

GEORGES SOREL

*Reflections on
Violence*

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I Class struggle and violence

I. The struggle of poorer groups against rich ones. – The opposition of democracy to the division into classes. – Methods of buying social peace. – The corporative mind.

II. Illusions relating to the disappearance of violence. – The mechanisms of conciliation and the encouragement which it gives to strikers. – Influence of fear on social legislation and its consequences.

I

Everyone explains that discussions about socialism are exceedingly obscure; this obscurity is due, to a large extent, to the fact that contemporary socialists use a terminology which no longer corresponds to their ideas. The best known of the people who call themselves *reformists* do not wish to appear to be abandoning certain phrases which have for a long time served to characterize socialist literature. When Bernstein, perceiving the enormous contradiction that existed between the language of social democracy and the true nature of its activity, urged his German comrades to have the courage to appear to be the way that they were in reality¹ and to revise a doctrine that had become false, there was a universal outcry at his audacity; and the reformists were not in the least eager to defend

¹ Bernstein complains of the chicanery and *cant* that reigns amongst the social democrats: E[duard] Bernstein, *Socialisme théorique et social-démocratie pratique* [Paris, Stock, 1900], p. 277. He addresses these words taken from Schiller to social democracy: 'Let it dare to appear what it is': p. 238.

the old formulas; I remember hearing well-known French socialists say that they found it easier to accept the tactics of Millerand^a than the theses of Bernstein.

This idolatry of words plays a significant role in the history of all ideologies; the preservation of a Marxist vocabulary by people who have become estranged from the thought of Marx constitutes a great misfortune for socialism. The expression ‘class struggle’ is, for example, employed in the most improper manner; and until a precise meaning has been given to it we must give up all hope of providing an accurate account of socialism.

A. – To most people the class struggle is *the principle of socialist tactics*. This means that the socialist party bases its electoral successes upon the clashing of interests that exists in an acute state between certain groups and that, if need be, it would undertake to make this hostility more acute; their candidates ask the most numerous and the poorest class to look upon themselves as forming a corporation and they offer to become the advocates of this corporation; thanks to the influence they gain from their position as representatives, they promise to seek to improve the lot of the disinherited. Thus we are not very far from what happened in the Greek city-states: the parliamentary socialists are similar to the demagogues who constantly called for the annulment of debts and the division of landed property, who piled all public taxation upon the rich and who invented conspiracies in order to have large fortunes confiscated. ‘In the democracies where the crowd is above the law,’ says Aristotle, ‘the demagogues, by their continual attacks upon the rich, always divide the city into two camps . . . The oligarchs should abandon all swearing of oaths like those they swear today; for there are cities which have taken this oath: “I will be the constant enemy of the people and I will do them all the evil that lies in my

^a Etienne-Alexandre Millerand (1859–1943); socialist deputy and president of the Republic from 1920–4; a leading advocate of reformist socialism in the mid-1890s, before joining Waldeck-Rousseau’s government of ‘republican defence’ in 1899 as minister of commerce. The first socialist to enter a ‘bourgeois’ government, this act was the subject of controversy across Europe, especially as the minister of war, Gallifet, had participated in the repression of the Paris Commune. ‘Ministerialism’ was subsequently condemned by the Second International and Millerand was expelled from the socialist party.

power.”² Here certainly is a struggle between two classes that is as clearly defined as it can be; but it seems to me absurd to assert that it was in this way that Marx understood the struggle which, according to him, was the essence of socialism.

I believe that the authors of the French law of 11 August 1848 had their heads full of these classical references when they decreed punishment against those who, by speeches and newspaper articles, sought ‘to trouble the public peace by stirring up contempt and hatred amongst the citizens’. The terrible insurrection of the month of June was just over, and it was firmly believed that the victory of the Parisian workers would have produced, if not an attempt to put communism into practice, at least serious requisitions on the rich in favour of the poor; it was hoped that an end could be put to civil wars by making it more difficult to propagate *doctrines of hatred* capable of rousing the proletariat against the bourgeoisie.

