

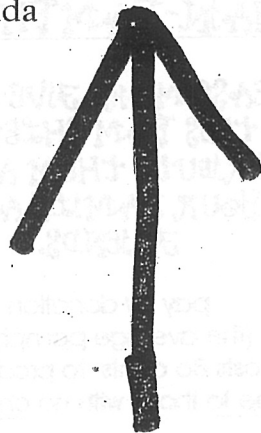
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To Tramps

Lucy Parsons

"more dangerous than a thousand rioters"

The Meaning of Social Revolution

by

J. MILNE



Context Preview for Lucy Parsons' "To Tramps"

The late 1800s and early 1900s were characterized by a stark class division between very wealthy industrialists and very poor factory workers. Parsons' essay "To Tramps" was distributed as a pamphlet to the homeless people on the streets of Chicago. At the time, the quality of life for those in the lower classes was incredibly bad. In 1883, members of the Chicago Citizens Association conducted an investigation into the living conditions of the working class and found "single rooms housing three or four families," and children slowly starving to death or freezing.

If you want to read more about the deplorable conditions faced by those working in the factories there, take a look at Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle*. This novel tells the story of an immigrant family who came over to America with great hopes of working hard to make their way in the new world. But the horrible conditions of the factory and the ghetto take their toll on the family - the sister is forced into prostitution, the child is eaten by rats, the hero of the story is forced out onto the streets and becomes a tramp. It is to this sort of person - the hardworking poor who just couldn't get a break and found themselves out on the streets - that Parsons' directed her argument.

Lucy Parsons was a dark-skinned woman - part African-American, part Native-American. She was married to a white man, Albert Parsons, and according to the miscegenation laws of the time their marriage was illegal. For this reason, when asked, Parsons denied her African-American heritage. Both Lucy and her husband were active in the socialist movement, working for the International Working People's Association. They published a newspaper called "The Alarm," and printed "To Tramps" in the first issue. Later, when Albert Parsons was charged with conspiracy in a trial concerning the Haymarket riot, the prosecution used this essay to help make the case against him (and even though Lucy wrote it, he was held responsible for it because he was her husband). Albert was not present at the Haymarket riot, and had nothing to do with the bomb that was thrown there; but partially because of the incendiary nature of his rhetoric, and his wife's rhetoric, he was convicted of conspiracy and executed.

This little essay therefore had an effect that Lucy Parsons probably didn't intend. Whether or not it had an influence on the tramps themselves is unknown. At the time, the Chicago Tribune was printing editorials that promoted the poisoning of tramps, and William Graham Sumner was giving speeches that suggested we should just let them freeze to death; Lucy Parson's argument that tramps should fight back was a response to this.

come depends on how soon is built into an overwhelming force the movement striving for its attainment. Today that movement is small, but its growth is the growth of the working class will to power. It is not a movement of banners and bunting, of fanfares and parades. Neither fireworks nor heroics feature its activities. But it is the greatest movement in the world today, and its cause is the greatest ever undertaken by man. And those who are its members are sure of their position, proud of their position, and certain that every step they take is a step forward. They know where they are going and they know how to get there.

We invite you to join us. We offer you freedom from the mental enslavement of class society. We offer you the companionship of men and women who are not carried away by the sham, the hypocrisy, the lies of a decadent ruling class. Most of all, we offer you an opportunity to roll up your sleeves and take part in the activities of the one movement worth while—the movement for Social Revolution.

An Address, delivered for the S. P. of C.

in the Labor Temple, Winnipeg,

March 9th, 1945,

by

J. MILNE

CHAIN-PAMPHLETS

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sew up its rips and tears, call it by some other name, and it will still be a poor shelter from the wind.

The solution to the social problem is Revolution — Social Revolution. And by this we mean a new system of society, a system in which there will be neither private nor government ownership of the means for producing and distributing wealth, a system in which all these things will be owned in common by all the people, where wealth will be produced for no other purpose than to satisfy human needs. We do not mean a condition of chaos, anarchy and bloodshed. *We have these things now.* We mean a system in which peace, happiness and freedom for the mass of the people will have a real meaning for the first time in history. We mean a system of society in which poverty, wars, insecurity and all the evils existing and arising from the economic nature of capitalism will be ended, once and for all time.

