

Max Nettlau

**Responsibility and Solidarity
in the Labor Struggle**

1899

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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 co-operation — 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 Co-operation, co-operative colonies, the labor exchange (the American expression for the direct exchange of the products of labour) 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 recognised; 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 endeavour 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,

sympathises 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 neutralise 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 sympathisers 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 recognised 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 civilisation, 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 pretences 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 organised 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 recognise 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 an the employer who orders me to do as I do.”

My opinion is that as long as this shirking, mercenary excuse is recognised 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 recognised 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 brutalised 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 its 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 as 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 utilised, 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 neighbours, 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, labourers, 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 centres 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 dishonourable 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 humour 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 utilising 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 emphasise 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.

German Social Democracy & E. Bernstein.

Social Democrats in nearly all countries begin to reap what they have sown. For years the propoganda of principles has had to stand back before the reckless strife for votes to conquer political and municipal power, as the phrase goes. Their ranks were swelled on one side by masses of voters, whose real convictions and prejudices remained for the greater part untouched; on the other side, by politicians and selfseeking persons who were on the lookout for a party which would accept them as leaders. Among the inevitable consequences of these superficial flippant tactics are some apparent successes of a kind that makes sincere members of the party blush with shame — like the admission of Millerand, the French Socialist politician, to the Ministry which Galliffet, the slaughterer of the Paris workers in 1871, adorns; or the election of Social Democrats to the Bavarian Diet at the cost of a compromise with the Catholic party, which brought that party into power and means the handing over of public instruction to the priests, as happened in Belgium some years ago.

Another consequence is the increase of ponderous circumspection and diplomatic moderation all round, in order not to alienate the sympathies of particular bodies of electors; examples are furnished by the hopeless confusion of the German Social Democratic party in dealing with the land question and co-operation. It is, indeed, difficult to find even a State Socialist solution of these problems which will suit agricultural laborers and peasant proprietors, co-operators and small shopkeepers alike, all of whom form precious and influential elements of the army of voters. In other countries the question of temporary alliance with bourgeois parties comes to the front (in France, Belgium, Italy, etc.) leading necessarily to

efforts to unite the greatest number of voters by all means, at the cost of any principle, in order to be able to enter such an alliance with the greatest possible strength and, consequently, to obtain the most favorable conditions.

Meanwhile, serious economic struggles are not encouraged. I do not deny that the momentary relative prosperity of industry and trade removes in some cases the primary cause of strikes, nor that the increasing solidarity and aggressiveness of the capitalists make a defensive attitude appear more practical to many just now; but it is quite natural, also, that those who represent the political interest of the party should, consciously or unconsciously, regret that energy and funds are used for economic struggles and diverted from the field of political action, and they will strive for the usual cheap political victories which leave the economic position altogether unaffected. The governing classes are quite cute enough to reap the benefit of such "tactics"; they have plenty of Galliffets to couple with all the Millerands who attain that cherished height of political power: a seat in a Ministry. At the same time, they are as implacable as ever in economic matters, federating and preparing for defying and fighting trade unionism; witness the general lockout of organised workers in Denmark last summer, the threatening legislation against coalitions in Germany, the suppression of all right of combination among the Italian railway workers, etc.

This evolution, furthermore, foils the hopes of the believers in the doctrines of Karl Marx and Frederick Engels. The expectation that, with the enormous increase of Socialist votes and representatives, the real power of the workers would increase also, has not been realised; and Marxists are anxious to find out the reason of this deadlock. Here their intellectual isolation becomes a bitter obstacle to finding the truth. From their early days Marx and Engels, after transforming the main results of contemporary science and Socialism into an agglomeration of ideas — arranged in their peculiar way and thenceforward self-styled "scientific Socialism," — erected what may be called a Chinese wall of prejudice around their system, and almost all intellectual progress of mankind during the past fifty or sixty years became an object of sneers and derision to the leaders of Marxism whilst remaining nearly unknown to the mass of their followers. This may appear strange to many; but the investigation of the original sources of Marxist ideas — familiar to readers of W. Tcherkesov's articles, — the Marxists' actions during all their history, the recent action of Edward Bernstein (a champion Marxist), and the attitude of the German Socialist party towards it only need closer examination to prove it.