Today, parliamentary socialists no longer believe in insurrection; if they still sometimes speak of it, it is to give themselves an air of importance; they teach that the ballot-box has replaced the gun, but the means of acquiring power might have changed without there being a change of mental attitude. Electoral literature seems inspired by the purist demagogic doctrines: socialism appeals to all the discontented without troubling itself about the place they occupy in the world of production; in a society as complex as ours and as subject to economic upheavals, there are an enormous number of discontented people in all classes; – that is why socialists are often found in places where one would least expect to find them. Parliamentary socialism speaks as many languages as it has types of clients. It addresses itself to workmen, to small employers, to peasants, and, in spite of Engels, it aims at reaching farmers;³ at times it is patriotic, at others it rants against the army. No contradiction is too great – experience having shown that it is possible, in the course of an electoral campaign, to group together forces which, according to Marxist conceptions, should normally be antagonistic. Besides, cannot a parliamentary deputy be of service to electors in every economic situation?

² Aristotle, *Politique*, bk VIII, chapter VII, 19. [Aristotle, *The Politics*, (Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1992), bk V, chapter IX.]

³ F[riedrich] Engels, ‘La Question agraire et le socialisme’, translated in *Le Mouvement socialiste* [44], 15 October 1900, p. 453. It has often been pointed out that certain socialist candidates had separate posters for the town and the country.

In the end the term 'proletariat' becomes synonymous with the oppressed; and there are the oppressed in all classes:⁴ the German socialists have taken a great interest in the princess of Coburg.⁵ One of the most distinguished reformers, Henri Turot, for a long time editor of *La Petite République*⁶ and municipal councillor in Paris, has written a book on the 'proletarians of love', by which title he designates the lowest class of prostitutes. If one day they give the right to vote to women he will doubtless be called upon to draw up a statement of the aims of this special proletariat.

B. – Contemporary democracy in France finds itself somewhat bewildered by the tactics of class struggle; this explains why parliamentary socialism does not mingle with the main body of the parties of the extreme Left.

In order to understand this situation we must remember the important part played by the revolutionary wars in our history; an enormous number of our political ideas originated in war; war presupposes the union of national forces against the enemy and our French historians have always severely criticized those insurrections which hampered the defence of the homeland. It seems that our democracy is harder on its rebels than monarchies are; the Vendéens^b are still denounced daily as infamous traitors. All of the articles published by Clemenceau^c to combat the ideas of

⁴ Hampered by the monopoly of the licensed stockbrokers, the other brokers of the Stock Exchange are thus *financial proletarians*, and amongst them more than one socialist admirer of Jaurès can be found.

⁵ The socialist deputy Sudekum, *the best-dressed man in Berlin*, played a large part in the abduction of the princess of Coburg; let us hope that he had no financial interest in this *affair*. At the time he represented Jaurès' newspaper in Berlin.

⁶ H[enri] Turot was for some considerable time one of the editors of the nationalist newspaper *L'Eclair*, and of *La Petite République* at the same time. When [Ernest] Judet [1851–1943] took over management of *L'Eclair* he dismissed his socialist contributor.

^b The counter-revolutionary rebellion in the Vendée, which began in March 1793, was the most significant of the internal revolts directed against the Revolution. Its repression was characterized by the indiscriminate slaughter of the population of the region.

^c Georges Clemenceau (1841–1929); Radical-Socialist deputy and journalist; one of the dominant political figures of the Third Republic. Famous for his statement that 'the Revolution is a bloc', it was also Clemenceau who led the journalistic campaign to secure the release of Dreyfus. He was later prime minister during the First World War.

Hervé^d are inspired by the purest revolutionary tradition, and he clearly says so himself: 'I stand by and shall always stand by the old-fashioned patriotism of our fathers of the Revolution', and he scoffs at the people who would 'suppress international wars in order to hand us over *in peace to the pleasures of civil war*' (*L'Aurore*, 12 May 1905).

For some considerable time the republicans denied that there was a struggle between the classes in France; they had such a horror of revolt that they would not recognize the facts. Judging all things from the abstract point of view of the *Déclaration des droits de l'homme*, they said that the legislation of 1789 had been created in order to abolish all distinction of class in law: it was for this reason that they were opposed to proposals for social legislation which, almost always, reintroduced the idea of class and distinguished certain groups of citizens as being unfitted for the use of liberty. 'The Revolution was supposed to have suppressed classes,' wrote a sad Joseph Reinach in *Le Matin* of 19 April 1895; 'but they spring up again at every step . . . It is necessary to point out these aggressive returns of the past, but they must not be allowed to pass unchallenged; they must be resisted.'⁷

