

*Michail Bakunin*

# On the Program of the Alliance

1871

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## *Introduction*

The overall theme of *The Program of the Alliance* is the relationship between the conscious revolutionary vanguard, Bakunin's Alliance, and the working masses in and out of the International whom it is trying to influence in a revolutionary direction, how to organize the unorganized and how to radicalize them when they are organized is the main theme though Bakunin digresses to other matters not strictly related to it. Since the text deals with different subjects, it has for the sake of clarity been divided into three sections (our subtitles).

*The Program of the Alliance* opens with a discussion of union bureaucracy, a description of how the executive committees elected by the sections of rank-and-file local unions tend to become transformed from being the intended agents to the masters of the membership. He stresses that no organization, however free, can long withstand the lethargy and indifference of the membership without degenerating into some form of dictatorship.

Bakunin's "Fabrica sections" were composed of native citizens, the highly skilled, better-paid watchmakers and jewelry workers, most of whom favored parliamentary action and class collaboration. The construction and other heavy manual workers, mostly unskilled, low-paid foreigners, favored direct economic action. Not being allowed to vote, they were naturally not interested in parliamentary action. Their disenfranchisement, and the indignities they suffered, often on the part of the snobbish Fabrica workers, engaged the support of Bakunin and the Swiss libertarian sections of the International.

The second section deals with the internal organization of the International. The so-called central sections referred to are the ideological-activist vanguard groups animating the organization of the masses. In discussing the connection between this revolutionary minority and the general membership of the International, Bakunin deals with the structure and the internal problems of the International and its ultimate objectives. The vast mass of the workers were quite unorganized and only a tiny fraction of the organized minority were affiliated with the International.

In the third section here, Bakunin anticipates the objection that his recommendations would make the International a miniature replica of the State. As so often elsewhere, Bakunin stresses the need for an organized revolutionary minority to guard against the usurpation of power. He insists that such a minority is not the same as the governing oligarchy of the State, and defines the essential differences between libertarian organization and state organization. Transcending the labor question as such, he goes on into a fruitful digression on the relationship of the individual to society and the nature of society and the State. Centralization and decentralization, the monopoly of power and the diffusion of power among the many units of society and the individuals who compose it, is a recurrent theme.

## Union Bureaucracy

Having convinced themselves that what they would like their sections to do is what the membership actually wants, the committees make decisions for them without even bothering to consult them. This illusion is bound to have unfortunate effects, particularly on the social morality of the leaders themselves. The leaders regard themselves as the absolute masters of their constituents, as permanent chiefs, whose power is sanctioned by their services as well as the length of their tenure in office.

Even the best of men are rendered corruptible by the temptations of power and the absence of a serious, consistent opposition. In the International there can be no mercenary corruption, for the association is too poor to pay high, or even adequate, salaries to its officials. . . . But the International is unfortunately subject to corruption by another kind of temptation: *vanity and ambition*.

. . . If there is a devil in human history, that devil is the principle of command. It alone, sustained by the ignorance and stupidity of the masses, without which it could not exist, is the source of all the catastrophes, all the crimes, and all the infamies of history.

Everyone, even the best of men, carries within himself the germs of this accursed affliction and every germ must necessarily quicken and grow if it finds even the slightest favorable conditions. In human society these conditions are the stupidity, the ignorance, and the servile habits of the masses. It can well be said that the masses themselves create their own exploiters, their own despots, their own executioners of humanity. When they are quiescent and patiently endure their humiliation and slavery, the best men emerging from their ranks — the most intelligent, the most energetic, the very men who in better circumstances could render great services to humanity — become despots even while deluding themselves that they are actually working for the benefit of their victims. By contrast, in an intelligent and alert society, jealous of its liberties and ready to defend its rights, even the most malevolent, the most egotistic individuals, necessarily become good. Such is the power of society, a thousand times stronger than the strongest individual.

It is thus clear that the absence of opposition and control and of continuous vigilance inevitably becomes a source of depravity for all individuals vested with social power. And those among them who cherish and would safeguard their personal morality should, in the first place, not stay too long in power, and in the second place, while still in power encourage this vigilant and salutary opposition.