Edward Bernstein in various articles in the *Neue Zeit* and his book, *The Basis of Socialism and the Task of Social Democracy* (in German, Stuttgart, 1899, 188 pages), questioned the truth of several fundamental doctrines of Marxism and, further, advocated a change in tactic for the German Social Democratic Party. It is

curious to note that he criticises the same Marxist doctrines which W. Tcherkesov in his *Pages of Socialist History* first attacked, mainly 'the concentration of capital.' Domela Nieuwenhuis remarks on this coincidence in *L'Humanité Nouvelle* (Paris April 10, 1899, p. 472), and also "A Reader" in the *Daily Chronicle* (August 17 last). I would not recall this fact if Bernstein had mentioned the priority of this Anarchist critic at all. He is somewhat undecided as to the theory of value, which, during Marx's lifetime not to speak of Engels', had already been criticised inside the party; Marx, from whom a definite explanation was expected, remaining silent. Bernstein now mentions Jevons, Menger, Boehm Bawerk, hitherto so much held in contempt by Marxists. He also looks closer at what the famous conquest of political power really means, and traces it back to Blanquist sources; here, again, alighting not very far from Tcherkesov's ideas, who traces it further back to the French political Radicalism of the thirties, if I am not mistaken.

Having gone thus far, he seems to me more original in challenging the theories of increasing misery of the masses and impending crises and social cataclysms leading to a final breakdown of the capitalist system at a given moment. He is inclined to see that the average wellbeing of the working classes increases, that periods of crises and depression tend to become scarcer and less acutely felt and that there is no sure prospect of a final crisis which would end in the social revolution, at all.

From this particular view of evolution he concludes that the working classes must begin to obtain political and social power in society now, giving up all dreams of a social revolution and sudden utopian changes. They must use the political machinery in central and local matters to the utmost — here he advocates Fabianism à l'outrance; they must also extend and fortify Trade Unionism and Co-operation; they must give up their attitude of stern negation to the inevitable demands of colonial expansion, etc. — which certainly means Imperialism — and soon. In fact, almost all he saw being done in England by so many independent movements he wants to see done in Germany by the one Social Democratic party, which is in no small degree startled by all these new tasks mapped out by Bernstein.

That country, indeed, now reaps in these matters the result of the doubtful benefit of a united Socialist party. Initiative is lacking; the party is bulky and slow moving. Different local action would often be necessary, but as a rule is evaded if it should be of a more advanced character. Blunders in the reactionary direction, however, are not infrequent. This is easily explained: the more conscientious elements obey the party program, whilst the more indifferent easily relapse into reactionary ways. So the formal unity kills the initiative for progress, but leaves the way to reaction open. Examples abound: at every Congress reactionary provincial, local and individual actions are blamed, yet are always repeated (e.g. the Bavarian Budget voted by Socialist members of the Bavarian Diet, money

for armaments unopposed by Schippel in the parliamentary committee, money for church building voted by Stegmüller in Baden, etc.); but no advanced action (which would, also, surely be censured by some) is ever recorded.

To return to Bernstein. The serious part of the practical proposals he made, namely, the strengthening of the economic position of the workers, has also been made before by Paul Kampffmeyer, the present secretary of the Frankfurt Trades Council, in a pamphlet (*Mehr Macht, More Power*) published in Berlin in 1898.

The great stress laid on the economic struggle by Bernstein is a step in the right direction; but it cannot be overlooked that he means to give up none of the empty political ambitions. His most talented defender at the Hanover Congress, Dr. David of Mayence, said distinctly: "He (Bernstein) says: it is false to conquer first political and afterwards economic power; the reverse is false also; both aims must advance side by side, causing and supporting each other mutually." And again: "Bernstein is of opinion that the processes of Socialising and of democratising must go hand in hand. The trade unionist and political movements are inseparable."