Is there any reason why such a state of affairs *ought not* to be introduced? For thousands of years the slaves of society, with brains and brawn and sweat and blood, have toiled to develop and erect the magnificent structure that is the modern means for producing the needs of mankind. Who can stand up and state bluntly that only the capitalist class may own these means and benefit from their operations? Who can stand up and state bluntly that the workers of the world should continue to live in hovels and feed on swill and shower the greatness of their ever expanding abilities on the lap of a useless parasite class?

Is there any reason why the state of affairs which we propose *cannot* be introduced? The workers feed and clothe and fight for the capitalist class. They wait on them hand and foot and carry them around on their backs from the cradle to the grave. When they decide that they will no longer engage in such foolishness, what power on earth is great enough to prevent them from asserting their will?

The day is coming when the workers of the world will rise from their knees, conscious of their own interests, their own strength, their own destiny. The day is coming when the workers of the world will proceed about the task of building society anew. How soon that day will

Lucy E. Parsons, "To Tramps," *Alarm*, October 4, 1884. Also printed and distributed as a leaflet by the International Working People's Association.

TO TRAMPS

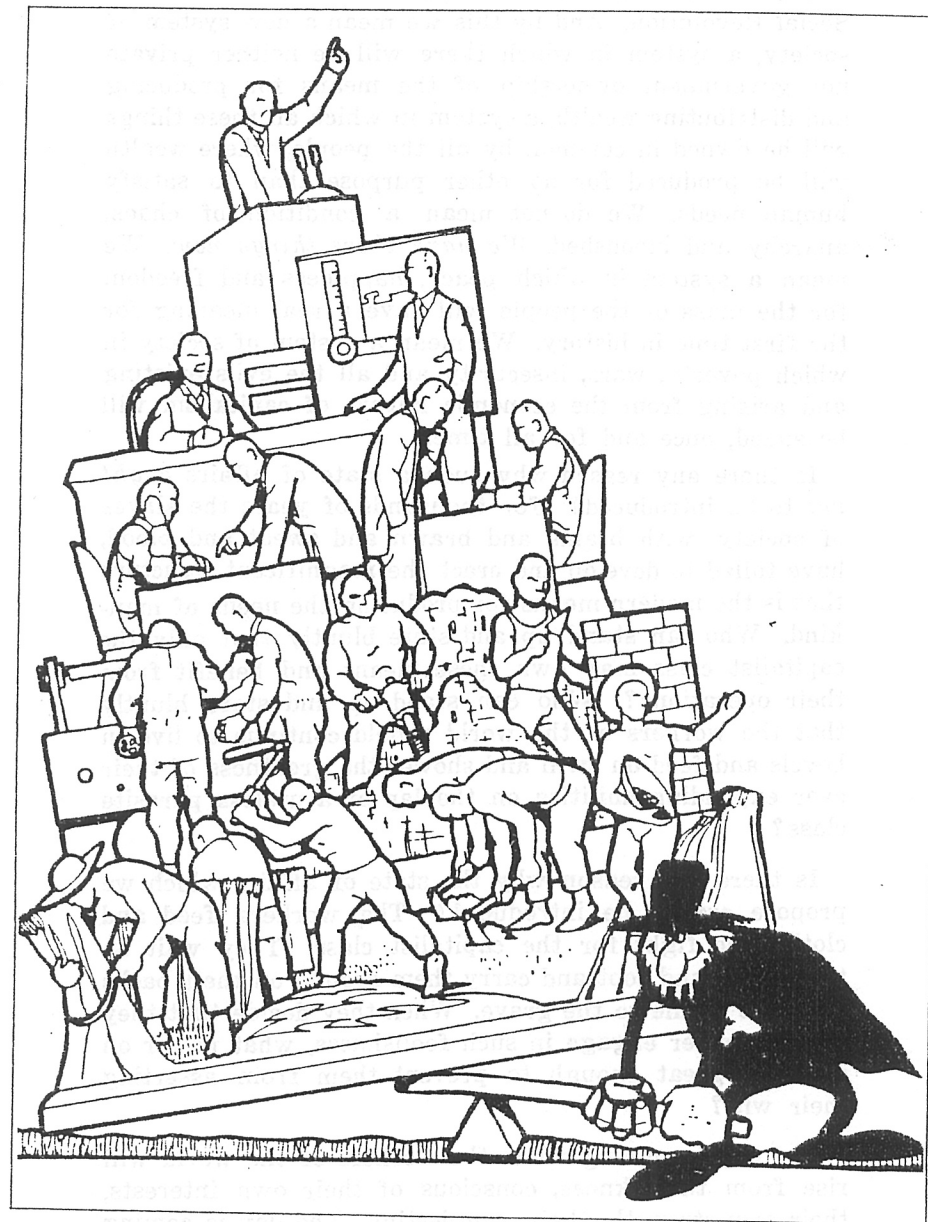
The Unemployed, the Disinherited, and Miserable.

