

The Socialist in Action—the two “possibilisms”

By P. M. André

There is only one Socialism, but there are at the same time two ways of conceiving its realisation: the scientific way—that of the international Socialism—and the “possibilist”. Quite a large number of French Socialists have for a long time been suffering from the latter. Scientific Socialism does not believe that the Social Revolution can be brought about by stages. It is waiting for the social change to take place through the seizure of political power by the working class, and it is with a view to that seizing by force that it is organising the proletariat into a class party. The efforts it makes are all those of recruiting, educating, and organising. To get the greatest number of workers, both hand and brain, to understand that, in the words of Sieyès, “they are everything in the nation, and can *be* everything whenever they want to”, to show them that the inevitable necessity for socialising the means of production, to draw them towards Socialism by a propaganda they can understand, and suited to their respective spheres; to use, in order that this propaganda should be as effective as possible, every means at our disposal under capitalist rule, legal means being thereby understood; to repudiate any proceeding capable of doing harm to the recruiting and educating of the masses—such are the essential methods of international Socialism.

This method has for reformers the serious inconvenience of condemning Socialists to what certain busy people call “inaction”. To recruit, educate and organise is, it seems, to do nothing. We must, perforce, wait until the recruiting, educating and organising of the proletariat is far enough advanced for the revolutionary seizure of the “State” to be brought to a triumphant issue.

And those who, in imitation of [the] Roy [king] of France, are “afraid to wait”, are full of praise for a swifter method, that of “possibilism”. By virtue of this last they begin the revolution all at once. This beginning takes place in different ways: by peaceful penetration or by direct action. They pretend to “act according to one’s temperament” but in fact, try to realise, from this very moment, in the midst of capitalist rule, all the immediate possibilities of slices of socialism. On the one hand they are associated with bourgeois reformers, in order to make popular and vote for reforms which, if added together, end to end, all along the centuries, will accomplish the transformation of property “without a blow being struck”. On the other hand, not having enough patience to recruit, educate and organise their workmen comrades, they reckon solely on the “active minority” in order to reduce in succession the rights of the masters, and for the expropriation of capitalism, workshop by workshop and factory by factory.

Radical “possibilists” and Anarchist “possibilists” have each in turn made trial of their own method. Every one of their experiments has proved an admirable lesson in facts for the French proletariat. The attempt made in 1893 by the railway union showed that merely proclaiming “general strike” and voting for it at congress was not sufficient for this pretended possibility of freedom to be actually realised by the will of a bold minority. Bomb-rule à la Ravachol and Emile Henry ended in a complete fiasco. Millerand’s entry into the ministry proved that “peaceful penetration” in the Government laboratory changed the victor into a servant of the bourgeoisie. The recent manoeuvre of revolutionary syndicalism only succeeded in decoying into a military trap those whose eyes were blinded by direct action. Finally, even the supreme manifestation, by which the General Federation of Labour [CGT] wished to protest against the massacre of its troops, could not reach its full extent, because the active minority by itself alone would not be able to arrange for a general cessation of work, if only for the space of 24 hours. On the contrary, the 21st section of the *Livre*, because it is an educated and organised union, because it has not exhausted its adherents by ceaseless strikes, was able, in spite of the uncertainty of the movement, to save the honour of union organisation.

Thus, one after another, all the workings of “possibilism”: reformist and Governmental preparation, Anarchist preparation, far from being the beginnings of the Social Revolution, have provided capitalist Governments with an occasion for easy victories.

Victories of a day, doubtless, for if the hard lessons of experience discourage for a moment those amongst our people who “do not know how to wait”, the greatest number of militant workers derive from those lessons greater confidence in the old method of international Socialism. Don’t let us look for impossibilism under the pretext of possibilism. To fight by hundreds against thousands, with stones or wretched revolvers against sharpened swords and repeating rifles is useless heroism. Firing on proletarians in uniform, while exhorting them not to fire upon proletarians in work-a-day dress, is to put back the hour when the army will be on the side of the insurrection. To excite by vain threats public

opinion against workmen's organisations is to fetter the work of education which should go on before and at length make possible the Social Revolution. Let us get ready for the victory of the proletariat by preparing the forces indispensable for that victory: recruiting, educating and organising.

(translated from *Le Socialisme* by Fritz)
(November 1908)