English readers will see that there is nothing new in Bernstein's tactics and will only wonder that they caused so much stir in the gigantic "scientific" party of Germany that was supposed to know everything. Yet this is only an example to show that they know nothing of what passes outside the pale of Marxism. Bernstein is the only influential Marxist who — having to remain in London as a proscriber even after the fall of the Anti-Socialist law in 1890 — peeped over the Chinese wall of Marxist doctrinairianism and actually rediscovered the modern labor movement for his fellow Marxists. They had for many years only heard of England as the place of residence of Marx and Engels; later on, of the lamented Avelings, and a country which had the happy destiny of furnishing the materials for *Das Kapital*, by Karl Marx. Later on, they were told that the Bloomsbury Socialist Society was the lever of the Marxist social revolution in England and that the great man in the English movement, besides the Avelings, was Will Thorne. Mr. Hyndman was alternately vilified when he was friendly towards the French Possibilists (Anti-Marxist Socialists), and praised to the skies when the Avelings joined the S.D.F. again. Fabianism was treated with the utmost contempt; the anti-political trade unions declared reactionary; co-operators treated as bourgeois, and the I.L.P. suspected of leanings towards the Anarchists — the arch-enemy. The movements outside the Marxist camp in other countries were treated similarly; and the poor readers of the German Social Democratic press lived in a fool's paradise, thinking that the sainted families, the Avelings and Lafargues, assisted by Liebknecht, Kautsky, Jules Guesde, Iglesias and a few other "fathers of the church" (as they now call themselves) would soon set things right for them. Had not Engels and Bebel prophesied the breakdown of the present system for the year

1898, not to mention earlier predictions¹ (1874, 1889, 1895)!! All other advanced movements and scientific researches were howled down by the bravi and hacks of the party. The astonishment of the German delegates at their recontre with Non-Marxist and anti-parliamentary Socialists at the London Congress of 1896 was unfeigned and genuine; until they came here most of them sincerely believed that Aveling was England!

So Bernstein's articles and book, commonplace as they are, acted like a thunderbolt. Bernstein-Apostata was one of the most polite epithets hurled at him. "With unmistakable herostratic animosity he throws the torch of criticism in the temple of Marxism, leaving no stone in its place," wrote a Stuttgart Socialist. Liebknecht called his book the "solemn renunciation of Social Democratic principles." Further amenities were used by Mesdames Zetkin and Luxemburg, the Russian Plechanov and many others. It was generally believed that at the Hanover Congress a moral stake would be erected to burn the heretic.

This, however, did not happen at that Congress, which ended in what Bernstein must consider is a satisfactory way to him. How this happened and what the true reasons were in my opinion, I will explain in the next and concluding article.

Nov. 16, 1899.

¹ These predictions were often referred to at the Hannover Congress of September last (see Protokoll, pages 141, 168, 186, 210, 218, 228-9, etc.); Kautsky hinted that in the case of Engels this prophesying was "strong optimism," whilst in the case of others it would have been idiocy. Bebel strove hard to deny the paternity of these prophecies, but was nailed down to his assertions pitilessly by I. Auer, the secretary of the party. I myself heard it stated at a recent meeting by a delegate to the Eisenach Congress of 1896, that Bebel at the time, elated with the momentary success, expected the break down to happen in 1874.