This is what the committees of Geneva (doubtless unaware of this threat to their personal morality) generally failed to do. Through self-sacrifice, initiative, and ability, they attained leadership, and by a species of self-hallucination, almost inevitable in all those holding office too long, they ended by imagining themselves indispensable. This is how a sort of governmental aristocracy was imperceptibly nurtured in the very heart of sections so democratic as the construction workers. . . . With the growing authority of the committees, the workers become increasingly, indifferent to all matters except strikes and the payment of dues, which are collected with great difficulty. . . .

The construction workers' section simply left all decision-making to their committees. "We have elected a committee. The committee will decide." This is what they told anyone who tried to get their opinion on any subject. Soon

they never had any opinion at all — like blank sheets of paper on which the committees could write whatever they wanted. As long as the committees did not ask for too much money and did not press the workers too hard to pay back dues, the committee could do almost anything with impunity. This is very good for the committees, but not at all favorable for the social, intellectual, and moral progress of the collective power of the International. In this manner power gravitated to the committees, and by a species of fiction characteristic of all governments the committees substituted their own will and their own ideas for that of the membership. They represented only themselves. Such power, based on the ignorance and indifference of the workers, is its inevitable and detestable consequence. Once introduced into the internal organization of the International, it prepares the ground for the spawning of all sorts of intrigues, vanities, ambitions, and personal interests. It is a fine way to inspire a puerile self-satisfaction and a sense of security as ridiculous as it is baneful for the proletariat; and sure, also, to frighten the timid souls among the bourgeoisie. But it is not a potent force. It will in no way promote the life-and-death struggle that the European proletariat must now wage against the all-too-real world of the bourgeoisie.

This indifference to general problems manifesting itself more and more every day, this lassitude which leaves all problems to the decision of committees, and the habit of automatic subordination which is its natural consequence, infects not only the sections but also the committees themselves. Most of the committee members become the unthinking instruments of three or two, or even just one of their colleagues. Some are more intelligent and aggressive than the others. Thus a majority of the sections as well as their committees are in fact ruled by oligarchs or individuals who mask their absolute power even in organizations which have constitutions and procedures as safeguards. . . In solidly organized sections like the Fabrica sections (whatever their other shortcomings) where there is real autonomy, they have been able to drastically curtail the arbitrary power of the Geneva Central Committee (representing all the local unions in the Geneva branch of the International) . . . even though they nevertheless exert a predominant influence — and this, for many reasons: first, that the Geneva workers are much better informed, have much more political understanding, and are far more articulate than the construction workers; second, that the Fabrica sections always delegated to the Central Committee their most intelligent and capable workers in whom they had full confidence; delegates who conscientiously fulfilled all their obligations to their respective sections as stipulated in the statutes; reporting regularly to the membership the proposals made and how they voted; asking for further instructions (plus instant recall of unsatisfactory delegates) . . .

Among the construction workers these conditions did not obtain, and where revolt against the tyranny was squelched before it could be effectively organized, the sections could defend their rights and their autonomy in only one way: the workers called general membership meetings. Nothing arouses the antipathy of the committees more than these popular assemblies, which the committees always try to counteract by staging *assemblies of all the committees of the sections*. . .

In these great meetings of the sections, the items on the agenda were amply discussed and the most progressive opinion prevailed. Most of the time, when the spirit of the masses was not corrupted by the skillful and slanderous

propaganda of the committees, these assemblies were inspired by a sort of collective instinct propelling the people irresistibly toward truth and justice. Even the most recalcitrant were swept into the current of generous sentiment. The mighty ones, the connivers who maneuvered the workers in secret meetings, lost their cocksure smugness when challenged by these assemblies, where popular good sense . . . made naught of their sophisms. In these assemblies of all the sections, great numbers of previously passive workers, caught up in the general camaraderie, repudiated their leaders and voted against their resolutions. . .

