

What is to be done?
(Reply to an article by “Outcast”)

Errico Malatesta(*Umanità Nova*, n. 185, August 26, 1922)

“What is to be done?” is the question that, more or less intensely, always troubles the minds of all men struggling for an ideal, and urgently comes back in moments of crisis, when a failure, a disillusionment induces one to re-examine the tactics adopted, to criticize possible errors and to seek more effective means. Comrade *Outcast* is right to bring up the question again and invite the comrades to think and decide about what to do.

Today our situation is difficult, and even dreadful in some areas. However, he who was anarchist before, remains anarchist after all; although we have been weakened by many defeats, we have also gained a valuable experience, which will increase our effectiveness, if only we are able to treasure it. The defections occurred on our side, which were actually rare, help us after all, because they rid us of weak and unreliable persons.

So, what is to be done?

I am not going to dwell upon the unrest occurred abroad against the Italian reaction. Certainly we can only expect benefits from anything that helps the proletariat of the world to know about the true conditions of Italy and the incredible infamies that have been committed and keep being committed by the bourgeoisie cops in order to stifle and destroy any emancipatory movement. We just read about an international rally of protest against fascism, that took place in New York on the 18th of the current month — and we are sure that our friends and those who have a sense of freedom and justice will do whatever they can in America, England, France, Spain, etc.

However, we are mainly interested in what is to be done here in Italy, because this is what is to be done by us. Although it is good to take into account all the auxiliary forces, it is very important not to rely too much on others, and seek our well being in ourselves and our own work.

In recent years we have approached the different avantgard parties with a view to joint action, and we have always been disappointed. Must we for this reason isolate ourselves, or take refuge from *impure* contacts and stand still trying to move only when we have the necessary strength and in the name of our complete programme?

I think not.

Since we cannot make the revolution by ourselves, i.e. our forces alone are not sufficient to attract and mobilize the large masses necessary to win, and since, no matter how long one waits, the masses cannot become anarchist before the revolution has started, and we will necessarily remain a relatively small minority until we can try out our ideas in the revolutionary practice, by denying our cooperation to others and by postponing the action until we are strong enough to act by ourselves, we would practically end up encouraging sluggishness, despite the high-sounding words and the radical intentions, and refusing to get started, with the excuse of jumping to the end with one big leap.

I know very well — if I had not known for a long time I would have learnt recently — that we anarchists are alone in wishing the revolution for good and as soon as possible, except some individuals and groups that champ the bit of the authoritarian parties’ discipline, but remain in those parties in the hope that their leaders will resolve someday upon ordering a general action. However, I also know that the circumstances are often stronger than the individuals’ will, and one day or another our cousins from all different sides will have to resolve upon venturing the final struggle, if they do not want to ignominiously die as parties and make a present to the monarchy of all their ideas, their traditions, their best sentiments. Today they could be induced to that by the necessity of

defending their freedom, their goods, their life.

Therefore we should always be prepared to support those who are prepared to act, even if it carries with it the risk of later finding ourselves alone and betrayed.

But in giving others our support, that is, in always trying to use the forces at the disposal of others, and taking advantage of every opportunity for action, we must always be ourselves and seek to be in a position to make our influence felt and count at least in direct proportion to our strength.

To this end it is necessary that we should be agreed among ourselves and seek to co-ordinate and organize our efforts as effectively as possible.

Let others keep misunderstanding and slandering our goals, for reasons we do not want to qualify. All comrades that seriously want to take action will judge what is better for them to do.

At this time, as at any time of depression and stagnation, we are afflicted by a recrudescence of hair-splitting tendencies; some people enjoy discussing whether we are a party or a movement, whether we have to associate into unions or federations, and hundreds of other similar trifles; perhaps we will hear again that “groups can have neither a secretary nor a cashier, but they have to entrust one comrade to deal with the group’s correspondence and another to keep the money”. Hair-splitters are capable of anything; but let practical men see to taking action, and let hair-splitters in good faith, and those in bad faith above all, stew in their own juice.

Let anyone do whatever they like, associate with whoever they like, but let them act.

No person of good faith and common sense can deny that acting effectively requires agreeing, uniting, organizing.

Today the reaction tends to stifle any public movement, and obviously the movement tends to “go underground”, as the Russian used to say.

We are reverting to the necessity of a secret organization, which is fine.

However, a secret organization cannot be all and cannot include all.

We need to preserve and increase our contact with the masses, we need to look for new followers by propagandizing as much as possible, we need to keep in the movement all the individuals unfit for a secret organizations and those who would jeopardize it by being too well-known. One must not forget that the persons most useful to a secret organization are those whose beliefs are unknown to the adversaries, and who can work without being suspected.

Therefore, in my opinion, nothing that exists should be undone. Rather, it is a matter of adding something more; something with such characteristics as to respond to the current needs.

Let nobody wait for someone else’s initiative; let anyone take the initiatives they deem appropriate in their place, in their environment, and then try, with due precautions, to connect their own to others’ initiatives, to reach the general agreement that is necessary to a valid action.

We are in a time of depression, it is true. However, history is moving fast nowadays: let us get ready for the events to come.