Bernstein's particular standpoint was already explained in a letter addressed by him to last year's Congress, held at Stuttgart (October 1898); but the discussion assumed no great proportions. An article by F. Domela Nieuwenhuis on this Congress in *L'Humanité Nouvelle* (Paris, April 10, 1899) is well worth reading. Early in 1899 Bernstein published his book, and since that time a brisk discussion has been going on, by articles and pamphlets; the hardest opposition came from Polish and Russian Social Democrats, "Parvus," Miss Luxemburg, Plekhanov. Meanwhile, the principal "father of the church" of Marxism, Karl Kautsky, was hard at work until a few weeks before the Hanover Congress, when he published an elaborate refutation of Bernstein (*Bernstein and the Social Democratic Program*, in German, Stuttgart, VIII., 195 pp.) Kautsky follows Bernstein step by step, and demolishes to his satisfaction almost every assertion of Bernstein, word by word.

He deals minutely with Bernstein's repudiation of the dogma of the concentration of capital, and he — and Bebel at the Congress — quotes many statistics in favor of the old dogma. I confess for myself that this question, so far as actual proof by statistics is concerned, remains open to me. Statistics are unsatisfactory proof in many serious questions: we are often too prone to accept those favorable to our hypothesis without the fullest critical examination and closest inspection, reasoning away the importance only of those which contradict our argument. This criticism and weighing of statistics is done with great skill by Kautsky and Bebel; but might, no doubt, be overthrown by a still closer examination on the part of Bernstein. For the distance between statistics and real life is enormous, and permits ever so many possibilities of plausible explanation. The result is often, as in this case, satisfactory only to the investigator himself.

The importance of this question for the prospect of revolution seems to me to be overrated. To say that if the number of capitalists increases the revolution will never come, seems to me as absurd as to expect the automatic downfall of the present system by the extinction of individual capitalists as a consequence of the concentration of capital. What really matters is not the number of capitalists, but that of persons — comprising the vast numbers of overseers, foremen, managers, etc. — whose interests, be it only in appearance even, are divided from those of the workers. I believe that as long as one single capitalist exists he will try, by the offer of a superior remuneration, to divide his workers into two classes and to profit by their discord. So a struggle will have to be gone through in any case, be the number of actual possessors of wealth large or small. Capitalism is as ripe for destruction today as it ever was and ever will be, if only the workers themselves felt disposed to attack it seriously.

The possibility of this serious attack depends on the spread of ideas and on the revolutionary spirit. This begins to be recognised, and Bernstein's criticism of the Materialist Conception of History (following upon that of W. Tcherkesov) is a

symptom of the growing lack of confidence in purely economic development is a motive power of revolution. Such criticism is, by the way, already met with in some of the writings of Michael Bakounine, who, whilst accepting Marx's theory to a large extent, yet says, speaking for instance of religions: "I think that all religions were but the posterior sanction of facts already accomplished. Once established as systems by human conscience and as official institutions of society religions become, undoubtedly, themselves the cause of new facts and of new political and social relations which, in the course of their further development, in the end modify and often even destroy the original religion or transform it into another religion which — whilst being apparently the negation of the preceding one — is in reality, at least in this negative way, nearly always its product" (1868). And again, writing in 1872: "He (Marx) does not take into consideration the other elements of history, such as the evident reaction of political, legal and religious institutions upon the economic situation," . . . (fully printed in *La Société Nouvelle*, July 1894, pp. 24–5; s. *Life of Bakounine*, note 2421).

Kautsky's book, then, and Bebel's six hour speech were the most serious weapons used to defend the old Marxist position. Bebel strained every nerve that Marxism might die game, and may often have scored against Bernstein, which not imply, however, that he was right if viewed from a broader, libertarian standpoint.