Electoral dealings have led many republicans to recognize that the socialists obtain great successes by using the passions of jealousy, of deception or of hate which exist in the world; then they became aware of the class struggle and many have borrowed the jargon of the parliamentary socialists: in this way the party that is called Radical-Socialist was born. Clémenceau even asserts that he knows *moderates* who became socialists overnight: 'In France', he said, 'the socialists that I know⁸ are excellent radicals who, thinking that social reforms do not advance quickly enough to please them, argue that it is good tactics to claim the greater in order to get the less. How

⁷ J[oseph] Reinach, *Démagogues et Socialistes* [Paris, Chailley, 1896], p. 198.

⁸ Clémenceau knows all the socialists in parliament very well and from long experience.

^d Gustave Hervé (1871–1944); leading antimilitarist campaigner in the years prior to 1914. His inflammatory articles led to his trial in 1901 in what became known as 'l'affaire Hervé'. Acquitted, he was nevertheless imprisoned for four years in 1905 for distributing antimilitarist material to army recruits. When released the following year, he established *La Guerre sociale*, further increasing the popularity of 'Hervéisme' in the socialist movement. Nevertheless, in 1914 he rallied to the defence of the Republic and immediately renamed his journal *La Victoire*.

many names and how many secret avowals I could quote to support what I say! But that would be useless, for nothing is less mysterious' (*L'Aurore*, 14 August 1905).

Léon Bourgeois^c – who was not willing to sacrifice himself completely to the new methods and who, perhaps because of this, left the Chamber of Deputies for the Senate – said, at the congress of his party in July 1905: 'The class struggle is a fact, but it is a cruel fact. I do not believe that it is by prolonging it that the solution of the problem will be attained; I believe that the solution rather lies in its suppression, in making all men consider themselves as partners in the same work.' It would therefore seem to be a question of creating social peace by legislation, in showing to the poor that the government has no greater concern than to improve their lot and by imposing the necessary sacrifices upon people who possess a fortune judged to be too great for the harmony of the classes.

Capitalist society is so rich, and the future appears to it in such optimistic colours, that it endures the most frightful burdens without complaining overmuch: in America politicians waste large amounts of taxation shamelessly; in Europe military preparation consumes sums that increase every year;⁹ social peace might very well be bought by a few additional sacrifices.¹⁰ Experience shows that the bourgeoisie allows itself to be plundered quite easily, provided that a little pressure is brought to bear and that they are intimidated by the fear of revolution: the party which can most skilfully manipulate the spectre of revolution will possess the future; this is what the Radical party is beginning to understand; but however clever its clowns may be, it will have some difficulty in finding

⁹ At the conference in The Hague the German delegate declared that his country bore the expense of the armed peace with ease; Léon Bourgeois held that France bore 'as lightly the personal and financial obligations that national defence imposed upon its citizens'. Ch[arles] Guieysse, who cites this speech, thinks that the tsar has asked for a limitation of military expenditure because Russia was not yet rich enough to maintain herself at the level of the great capitalist countries: *La France et la paix armée* [Paris, Pages Libres, 1905], p. 45.

¹⁰ That is why Briand, on 9 June 1907, told his constituents at Saint-Etienne that the Republic had made a *sacred pledge* to the workers about old-age pensions.

^c Léon Bourgeois (1851–1925); politician and prime minister between 1895–6; in his *La Solidarité* (1896), he expounded the doctrine known as solidarism, which sought to highlight the social obligations of the rich to the poor, and accordingly advocated a programme of social reform and progressive taxation.

any who can dazzle the big Jewish bankers as well as do Jaurès and his friends.

C. – Syndicalist organization gives a third value to the class struggle. In each branch of industry, employers and workmen form antagonistic groups which have continual discussions, which negotiate and make agreements. Socialism brings along its terminology of social struggle and thus complicates conflicts that might have remained of a purely private order; corporative exclusivism, which so resembles the sense of belonging to a locality or to a race, is thus consolidated, and those who represent it like to think that they are accomplishing a higher duty and are doing excellent work for socialism.