A word to the 35,000 now tramping the streets of this great city, with hands in pockets, gazing listlessly about you at the evidence of wealth and pleasure of which you own no part, not sufficient even to purchase yourself a bit of food with which to appease the pangs of hunger now gnawing at your vitals. It is with you and the hundreds of thousands of others similarly situated in this great land of plenty, that I wish to have a word.

Have you not worked hard all your life, since you were old enough for your labor to be of use in the production of wealth? Have you not toiled long, hard and laboriously in producing wealth? And in all those years of drudgery do you not know you have produced thousand upon thousands of dollars' worth of wealth, which you did not then, do not now, and unless you ACT, never will, own any part in? Do you not know that when you were harnessed to a machine and that machine harnessed to steam, and thus you toiled your 10, 12 and 16 hours in the 24, that during this time in all these years you received only enough of your labor product to furnish yourself the bare, coarse necessities of life, and that when you wished to purchase anything for yourself and family it always had to be of the cheapest quality? If you wanted to go anywhere you had to wait until Sunday, so little did you receive for your unremitting toil that you dare not stop for a moment, as it were? And do you not know that with all your squeezing, pinching and economizing you never were enabled to keep but a few days ahead of the wolves of want? And that at last when the caprice of your employer saw fit to create an artificial famine by limiting production, that the fires in the furnace were extinguished, the iron horse to which you had been harnessed was stilled; the factory door locked up, you turned upon the highway a tramp, with hunger in your stomach and rags upon your back?

Yet your employer told you that it was overproduction which made him close up. Who cared for the bitter tears and heart-pangs of your loving wife and helpless children, when you bid them a loving "God bless you" and turned upon the tramper's road to seek employment elsewhere? I say, who cared for those heartaches and pains? You were only a tramp now, to be execrated and denounced as a "worthless tramp and a vagrant" by that very class who had been engaged all those years in robbing you and yours. Then can you not see that the "good boss" or the "bad boss" cuts no figure whatever? that you are the common prey of both, and that their mission is simply robbery? Can you not see that it is the **INDUSTRIAL SYSTEM** and not the "boss" which must be changed?

Now, when all these bright summer and autumn days are going by and you have no employment, and consequently can save up nothing, and when the winter's blast sweeps down from the north and all the earth is wrapped in a shroud of ice, hearken not to the voice of the hypocrite who will tell you that it was ordained of God that "the poor ye have always"; or to the arrogant robber who will say to you that you "drank up all your wages last summer when you had work, and that is the reason why you have nothing now, and the workhouse or the workyard is too good for you; that you ought to be shot." And shoot you they will if you present your petitions in too emphatic a manner. So hearken not to them, but list! Next winter when the cold blasts are creeping through the rents in your seedy garments, when the frost is biting your feet through the holes in your worn-out shoes, and when all wretchedness seems to have centered in and upon you, when misery has marked you for her own and life has become a burden and existence a mockery, when you have walked the streets by day and slept upon hard boards by night, and at last determine by your own hand to take your life, - for you would rather go out into utter nothingness than to longer endure an existence which has become such a burden - so, perchance, you determine to dash yourself into the cold embrace of the lake rather than longer suffer thus.