## The Structure of the International

The rise of modern industry sparked the founding of the International in 1864 in almost all European countries, particularly in highly industrialized England, France, Germany, Switzerland, and Belgium. Two factors brought about the creation of the International. The first was the simultaneous awakening of the spirit, courage, and consciousness of the workers in these countries which followed the catastrophic defeat of the 1848 and 1851 uprisings. The second factor was the phenomenal enrichment of the bourgeoisie and the concomitant poverty of the workers. But, as is often the case, this renascent faith did not at once manifest itself among the proletarian masses. The first feeble, widely scattered associations were pioneered by a few of the most intelligent, educated militants — most of them tempered in the crucible of past struggles. . . It was they who, upon returning from the founding conference of the International in London, organized the first central sections of the International in their respective countries.

The central sections represent no specific industry, but comprise the most advanced workers from all the industries. What do these sections represent? The idea behind the International. What is its mission? The elaboration and propagandizing of this idea. What is this idea? It is the full emancipation of all those who eke out their miserable sustenance by any form of productive labor, who are economically exploited and politically oppressed by the capitalists and their privileged intermediaries. Such is the negative, combative, or revolutionary force of this idea. And what is the positive force? It is the founding of a new social order resting on emancipated labor, one which will spontaneously erect upon the ruins of the Old World the free federation of workers' associations. These two aspects of the same question are inseparable.

For no one can destroy without having at least a remote conception, true or false, of the new order of things which should replace the existing one. The more fantastic the conception, the more ruthless must be the destructive force. The more this concept approximates reality and conforms to the necessary, creative development of existing society, the more useful and salutary will be the effects of this destructive action. Destructive action is always determined not only by its purpose and its intensity but also by the means employed. It is conditioned by the constructive ideal from which it draws its initial inspiration, which constitutes its soul.

The central sections are the active nuclei which retain, develop, and clarify the new faith. No one joins them as a specialized worker in this or that trade. All join as workers in general to promote the general organization of labor in all countries. They *are* workers in “general.” Workers for what? Workers for

the idea, for propaganda, and for the organization of the economic and militant might of the International, workers for the Social Revolution.

If the International Workingmen's Association were composed solely of central sections, it would never have attained even one hundredth of the power of which it can now be so proud. The central sections would have been mere debating societies where all kinds of social questions, including of course that of workers' organizations, would have been perpetually discussed without the least attempt being made or the slightest possibility existing of putting these ideas into practice. And this for the simple reason that "labor in general" is an abstract idea which is realized only in the immense diversity of specialized trades and industries. Each industry has its own special problems which cannot be determined by abstract formulas, and which are revealed only through actual development and practice.

The relationship of these industries to labor in general results from the vital combinations of all particular trades and functions, and is not based on an abstract, a priori principle, dogmatically or violently imposed.

If the International had been composed only of the central sections, the latter probably would have succeeded in organizing conspiracies for the overthrow of the existing order but would have been unable to achieve its goal. For it could have attracted only a mere handful of heroic workers while the remaining millions of workers would have remained outside this small circle. And the social order cannot be destroyed without winning the support of these millions. Only a relatively small number of individuals are moved by an abstract idea. The millions, the proletarian masses (and this is true also for the privileged classes) are moved only by the force of facts . . . by their immediate interests and their momentary passions.

In order to interest and involve the whole proletariat in the work of the International, it is necessary to approach them not with vague generalizations but with realistic understanding of their daily concerns. To win the confidence of uninformed workers, and the vast majority of the proletariat are unfortunately in this group. it is necessary to begin by talking to the worker, not of the general troubles of the proletariat of the world, nor the general causes responsible for them, but only of his own trade and the working conditions in his own locality, his working hours. the cost of living, and to suggest practical measures to alleviate these evils and better his conditions. It would be a mistake to speak to him first about things like the abolition of hereditary property, the abolition of the juridical rights of the State, and the replacement of the State by the free federation of producers' associations. He probably will not understand these theories. No! Propose in simple language such ideas as will appeal to his good sense and which he can verify by his daily experiences. These measures are: the establishment of complete solidarity with his workmates in order to defend his rights and resist the aggression of the employer. Next, the extension of this solidarity from his place of work to embrace the trades in his own locality, i.e., his formal entry as an active member in the section of his trade or profession, a section affiliated with the International Workingmen's Association.