He affirmed the progressive evolution of the party as shown by the rejection of long cherished dogmas in the course of time, such as: the iron law of wages, labor the source of all wealth, all other parties form a compact mass of reactionists, and the demand for State-supported co-operative associations. What Bernstein put forward had been said by bourgeois and also by Socialist writers for many years. Marx himself, he maintains, was aware of the numerical growth of capitalists side by side with the concentration witnessed in actual industrial production; "with the accumulation of capital the number of capitalists more or less increases," are Marx's words (*Capital*, vol. I.). Incidentally, Bebel mentions the growing necessity for intensive cultivation in agriculture (*Protokoll*, p. 104). The theory of increasing misery does not, according to Marx, exclude the growth of rebellious spirit, of combinations and organisation among the workers by which economic concessions are forced from the bourgeoisie. Bebel agrees with Bernstein that the class struggle proceeds in milder forms (a rather optimistic view in the presence of massacres of strikers, immense lockouts, exceptional laws, etc.!), but maintains that class contrasts become sharper and are more acutely felt. He considers the working classes to be fully prepared to take over productive industry themselves, and rejects Bernstein's deprecatory and discouraging remarks to the contrary. "A fighting party, he said, wants to win and for this it requires enthusiasm, the spirit of sacrifice and of fight; these are taken away if artificial stress is laid on difficulties

on all hands, if we are constantly told: “be cautious; do behave nicely; be good children in order not to frighten the dear middle classes,” etc. This sounds right enough, and Bebel, being in good strain, sweeps away the “ethical” arguments against expropriation, ending with words: “so we stand by expropriation; this we won’t give up” (storms of applause).

But, as usual, he instantly turns round and proceeds: “We need not use force.” . . . “It is not the revolutionists who bring about revolutions, but this is always done by the reactionists” (great applause), etc. This double-faced talking is the essence of German Social Democratic propaganda, and Bebel emphasises this in saying later on: “I repeat that we are essentially a revolutionary party. This does not mean that we should reject reforms when we can get them. This is proved by our program: not in vain this program contains a principal and a practical part” (Hear, hear!), Prot. p. 125. And Dr. David (Bernstein’s champion) said shortly after: “By what means do we try to stir up in the masses at election time? Quite instinctively, without renouncing Socialist principles, we are led to insist mainly on practical, familiar, palpable advantages.” This speaker considers the shortening of the hours of labor as “expropriation” because it deprives the capitalist of the right to make use of his machinery for profit after certain hours; upon which Mrs. Zetkin ironically declared the muzzling of dogs to be Socialism also in the Davidian sense, because it reduced the rights of property. I mention these examples to show the continuous juggling with words, the misuse of “revolution,” “expropriation,” etc., for quite indifferent or reactionary measures. The principal and the practical part of the program, excluding each other to every friend of logic, present ample opportunities for such tricks.

Bebel proposed a lengthy resolution, declaring that no change in principles or tactics was necessary, expressing platonic sympathy with Co-operation and admitting the principle of temporary alliances with bourgeois parties for electioneering purposes to obtain an extension of political rights and social reforms.

A long debate followed. Dr. David, of Mayence, stood up for Bernstein; Liebknecht was hardest against him, and many others brought their little bundle of wood to enlarge the heretic’s stake. But there was, after all, little spirit in these attacks; most seemed impelled by an uneasy conscience to explain painfully that things were not quite so bad with them (in the matter of retrograde tactics) as Bernstein had depicted, and cheered each other up in this way.

This went on in a dull way until the real masters of the party, the cynics Vollmar and Auer, two Bavarians, considered that their turn had come. Vollmar is the chief of the Bavarian Socialists, the recent allies of the Clerical party, and Auer is the quasi permanent secretary of the Berlin executive of the party, a man who is of decisive influence in so many of the personal and financial questions that affect the hundreds of editors, printers, party officials, etc., all over the north of

Germany. Where Auer's power ends, that of Vollmar, the southern leader begins; and vice versa. These two men are unscrupulous politicians who care not two straws for principles nor the idols mentioned by tradition or prestige. When Auer, dragging in private conversations, ridiculed Bebel's prophecies, Bebel retaliated by revealing the dreadful fact that Auer had called Marx and Engels "popes" in private conversation also, and in his speech at the Congress Auer spoke of the (Marxist) "fathers of the church." He also said: "I cannot get on with the dialectical method and the way all these things are described; black there becomes white and white becomes black, and in a higher sphere a grey mixture results from them which leaves you in blank amazement." . . . "I am no Marxist," he had said before, "in the sense in which the Marxist fathers of the church have developed that thing up till now, those fathers of the church to which Bernstein belonged for all these years." "But," he said, later on, "this is what I am: I am an enthusiastic adherent of the doctrines of Marx and Engels as far as my intellect could grasp them."