Anarchik at work: Cartoon by Roberto Ambrosoli

This has been a brief sketch of the adventuresome and troublesome nature of commodity production. A great deal more could be said on the subject. But perhaps enough has been said at this time to more than strongly suggest that wars are not the result of the wickedness of power-mad dictators, that depressions are not unfortunate natural phenomena, and that poverty is not the result of the failure of individuals to get ahead in the world. Perhaps enough has been said to show that these evils are definitely related, that they are definite features of the economic fabric of society as at present constituted. Perhaps enough has been said to show that they stem directly from the capitalist ownership of the means of life.

A lot of people around us think something ought to be done for the workers. They think wages somehow ought to be protected and even increased—*reasonably*, of course. They think someone ought to take the workers under a protective wing during times of depression, that minimum standards ought to be set up, that boards of experts on this and that ought to be formed, that the government ought to purchase some industries. They think that if something (almost anything, it would seem) were done by a well-meaning government, it would prove beneficial to the downtrodden underdog.

These people (and occupying an honored position within their ranks may be found the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation) forget, or don't know, that they are not pioneers in this kind of activity, that they are simply the current representatives of a long line of misinformed warriors who have been baying at the moon for generations. Two great modern monuments provide adequate testimony to the success of their efforts: the Great Depression of the Hungry Thirties and the Great Catastrophe of the Bloody Forties.

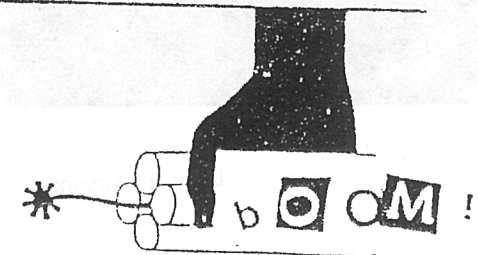
Capitalism reminds one of the German worker back in the days of secret rearmament in Germany. He worked in a factory that produced parts for baby carriages. His wife was to have a baby, so he naturally had to carry home the necessary parts. He complained bitterly afterwards because, no matter how he assembled the parts, the result was always the same—a machine gun.

Capitalism is like that. No matter what you do to it, it reacts in the same way. Wrap yourself up in capitalism,

But halt, before you commit this last tragic act in the drama of your simple existence. Stop! Is there nothing you can do to insure those whom you are about to orphan, against a like fate? The waves will only dash over you in mockery of your rash act; but stroll you down the avenues of the rich and look through the magnificent plate windows into their voluptuous homes, and here you will discover the *very identical robbers* who have despoiled you and yours. Then let your tragedy be enacted *here!* Awaken them from their wanton sport at your expense! Send forth your petition and let them read it by the red glare of destruction. Thus when you cast "one long lingering look behind" you can be assured that you have spoken to these robbers in the only language which they have ever been able to understand, for they have never yet deigned to notice any petition from their slaves that they were not *compelled* to read by the red glare bursting from the cannon's mouths, or that was not handed to them upon the point of the sword. You need no organization when you make up your mind to present this kind of petition. In fact, an organization would be a detriment to you; but each of you hungry tramps who read these lines, avail yourselves of those little methods of warfare which Science has placed in the hands of the poor man, and you will become a power in this or any other land.

Learn the use of explosives!