It is well known that the litigants who are strangers in a town are generally very badly treated by the judges of the commercial courts sitting there because they try to give judgements in favour of their fellow townspeople. Railway companies pay fantastic prices for land the value of which is fixed by juries recruited from among the neighbouring landowners. I have seen Italian sailors overwhelmed with fines for alleged infractions of the law by fishing arbitrators with whom they had come to compete on the strength of ancient treaties. – Many workers are in the same way inclined to assert that in all their disputes with the employers the worker has morality and justice on his side; I have heard the secretary of a *syndicat*, so fanatically reformist that he denied the oratorical talent of Guesde,^f declare that no one had class feeling so strongly developed as he had, – because he argued in the way I have just indicated, – and he concluded that the revolutionaries did not possess a monopoly of the right conception of class struggle.

It is understandable that many people have considered this corporative spirit as no better than parochialism and that they have tried to destroy it by employing methods very analogous to those which have so much weakened the jealousies which formerly existed in France between the provinces. A more general culture and the intermixing with people of another region rapidly destroy

^f Mathieu Bazile ('Jules') Guesde (1845–1922); Marxist and founder of the Parti Ouvrier Français; as an ardent campaigner for socialism, he was famous for his oratorical skills both in parliament and the country at large, regularly touring France and speaking to vast audiences.

provincialism: by frequently bringing the important men of the *syndicats* into contact with the employers and by providing them with opportunities to take part in discussions of a general nature in joint commissions, would it not be possible to destroy the corporative feeling? – Experience shows that this is possible.

II

The efforts which have been made to remove the causes of hostility which exist in modern society have undoubtedly had some effect, – although the peacemakers may be much deceived about the extent of their work. By showing a few officials of the *syndicats* that the members of the bourgeoisie are not such terrible men as they had believed, by overwhelming them with politeness in commissions set up in ministerial offices or at the Musée Social, and by giving them the impression that there is a *natural and republican equity* above class prejudices and hatreds, it has been possible to change the attitude of a few revolutionaries.¹¹ A great confusion in the mind of the working classes was caused by the conversion of a few of their old leaders; the former enthusiasm of more than one socialist has given way to discouragement; many workers have wondered whether trade union organization was becoming a kind of politics, a means of personal advancement.

But simultaneously with this development, which filled the heart of the peacemakers with joy, there was a recrudescence of the revolutionary spirit in a large section of the proletariat. Since the governments of the Republic and the philanthropists have taken it into their heads to exterminate socialism by developing social legislation and by moderating the resistance of the employers in strikes, it has been observed, more than once, that the conflicts have become more acute than formerly.¹² This is frequently explained by saying that it

¹¹ When it comes to social buffoonery there are very few new things under the sun. Aristotle has already laid down the rules of social peace; he said that the demagogues 'should in their harangues appear to be concerned only with the interests of the rich, just as in oligarchies the government should only seem to have in view the interests of the people' [Aristotle, *Politique*: Aristotle, *The Politics*, bk V, chapter IX]. That is a text which should be inscribed on the door of the offices of the Direction du Travail.

¹² Cf. G[eorges] Sorel, *Insegnamenti sociale [dell'economia contemporanea* (Palermo, Sandron, 1907)], p. 343. [See *Social Foundations of Contemporary Economics* (New Brunswick, NJ, Transaction Books, 1984), p. 285].

is only an accident imputable to the bad old ways; people like to delude themselves with the hope that everything will be perfectly fine on the day when manufacturers have a better sense of the practices of social peace.¹³ I believe, on the contrary, that we are in the presence of a phenomenon that flows quite naturally from the conditions in which this alleged pacification is carried out.

I observe, first of all, that the theories and actions of the peace-makers are founded on the notion of duty and that duty is something entirely indeterminate – whilst law seeks rigid definition. This difference is due to the fact that the latter finds a real basis in the economics of production, while the former is founded on sentiments of resignation, goodness and sacrifice: and who can judge whether someone who submits to duty has been sufficiently resigned, good and self-sacrificing? The Christian is convinced that he will never succeed in doing all that the Gospel demands of him; when he is free from all economic ties (in a monastery) he invents all sorts of pious obligations, so that he may bring his life nearer to that of Christ, who loved men to the point that He accepted such an ignominious fate that they might be redeemed.

In the economic world, everyone limits his duty according to his unwillingness to give up certain profits; if the employer is always convinced that he has done his duty, the worker will be of the contrary opinion, and no argument could settle the matter: the first will believe that he has been heroic, and the second will treat this supposed heroism as shameful exploitation.