Vollmar sneered at the customary attacks against the reactionary wing of the party: himself, Auer, Schippel, W. Heine, Bernstein. "The stake was already prepared; but the matches would not catch fire, and force was lacking to throw them on the stake." "Year by year I am placed on the proscribed list; but up till now this has been good for my health. I am not at all complaining." Thus spoke the man who, last year, said that the Paris workers of the time of the Commune would have done better by going to sleep than by proclaiming the Commune of Paris! He concluded by scarcely veiled threats against the sticklers for dogmas, those who insist on adherence to principles (Protokoll, p. 216).

These two men behaved at the congress like Brennus did at Rome: *Væ victis!* Auer, who sports rough language, said that he had written to Bernstein: "Dear Ned, you are an ass; for such things [as are expressed in Bernstein's book] are not said but done," (p. 208) meaning: be as reactionary as you like in practice, only keep up appearances in public utterances.

And he played out the trump up his sleeve when he concluded his speech with an extract from a letter of Bernstein's — using more polite language in return — saying: "Dear friend Auer, with the usual necessary grain of salt I shall vote for Bebel's resolution."

Under these circumstances Bebel's resolution, intended to smash up Bernstein for ever, was voted by 205 against 34 on the third clause, admitting alliances with bourgeois parties, and by 216 against 21 (vote on the entire test). The minority opposing the third clause mainly hailed from Berlin and surrounding districts.

So the affair ended, to use a German expression, like the Hornberger Schiessen, or, to use a parallel, like the French Socialist Congress held at Paris in December, 1899, to decide on Millerand's participation in a French Ministry. One resolution, voted by some 800 against 600, repudiated the participation of Socialists in

bourgeois Ministries; and another resolution, voted by the great majority of the Congress, admitted this participation under exceptional circumstances, which will, of course, always exist in the minds of Ministerial candidates! So “the principle” was reaffirmed by a platonic resolution; at the same time, the actual conduct of the offenders against “the principle,” Bernstein and Millerand, remains unchallenged.

What is the meaning of such votes — with which the accused himself heartily concurred, as Bernstein did and Millerand might have. This, then, means the failure of independent political action by the State Socialist parties of France and Germany. And the step they take in consequence of this is not a step forward out of the dirt of politics, but a step backward right into the bourgeois camp — electioneering alliances in Germany, participation in Galliffet’s Ministry in France.

This shows that these parties, as such, have no fresh spirit in them, are rotten and doomed.

Marxism, the principal embodiment of these tactics, falls to pieces everywhere, and the withered forms of its last believers — Liebknecht, Bebel, Kautsky and a few others — look almost pathetic as the sun sets on them and their time is over. The rest, the bulk of the party, the labor politicians become bourgeois politicians again. This decay is inevitable and fatal; and Bernstein, the apologist of Social Democratic degeneration, is the merest episode in this evolution.

A hopeful sign is that economic movements, trade unionism and co-operation, here and there free themselves from their connection with Socialist politics, a connection which on the continent is closer even than here. But much remains to be done.

Our own conviction of Anarchism can but be strengthened by these spectacles, and our field of action becomes larger as many cannot but be disillusioned in the end by this evolution backward. Our old criticism of Social Democratic principles and tactics is fully justified by these events. We wish only that our propaganda would receive so much direct support as it is indirectly supported by this series of facts and by so many other facts we see when looking around as the outcome of authority — the root of all misery! N.

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Max Nettlau
Responsibility and Solidarity in the Labor Struggle
1899

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