Dedicated to the tramps by Lucy E. Parsons.



to read more about Lucy Parsons, visit:

www.lucyparsonspj.org/



Lucy E. Parsons

But, between the factory and the coffers of capital, a devious line is travelled by the wealth produced by labor. Obviously, the articles produced in a given plant are not in themselves of much use to the plant owner. The manufacturer of shoes can wear only one pair of shoes. It may suit his vanity to reserve for his personal use a dozen pair, or even more; but clearly he cannot use the entire output of a shoe factory. And that, of course, is not his purpose. Neither is it his purpose to provide shoes to those who need shoes. His purpose is to realize profits. So the shoes, which the workers have produced for him, are placed on the market, to be bought by those who need them and have the price to pay for them. And this, as everyone knows, is what happens to the entire output of modern industry.

The workers, as we have already pointed out, are not in a position to buy back all their produce. Only part of it is within their means. Nor can the capitalists themselves consume the balance. They are compelled, therefore, to reach ever farther afield in search of new outlets for their commodities.

But the markets thus created, although always expanding, do not expand at a rate uniform with expanding productivity and production, and every so often great masses of wealth pile up and cause the capitalists to curtail production. Then we have the spectacle of idle and hungry workers trudging the streets in search of work and begging the powers that be for crusts of bread in a land of plenty. Such a condition existed during the Hungry Thirties. And the great surpluses of wealth at that time were never fully disposed of until the present war was well under way.

In the everyday production and circulation of wealth, the capitalists find themselves in need of sources of raw materials, protection in the transport of goods, new markets, etc. They fight among themselves over these things. In a given country, their differences are settled periodically at the ballot box. On the international field, they frequently resort to violence, and the workers are then called upon to join in the fight for freedom, to save the world for democracy, to defend "our way of life" and such-like nonsense. Such is the true nature of this war.



The modern worker works in a plant which he does not own, with machinery which he does not own; and the wealth which he produces, he does not own. What he receives in return for his labors is contained in an envelope, or is represented by a check, and is called wages. And his wages are a claim upon the wealth which he has produced. Not all the wealth; only some of it. He does not receive wealth proportionate to the amount which he produces. His wages rise at one time, and fall at another time; then rise and fall again at other times, depending largely upon the conditions of the labor market. His productivity does not fluctuate like that. And if we examine his real wage (i.e., the amount of goods he can obtain for his money wage) over an extended period of time, it will be seen that his standard of life has increased only in a trifling degree (in many cases not at all), and even this increase is of doubtful benefit in view of the greater insecurity of advancing capitalism. Contrasted with the steady and tremendous advance in productivity, there can be no room for doubt that the living standards of the workers come a sad-looking second.

Then what becomes of the ever-increasing wealth which the workers produce but do not receive? Into the coffers of capital it goes. Part of it is used for the replacement and expansion of plant and machinery. Part of it, of course, is used to surround the capitalist with massive evidences of wealth and luxury. Part of it is used to pay off the politicians, pedagogues, priests, pressmen and such like for their services in keeping the minds of the workers stunted.

The Meaning of Social Revolution

THE word Revolution is a source of fear to a great many people. In their minds it brings forth a picture of civil strife, bloodshed and destruction. It portrays the ruin of all the things they love and respect, and the setting up of conditions too horrible even to mention. It is a word that is not pleasantly received.

On the one hand, this attitude arises from a genuine consciousness of economic interests. To the owners of capital, it is not disturbing that dictatorships spread themselves across the earth, leaving economic and intellectual wretchedness in their wake—so long as the interests of capital are not affected thereby. These activities, indeed, are even useful at times, since they give the proper people a firmer grip on the affairs of society by cleansing the minds and purging the ranks of workmen who have become misguided and discontented. To the owners of capital it is not disturbing that bombs should drop from the skies, that the work of man should be reduced to rubble, and that men, women and children should be ground into that rubble—if these things happen in the interests of capital. To the owners of capital it is fitting that insecurity and want should be permanent features of a world of plenty, since these are the only things upon which power and wealth can be built. But Revolution! Intolerable!