For our great high priests of duty, the contract to work is not a form of sale; nothing is so simple as a sale; nobody troubles himself to find out whether the grocer or the customer is right when they agree on the price of cheese; the customer goes where he can buy at the best price and the grocer is obliged to change his prices when his customers leave him. But when a strike takes place it is quite another thing: all the well-intentioned people, the men of progress and the friends of the Republic, begin to discuss the question of

¹³ In his speech of 11 May 1907 Jaurès said that nowhere had there been such violence as there was in England during the period when both the employers and the government refused to recognize the trade unions. 'They have given way; there is now vigorous and strong action, which is at the same time legal, firm and wise.'

which of the two parties is in the right: *to be in the right is to have fulfilled one's whole social duty*. Le Play has given much advice on the means of organizing labour with a view to the strict observance of duty; but he could not fix the extent of the mutual obligations involved; he put his faith in the discretion of each party, a proper sense of place in the social hierarchy, and the master's intelligent estimation of the real needs of the workman.¹⁴

The employers generally agree to discuss disputes on these lines; to the demands of the workers they reply that they have already reached the limit of possible concessions – while the philanthropists wonder whether the selling price will not allow a slight increase in wages. Such a discussion presupposes that it is possible to ascertain the exact extent of social duty and what sacrifices an employer must continue to make in order *to maintain his position*: as there is no reasoning capable of resolving such a problem, the *wise men* suggest recourse to arbitration; Rabelais^g would have suggested recourse to the chance of dice. When the strike is important, parliamentary deputies loudly call for an enquiry, with the object of discovering if the leaders of industry are properly fulfilling their *duties as good masters*.

Results are achieved in this way, which nevertheless seem so absurd, because, on the one hand, the large employers have been brought up with civic, philanthropic and religious ideas,¹⁵ and, on the other, because they cannot show themselves too stubborn when certain things are demanded by people occupying high positions in the country. Conciliators stake their pride on succeeding and they would be extremely offended if industrial leaders prevented them from making social peace. The workers are in a more favourable position because the prestige of the peacemakers is much less amongst them than with the capitalists: the latter therefore give way much more easily than the workers in letting the well intentioned have the glory for ending the conflict. It is noticeable that these methods only rarely succeed when the matter is in the hands of

¹⁴ F[rédéric] Le Play, *L'Organisation du travail* [Paris, Dentu, 1870], chap. II, [section] 21, [pp. 143–5].

¹⁵ About the forces which tend to maintain the sentiments of moderation see [Sorel], *Insegnamenti sociali*, Part 3, chap. V. [See Sorel, *Social Foundations*, pp. 289–99.]

^g François Rabelais (c. 1494–1553); writer; best known for *Pantagruel et Gargantua*.

former workers who have become rich: literary, moral or sociological considerations have very little effect upon people born outside the ranks of the bourgeoisie.

The people who are called upon to intervene in disputes in this way are misled by what they have seen of certain secretaries of the *syndicats*, whom they find much less intransigent than they expected and who seem to them ready to understand the idea of social peace. In the course of arbitration meetings more than one revolutionary has shown that he aspires to become a member of the lower middle class, and there are many intelligent people who imagine that socialist and revolutionary conceptions are only an accident that might be avoided by establishing better relations between the classes. They believe that the working-class world understands the economy entirely from the standpoint of duty and is persuaded that harmony would be established if a better social education were given to citizens.

Let us see what influences are behind the other movement that tends to make conflict more acute.

The workers quickly perceive that the activity of conciliation and arbitration rests upon no economico-juridical foundation and their tactics have been conducted – instinctively, perhaps – in accordance with this fact. Since the feelings and, above all, the pride of the peacemakers are in question, a strong appeal must be made to their imaginations and they must be given the idea that they have to accomplish a titanic task; demands are therefore piled up, figures fixed in a haphazard way, and no one worries about exaggerating them; often the success of a strike depends on the cleverness with which a member of a *syndicat* (who thoroughly understands the spirit of *social diplomacy*) has been able to introduce demands which are in themselves very minor but which are capable of giving the impression that the employers are not fulfilling their social duty. Upon many occasions writers who concern themselves with these questions have been surprised that several days elapse before the strikers have settled what exactly they have to demand, and that, in the end, demands are put forward that had not been mentioned in the course of the previous discussions. This is easily understood when we consider the bizarre conditions under which the discussion of the interested parties is carried on.

