has been left no other outlet. Indeed, there is no denying that had this force been able to exercise itself without encumbrance, following the line of least resistance, it might not have manifested itself in violent actions but displayed a peaceable, majestic, calm aspect of itself. Isn't the river that rolls to the sea with Olympian but irresistible sluggishness not made up of the very same liquid molecules that, tumbling torrentially through steep-sided valleys, barged aside the obstacles placed in their path? The same goes for people power.

Illusory palliatives

But, given that the people do not resort to force just for the pleasure of it, it would be dangerous to hope to preempt such recourse through the use of palliatives along parliamentary and democratic lines. Thus there is no voting system – no referendum, nor any other procedure that would seek to divine the key to the people's wishes – thanks to which one might attempt to forestall revolutionary movements. Clinging to illusions of this sort would be tantamount to lapsing back into the unhappy experiences of the past, when the miraculous virtues attributed to universal suffrage were the focus of widespread hopes. True, it is more convenient to believe in the omnipotence of universal suffrage, or even of the referendum, than

to see things as they really are: it spares one the need to act – but, on the downside, it brings economic liberation no nearer.

In the final analysis, we must always be brought back to this ineluctable conclusion: recourse to force!

However, the fact that some voting method, some referendum procedure, etc., is unlikely to sound the extent and intensity of revolutionary consciousness should not be interpreted as finding against their relative worths. Referendum, say, may have its uses. In certain circumstances, recourse to it may well be the best policy. In instances posed with precision and clarity, it is convenient to gauge the tenor of workers' thinking by this method. Moreover, trade union organisations can use it, as the need arises (and this goes for those of them which, not being as yet completely free of the hold of capitalism, look to State intervention, as well as for those which are plainly revolutionary). And this has long been the case! Neither the one nor the other waited until any attempt was made to enshrine it as a system and for the attempt to be made to pass it off as a by-product of direct action.

It is therefore absurd to argue that the referendum runs counter to the revolutionary method – just as it would be absurd to argue that it is its inevitable complement. It is a mechanism for quantitative measurement and quite unsuited to qualitative assessment. Which is why it would be ill-advised to depend upon its being a lever capable of shifting capitalist society off its foundations. Even if it were to become more commonplace, its practice is not going to take the place of the initiatives required and vigour crucial when an idea's time has come.

It is infantile to talk about a referendum when what is at stake is revolutionary action such as the storming of the Bastille ... Had the *Gardes Francaises* not defected to the people on 14 July 1789, had a conscious minority not set about attacking the fortress ... had an attempt been made first to determine by referendum the fate of that odious prison, the likelihood is that it would still be dominating the entrance to the *faubourg* Antoine ...

Our hypothesis with regard to the seizure of the Bastille is applicable to all revolutionary events: let them be put to the test of a hypothetical referendum and similar conclusions will be reached.

No! There is no suffrage-based or referendum-based panacea likely to take the place of recourse to revolutionary force. But we must be plainly specific on this point: such recourse to force does not imply that the masses are sleeping. Quite the opposite! And it is all the more effective, the more these masses are endowed with a more enlightened consciousness.

For the economic revolution that capitalist society carries within itself to unfold at last and result in achievements, and for backward lurches and savage backlash to be impossible, those beavering away at the great undertaking must know what they want and how they want it. They have to be conscious entities and not impulse-driven! Now, let there be no mistake about this, numerical strength is only truly

efficacious from the revolutionary viewpoint if it is fertilised by the initiative of individuals and by their spontaneity. By itself, it is nothing more than an accumulation of indeterminate men that might be compared to a pile of inert matter prey to the impulses reaching it from without.

Thus it turns out that direct action, whilst proclaiming that the use of force cannot be avoided, lays the groundwork for the ruination of the rule of force and violence, in order to supplant it with a society based on consciousness and concord. This because it is the popularisation, in the old society of authoritarianism and exploitation, of the creative notions that set the human being free: development of the individual, cultivation of the will and galvanisation for action.

And so we are brought to the conclusion that direct action, quite apart from its value as a boon to society, carries within itself a value as a moral impregnation, in that it refines and elevates those whom it impregnates, releasing them from the straitjacket of passivity and inciting them to radiate strength and beauty.

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