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Letter to Several Workers in Paris and Rouen

Pierre-Joseph Proudhon

1864

Citizens and friends:

This work was inspired by you and belongs to you.

Ten months ago you asked me what I thought of the electoral manifesto published by sixty workers from the Seine. You especially wanted to know if, after having pronounced yourselves at the elections of 1863 with a negative vote, you should persist in this line or if, because of the circumstances, you were permitted to support with your vote and your influence the candidacy of a comrade worthy of our sympathy.

There can be no doubt concerning my opinion on the thoughts expressed in your manifesto, and I frankly expressed it when I received it. To be sure, I was pleased by this reawakening of socialism: who in France had more right to be pleased than I? And I was in agreement with you and the Sixty that the working class isn't represented and that it has the right to be so; how could I possibly feel otherwise? If such were possible, would not working class representation be today, as it was in 1848, the official affirmation of socialism from the political and economic points of view?

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But between this and the participation in elections, which would commit, along with democratic consciousness, its principles and its future, there is an abyss that I did not hide from you, citizens. And I can add that these reservations, welcomed by you, have since then been confirmed by experience.

What then is French democracy up to, once so proud and pure, and which, on the word of a few ambitious ones, imagined that through use of a false oath it could go from victory to victory? What conquests have we gained? Through what new and powerful idea has our policies been revealed? In the last eighteen months what successes have been signaled by the energy of our advocates or have repaid their glibness? Have we not been the witnesses of their perpetual defeats and failures? Duped by their parliamentarianism, haven't we seen them beaten on almost all questions by the government's orators? And when they were taken into court for the crime of having formed associations or met without authorization, when they had to explain themselves before the country and those in power, were they not confounded by that legality they vaunted and whose interpreters they posed as? What pitiful intrigues! And what a pitiful defense! I leave you to judge ... After so many noisy debates can we deny that deep down our representatives have no other ideas, tendencies, or policies than the policies, tendencies, and ideas of the government?

Thanks to them it is now the case for young democracy what was once the case for old liberalism, two schools which an effort is being made to pair off: the world is beginning to back away from them. It is said that the truth, right, and freedom are no longer any more on this side than on the other.

It is thus a matter of revealing to the world, through authentic testimony, the ideas, the true ideas of modern people, to legitimize its reformist aspirations and its right to sovereignty. Is universal suffrage truth or is it fiction? It is once again a question of restricting it, and it is certain that aside from labor very few take it seriously.

It's a matter of demonstrating to working class democracy what happens when a party enters political life when it lacks sufficient consciousness of itself and its ideas, and has given its votes to names that don't represent it. How when the superior class loses the direction of a movement it is up to the inferior one to take it. And how a people, incapable of regenerating itself through this regular succession, is condemned to perish. Do I dare to say that it's a matter of making French plebeians understand that if in 1869 it takes it into its head to yet again win a battle for the benefit of its bosses as it did in 1863-64, its emancipation could be put off for a half-century?

Have no doubt, my friends, that protest via the blank ballot, so little understood, so poorly received ... that this absolute declaration of incompatibility between an outdated system and our dearest aspirations, this stoical veto, cast by us against presumptuous candidacies, is nothing less than the announcement of a new order of things, our becoming aware that we are the party of right and of freedom, the solemn act of our entry into political life and, I daresay, the signaling to the old world of its oncoming and inevitable fall ...