I am amazed that there are no professional observers of strikes who would not undertake to draw up lists of the workers' demands; they would obtain all the more success in conciliation councils as they would not let themselves be dazzled by fine words as easily as the workers' delegates.¹⁶

When everything is over there is no shortage of workers who do not forget that the employers had at first declared that no concession was possible: they are thus led to believe that the employers are either ignorant or liars; these are not consequences conducive to the development of social peace!

So long as the workers submitted without protest to the authority of the employers, they believed that the will of their masters was completely dominated by economic necessities; after the strike they realize that this necessity is not of a very rigid kind and that, if energetic pressure from below is brought to bear upon the will of the master, a way will then be found to escape the pretended fetters of the economy; thus (within practical limits) capitalism appears to the workers to be *unfettered* and they reason as if this was entirely the case. What in their eyes restrains this liberty is not the necessity that arises from competition but the ignorance of the captains of industry. In this way is introduced the notion of the *inexhaustibility of production*, which is one of the axioms of the theory of class struggle in the socialism of Marx.¹⁷

Why then speak of social duty? Duty has meaning in a society in which all the parts are intimately connected with one another; but if capitalism is inexhaustible, solidarity is no longer founded upon the economy and the workers think they would be dupes if they did not demand all that they could obtain; they look upon the employer as an adversary with whom one comes to terms after a war. *Social duty no more exists than does international duty.*

These ideas are, I admit, a little confused in many minds; but they exist in a far more substantial way than the supporters of social peace imagine; the latter are content with appearances and never

¹⁶ The French law of 27 December 1892 seems to have foreseen this possibility; it stipulates that the delegates on conciliation boards should be chosen among the interested parties; it thus keeps out those professionals whose presence would render precarious the prestige of the authorities and of the philanthropists.

¹⁷ Sorel, *Insegnamenti sociali*, p. 390. [See Sorel, *Social Foundations*, p. 321.]

penetrate to the hidden roots that sustain the present tendencies of socialism.

Before passing to other considerations, we must note that our Latin countries present a great obstacle to the formation of social peace; the classes are more sharply separated by external characteristics than they are in Saxon countries; these differences greatly embarrass the leaders of *syndicats* when they abandon their former manners and take up a position in the official or philanthropic world:¹⁸ this world has welcomed them with great pleasure ever since it has been understood that the tactic of gradually transforming union officials into members of the middle class can produce excellent results; but their comrades distrust them. In France this distrust has become much more strong since the entry of a significant number of anarchists into the syndicalist movement, because the anarchist has a horror of everything that recalls the activities of politicians – devoured by the desire to climb into the upper classes of society and already having the capitalist spirit when they were still poor.¹⁹

Social policy has introduced new elements which must now be taken into account. First of all, we can observe that today the workers *count* in the world in the same way as the different productive groups that demand to be protected: they must be treated with the same care as wine producers or sugar manufacturers.²⁰ There is nothing settled about protectionism; the custom duties are fixed so

¹⁸ Everyone who has seen trade union leaders close up is struck by the extreme difference which exists between France and England from this point of view; the leaders of the English trade unions rapidly become gentlemen without anyone blaming them for it (P[aul] de Rousiers, *Le Trade-unionisme en Angleterre* [Paris, Colin, 1897], pp. 309 and 322). Whilst correcting these proofs I read an article by Jacques Bardaux, pointing out that a carpenter and a miner had been made knights by Edward VII (*Les Débats*, 16 December 1907).

¹⁹ Some years ago Arsène Dumont invented the term 'social capillarity' to express the slow ascent of classes. If syndicalism followed the guidance of the peacemakers it would be a powerful agent of social capillarity.

²⁰ It has often been pointed out that the workers' organization in England is a simple union of interests, for the purpose of immediate material advantages. Some writers are very pleased with this situation because, quite rightly, they see it as an obstacle to socialist propaganda. *Annoying the socialists*, even at a cost to economic progress and to the safety of the culture of the future, that is the great aim of certain great *idealists* of the philanthropic bourgeoisie.

as to satisfy the desires of very influential people who wish to increase their incomes; social policy proceeds in the same manner. The protectionist government claims to have knowledge which enables it to measure what should be granted to each group, so as to defend the producers without injuring the consumers; similarly, it is declared that social policy will take into consideration the interests of both the employers and the workers.