On the other hand, this attitude towards Revolution arises from a genuine lack of consciousness of economic interests. The workers of the world do not understand wherein their interests lie. They are under the influence of the perverted outlook of the ruling class; and because of this they accept the evils of modern society with tolerance, or resentment turned in wrong directions, while they face the thought of Revolution with almost unanimous opposition.

We stand for Revolution. But let it be made clear now that we mean by Revolution, not the things they say we mean, not the tortured existence with which you are now all too familiar, not a change of rulers, masters, or government personnel: we mean a change that will put an end to all these things, a basic change in the economic relationships of society. We mean a Social Revolution—a Socialist Revolution.

Why do we speak of Revolution? There is a reason. What is it? Well, as a starting point, let us ask the question: "Is everyone satisfied with society as it is today?" Even the most optimistic capitalist apologist would be compelled to answer in the negative. There can be no dispute about the fact that discontent is widespread. It is not active, but it does exist. Why are people discontented? Why are you discontented? Ask this question of yourself and of your workmates. Consider the answers. In other parts of the earth, we should be obliged to head the list with the terror brought by bombs and shells; the grief brought by ruined homes; and the horror of living in the midst of death and destruction. Here, we must head the list with the sorrow brought by little items: "Missing", "Seriously wounded". "Fallen in the line of duty." And following these comes the discontent arising from the many restrictions and impositions brought by war, the shortages in housing and in consumers' goods, the rising price levels, etc.

It may be said that this discontent may be attributed mainly to the war. That may be conceded, but was the war necessary? "Yes", perhaps you will answer, "It was necessary to destroy Hitler before he destroys us." But that sort of thing was done once before, was it not? It did not prevent the coming of Hitler. "No," may come the reply, "but that was because we didn't do a good enough job of it at that time. We shall not make the same mistake again." But let us suppose that a better job had been done the last time. Would it have prevented the coming of Mussolini? Would it have prevented the rise of Japan? Would there never have been the Hungry Thirties? And let us suppose that, after the war, Germany is completely exterminated. Will that prevent another Hitler from arising somewhere else—perhaps here? Will that prevent another great depression, another great war?

These questions are occurring to workers. Only so far, at present, can they find answers that satisfy them. The other questions remain unanswered, vaguely imprinted on their minds, but looming ever greater as the months go by, bringing with them the dawning thought that life can never be more than an endless circle of want and viciousness, that their periods of greatest access to the products of their own labors can come only at times when

millions of their kind are thrown at each other's throats, only at times of greatest tragedy.

A truly disturbing thought! Yet, where can there be found reason for another thought? Government plans for the post-war world (insofar as these concern the workers) are designed *solely to check actual starvation*. How can such plans be reconciled with the thought of a world of plenty? The "Big Three" conferences have already produced visible signs of disagreement, and if such signs are apparent in the midst of war, what hope can there be that the defeat of their present opponents will bring an end to such conflicts? Peace and plenty may feature prominently in the words of capital, but there is little room for them in the deeds of capital. They talk of plenty and prepare for scarcity; they talk of peace and prepare for war.

But even though the public figures of our time, the trusted and honored statesmen of today, can and will do nothing to ease the fears and difficulties of mankind, something can be done; and our task is to show what can be done and how it is to be done. This explanation will bring you closer to an understanding of the meaning of Social Revolution.

There is one outstanding problem in modern society. It runs constantly through all the changing fortunes of capitalism, ever present, tending to become ever more intense with the passage of time. And that is the problem of poverty. If we trace back this problem to its breeding ground, we shall find that these other problems which I have mentioned are related to it in such a way that their solution can be effected only through the solution of this fundamental problem. The insecurity of trade depressions, the destructiveness of modern wars, the wretchedness of everyday life under capitalism can be ended only when poverty is ended.

You and I and the great mass of humanity, in order to live, are obliged to work for other people. We have no choice in the matter. The mills, the mines, the factories, all the things that are needed to sustain the life of all the people are owned by only a few of the people — the capitalists. This is a statement that hardly needs to be elaborated upon. It is common knowledge. What is not common knowledge is the fact that here is to be found the source of the great evils of today.