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César De Paepe, *[Strikes, Unions, and the Affiliation of Unions with the International]*²²

[...] First we should state that in our view the strike is not even a partial solution to the great problem of the abolition of poverty, but we do think it is an instrument of struggle that can lead in the end to the solution of the problem. This is why we think we should speak out against the single-minded cooperativists, who see no serious movement among the workers apart from consumption, credit and production societies, and who in particular regard the strike as useless or even injurious to the workers' interests. [...]

The strike is just and legitimate and necessary when the employer breaks a collective agreement, and it may be tried then even if the chances are that it will be unsuccessful. Is it not always a great and fine thing to see slaves protest against barbaric and inhuman measures? And what measure can be more barbaric and inhuman than ceaseless whittling down of the rations of those whose life consists only of deprivations?

Given the minimal wages in certain industries (large manufactories and collieries, for instance), given the great centralization of capital which means that capitalists are in permanent league with one another to reduce workers to their last gasp, given the huge capital that these workers would need to run vast factories and collieries, and given the lack of any organization of credit that might make it easier to create production associations in these industries, we ask what other weapon than the strike, even unorganized, is left to these

²² The following text is excerpted from a report presented by the Brussels section at the 8 September 1868 session of the IWMA congress which took place in the same city. César De Paepe [1841–90] was second only to Marx as a theoretician of the IWMA. Leader of the association in Belgium, he participated in all the congresses (except those of Geneva 1866 and The Hague 1872) and conferences of the IWMA. He joined the 'autonomist' IWMA and was a delegate at its congresses of Brussels (1874) and Bern (1876). In 1885 he was among the founders of the Belgian Socialist Party. This text was published in B1868 and may be found in PI, I: 271–85.

proletarians against the indefinite lowering of their wages. Is it better that they starve to death on the job, without uttering a cry of indignation and without making any effort to get back on their feet? Well, even if it was proved like $2 + 2 = 4$ that the strike cannot bring the workers any improvement in such cases, it would have to be accepted as the ultimate protest of the downtrodden against the vices of our organization of society.

We said at the beginning of this report that the strike may be useful and necessary; that consequently we favour resistance societies²³ with a view to giving resources and wise, energetic leadership to strike actions. Yes, despite our wish and certainty that we shall one day see the social order completely transformed – that is, that the exploitation of man by man will be ended and replaced with the equal exchange of products and reciprocity among producers – we hold that it is necessary to establish resistance societies so long as there exist categories of workers whose complete liberation is today impossible.

[...]

The resistance society is still necessary because it instils a certain fear in the exploiter. He will refrain from infringing agreements unless he is almost sure of success, since he knows that he will lose his authority if his arbitrary moves end in failure. This remark is so true that it is applicable to the exploited. For workers who are forced to go back to work, having initially refused to do so because of a cut in the price offered for it, are much more aware of the authority exercised over them by a disdainful employer when need forces them to return with bowed heads to their workplace, which, instead of a site of slavery, ought to be one of happiness and satisfaction, because it is there that life, wealth and well-being have their origin.

The resistance society is indisputably necessary so long as the exploitation of man by man persists, so long as the idle extract anything whatsoever from the labour of others. It is necessary not only because of what we have already said but also because it is the only way that the bosses and the workers will know who they are dealing with when someone comes looking for work. The Association

²³ The resistance society (*société de résistance*) was one of several types of workers' organizations in the nineteenth century, following abolition of guilds during the Revolution. Unlike other types of organization, the resistance societies provided little by way of benefits and existed fundamentally to improve wages and the conditions of employment by coordinating strikes and exerting other forms of pressure on employers, as a result of which they were illegal.

gives each of its members a certificate of morality and honesty. Bosses and workers will know that the Association has within it only workers who are free from any taint.

We further note that one of the reasons for the constant lowering of the price of manpower is that unemployed workers go round the houses offering their labour – which gives the exploiter the idea that there is a greater abundance of men without work than there is in reality. Through the Association, demands for workers should be made directly to the committees, which can then send workers only where the need for them has made itself felt.

Apart from its usefulness for strikes, the placement of workers, etc., the price maintenance society is also useful by virtue of one of the complementary institutions it should comprise: we mean the unemployment insurance fund, an indispensable complement to the resistance fund proper. For while it is necessary that the Association should collect funds to provide for members in the event of strike action, that is, in the event of unemployment resulting from a dispute with the bosses, it is at least useful that it should do as much in the event of unforeseen unemployment due to more or less temporary industrial crises.

If, to be successful, strikes need to be waged and led by resistance societies, it is also the case that resistance societies will be serious only when they are all federated with one another – not only at the level of a trade or country, but across different countries and trades. Hence the necessity of an international federation.

A word of explanation will not be out of place here. Thus, it is readily understandable that, even if a resistance society succeeds in rallying all the workers in one trade in a particular locality, it will have not have achieved anything stable and worthwhile unless the boss is unable to find anywhere – in neighbouring areas, in other parts of the country or abroad – the workers he needs to replace those who have withdrawn their labour for a legitimate reason.

[...]

The strike, we maintain, is useful only for a limited period of time; a perpetual strike would mean making the wages system perpetual, and we want the abolition of the wages system; a perpetual strike would mean struggle with

no end or truce between capital and labour, and our aim is precisely not what is nowadays called the *association of labour and capital* (a hybrid whereby the capitalist funder comes to an agreement with the workers to do away with the boss, while continuing to extract interest and dividends from their labour) but the absorption of capital by labour. For since capital is accumulated labour that should have a simple exchange-value equal to the value of the labour it cost, it cannot be taken into account in the distribution of products. As the product of labour, capital can only be the worker's property; it cannot be his associate.

Thus, since this transformation of resistance societies does not take place in just one country but in all, or at least in those at the forefront of civilization, since, in short, all these associations of all federated countries will intervene at first for the purposes of struggle, building on this federation to apply it to the reciprocal exchange of products at cost price, international mutual exchange will replace both protectionism and the free trade advocated by bourgeois economists. And since this universal organization of labour and exchange, of production and circulation, coincides with an inevitable and necessary transformation in the organization of landed property as well as an intellectual transformation starting with a complete education for all, the regeneration of society shall be brought about in both the material and mental domains. Based henceforth upon science and labour, not, as today, upon ignorance and the domination of capital, mankind will peacefully accomplish its destiny as it marches from progress to progress in every branch of the arts, sciences and industry.