Few people, outside the faculties of law, are so naive as to believe that the State can carry out such a programme: in fact, members of parliament resolve partially to satisfy the interests of those who are most influential in elections without provoking too-lively protests from the people who are sacrificed. There is no other rule than the true or presumed interest of the electors: every day the customs commission alters its tariffs and it declares that it will not stop altering them until it succeeds in securing prices which it considers remunerative to the people for whom it has undertaken the part of providence; it keeps a watchful eye on the operations of importers; every lowering of price attracts its attention and provokes enquiries designed to discover if it is not possible to raise values artificially. Social policy operates in exactly the same way: on 27 June 1905 the proposer of a law regulating the hours of work in the mines told the Chamber of Deputies: 'Should the application of the law give rise to disappointment amongst the workers, *we have undertaken* to bring forward a new bill without delay.' This worthy man spoke exactly like the proposer of an import tariff law.

There are plenty of workmen who understand perfectly well that all the rubbish of parliamentary literature only serves to disguise the true motives which guide the government. The protectionists succeed by subsidizing a few important party leaders or by financing newspapers which support the policies of these leaders; the workers have no money but they have at their disposal a far more effective means of action – they can *inspire fear*, and for several years they have not denied themselves this expedient.

At the time of the discussion of the law regulating labour in the mines, the question of threats addressed to the government arose several times: on 5 February 1902, the president of the commission told the Chamber that those in power had lent 'an attentive ear to clamourings from without, [that they had been] inspired by the sentiment of benevolent generosity by allowing themselves to be

moved, *despite the tone in which they were couched*, by the demands of the workers and the long cry of suffering of the miners'. A little later he added: 'We have accomplished a work of social justice . . . a work of benevolence also, in going to those who toil and who suffer like friends solely desirous of working in peace and under honourable conditions, and we must not, by a brutal and too egotistic refusal to unbend, allow them to follow impulses which, *while not actual revolts*, would have as many victims.' All these confused phrases served to hide the terrible fear that gripped this grotesque deputy.²¹ In the sitting of 6 November 1905, in the Senate the minister declared that the government was not willing to give way to threats but that it was necessary to open not only ears and mind but also the heart to 'respectful demands'(!); a good deal of water had passed under the bridge since the day when the government had promised to pass the law under the threat of a general strike.²²

I could choose other examples to show that the most decisive factor in social politics is the cowardice of the government. This was shown in the plainest possible way in the recent discussions on the closure of employment offices and on the law which sent to the civil courts appeals against the decisions of the arbitrators in industrial disputes. Nearly all the leaders of the *syndicats* know how to make excellent use of this situation and they teach the workers that it is not a question of demanding favours but that they must profit from *bourgeois cowardice* to impose the will of the proletariat. There is too much evidence in support of these tactics for them not to take root in the world of the working class.

One of the things which appears to me to have most astonished the workers during the last few years has been the timidity of the forces of law and order in the presence of a riot: the magistrates who have the right to demand the services of soldiers dare not use their power to the utmost, whilst officers allow themselves to be abused and

²¹ This imbecile has become minister of commerce. All his speeches on this question are full of nonsense; he was a doctor of the insane and perhaps has been influenced by the logic and the language of his clients.

²² The minister declared that he was creating 'real democracy' and that it was demagoguery 'to give way to external pressure, to haughty summonses which, for the most part, are only higher bids and baits addressed to the credulity of people whose life is hard'.

struck with a patience hitherto unknown in them. It has become more and more evident every day that working-class violence in strikes possesses an extraordinary efficacy: prefects, fearing that they may be obliged to use legal force against insurrectionary violence, bring pressure to bear on employers in order to compel them to give way; the safety of factories is now looked upon as a favour which the prefect can dispense as he pleases; consequently, he arranges the use of his police so as to intimidate the two parties and to bring them skilfully to an agreement.

It did not take much time for leaders of the *syndicats* to grasp this situation, and it must be admitted that they have used the weapon that has been put into their hands with great skill. They endeavour to intimidate the prefects by popular demonstrations, which have the potential for serious conflict with the police, and they commend riotous behaviour as the most effective way of obtaining concessions. It is rare that, after a certain time, the administration, itself worried and frightened, does not seek to influence the leaders of industry and to impose an agreement upon them, which becomes an encouragement for the propagandists of violence.

Whether we approve or condemn what is called the *direct and revolutionary method*, it is clear that it is not about to disappear; in a country as warlike as France there are profound reasons that would assure a considerable popularity for this method, even if its enormous efficacy had not been demonstrated by so many examples. This is the great social fact of the present hour and we must seek to understand its significance.

I cannot refrain from noting here a reflection made by Clemenceau with regard to our relations with Germany and that applies equally well to social conflicts when they take on a violent aspect (which seems likely to become more and more general in proportion as a cowardly bourgeoisie continues to pursue the dream of social peace): 'There is no better means', he said, '[than the policy of perpetual concessions] for making the opposite party ask for more and more. Every man or every power, whose action consists solely in surrender, can only finish by self-annihilation. Everything that lives resists; that which does not resist allows itself to be cut up piecemeal' (*L'Aurore*, 15 August 1905).

A social policy based upon bourgeois cowardice, which consists in always surrendering before the threat of violence, cannot fail to

engender the idea that the bourgeoisie is condemned to death and that its disappearance is only a matter of time. Every conflict which gives rise to violence thus becomes a vanguard fight, and no one can foresee what will come out of such skirmishes; the great battle never materializes, but each time that they come to blows the strikers hope that it is the beginning of the great *Napoleonic battle* (the one that will crush the vanquished definitively); in this way, the practice of strikes engenders the notion of the catastrophic revolution.

A keen observer of the contemporary working-class movement has expressed the same ideas: 'They, like their ancestors [the French revolutionaries], are for struggle, for conquest; through force they desire to accomplish great works. Only the war of conquest interests them no longer. Instead of thinking of battles, they now think of strikes; instead of setting up their ideal as a battle against the armies of Europe, they now set it up as the general strike in which the capitalist regime will be destroyed.'²³

The theorists of social peace shut their eyes to these embarrassing facts; they are doubtless ashamed to admit their cowardice, just as the government is ashamed to admit that its social politics are carried out under the threat of disturbances. It is curious that people who boast of having read Le Play have not observed that his conception of the conditions of social peace was very different from that of his stupid successors. He supposed the existence of a bourgeoisie of serious moral habits, imbued with the feelings of its own dignity and having the energy necessary to govern the country without recourse to the old traditional bureaucracy. To these men, who possessed both riches and power, he aspired to teach *social duty towards their subjects*. His system presumed an undisputed authority; it is well known that he deplored the licence of the press under Napoleon III as scandalous and dangerous; his reflections on this subject seem somewhat amusing to those who compare the newspapers of that time to those of today.²⁴ Nobody in his day would have believed

²³ Guieysse, [*La France*], p. 125.

²⁴ Speaking of the elections of 1869, he said that there had been 'violences of language which France had not heard before, even in the worst days of the Revolution': *L'Organisation du travail* [Paris, Dentu, 1871], 3rd edn, p. 340. Obviously he had in mind the Revolution of 1848. In 1873, he declared that the emperor could not congratulate himself on having abrogated the system of restraint on the press before having reformed the morals of the country: *La Réforme sociale en France* [Tours, Mame, 1874], 5th edn, III, p. 356.

that a great country would accept peace at any price; his point of view on this matter did not differ greatly from that of Clemenceau. He would never have admitted that one could have the weakness and hypocrisy to disguise the cowardice of a bourgeoisie incapable of defending itself with the name of social duty.

The cowardice of the bourgeoisie strongly resembles that of the English Liberal Party, which constantly proclaims its total confidence in arbitration between nations: arbitration nearly always produces disastrous results for England.²⁵ But these *wise men* prefer to pay out, or even to compromise the future of their country, rather than face the horrors of war. The English Liberal Party has always the word *justice* on its lips, exactly like our bourgeoisie; we might very well ask ourselves if all the high morality of our great contemporary thinkers is not founded on a degradation of the sentiment of honour.

²⁵ [Sir Henry] Sumner Maine [1822–88] observed a long while ago that it was England's fate to have advocates who aroused little sympathy (*Le Droit international*, French trans., [Paris, Thorin, 1890], p. 279). [See *International Law* (London, J. Murray, 1890).] Many English people believe that by humiliating their country they will rouse more sympathy for themselves: this is not proven.