Having joined his section of the International, the newly enlisted worker learns many things. He learns that the same solidarity that exists within his section is also established among all the different sections and trades in the whole area; that this wider solidarity has become necessary because all the employers in all the industries have established a united front to cut wages and drive down

the living standards of the workers. He will learn later that this solidarity is not confined to his area but extends much further, beyond all frontiers, and embraces the workers of the world, powerfully organized for their defense, for waging war against exploitation by the bourgeoisie.

A worker does not need much intellectual preparation to become a member of a trade union section which is affiliated to the International, He is already, unconsciously and in a perfectly natural manner, conditioned to become one. All he has to know is that hard work is wearing him down, that his wages are barely enough to provide for his family, that his employer is a ruthless exploiter whom he detests with all the hatred of the slave rebelling against his master. This feeling will, when the final struggle has been won, give place to a feeling of justice and goodwill toward his former employer, as is befitting one who is now among the fraternity of free men.

The worker easily understands that he cannot possibly fight alone. To defend his rights he must unite with his fellow workers in his place of work, and pledge his solidarity in the common struggle. He learns that a union in one shop is not enough, and that it is necessary for all workers in the same trade and in the same locality to join forces. Even the least informed workers will, as a result of their shared experience, soon realize that solidarity must transcend narrow local limits.

The workers in the same trade and locality declare a strike for shorter hours and more pay. The boss imports strikebreakers from other places in and even outside the country who will work for less pay and longer hours. To compete with foreign producers who can sell their goods more cheaply because of lower working costs, employers are forced to reduce wages and lengthen working hours. Better working conditions in one country can be maintained only if the conditions in all other countries are comparable. Repeated experience eventually teaches *even* the most simple-minded workers that it is not enough to be organized locally, and that the workers in the same trade must be unionized not only in one region or in one country, but in all countries. . .

If only a single trade is internationally organized, while other trades remain unorganized . . . the employer making less money in the unionized enterprises will gradually transfer his capital to the more sparsely organized and even altogether nonunion shops and industries. This situation creates unemployment in organized trades and compels the workers either to starve or to accept lower wages and increased hours. Conditions in any particular trade or industry will sooner or later affect the workers in all other branches of production. These factors demonstrate to the workers in all occupations in all lands that they are unbreakably linked by ties of economic solidarity and fraternal sentiment. . .

The International Workingmen's Association did not spring ready-made out of the minds of a few erudite theoreticians. It developed out of actual economic necessity, out of the bitter tribulations the workers were forced to endure and the natural impact of these trials upon the minds of the toilers. For the International to come into being, it was necessary that the elements which went into its making — the economic factors, the experiences and aspirations and attitude of the proletariat — should have already provided a solid base for it. It was necessary that all over the world there should be pioneering groups or associations of advanced workers who were willing to initiate this great workers' movement of self-emancipation. . . It is not enough that the workers can free themselves by way of international solidarity. It is also necessary that they have confidence



in the effectiveness of this solidarity and in their coming deliverance. In the workers' world this economic solidarity is also expressed emotionally by a deep passionate sentiment. As the political and social consequences of the economic oppression are felt by the proletariat in all trades and lands, this sentiment of emotional solidarity grows ever more intense.

The new member learns more from his own personal experience than he does from the verbal explanation of his fellow workers, explanations that are confirmed by his own experience and the experiences of all the members of his section. The workers of his trade, no longer willing to put up with the greed of their bosses, declare a strike. For a worker living only on his meager wages, every strike is a misfortune. His earnings stop and he has no savings. . . The strike fund of his union, built up with great difficulty, cannot sustain a strike lasting many days or even weeks. The strikers must either starve or give in to the harsh conditions imposed by their insolent employers, if help does not come quickly.

But who will offer to help the strikers? Help can come only from workers in other trades and other countries. Lo and behold! Help arrives. The International sends out a call for help, and local as well as foreign sections respond . . . This experience, renewed many times, demonstrates to the worker more power fully than words the blessings of the international solidarity of labor.

To share in the advantages of this solidarity, the worker is not asked about his political or religious beliefs. He is asked only one question: with the benefits, will you also accept the sometimes inconvenient obligations of membership? Will you practice *economic solidarity in the widest sense of the word*?

But once this solidarity is seriously and firmly established, it produces all the rest, all the sublime and the most subversive principles of the International which becomes the most ruthless enemy of religion, of the juridical rights of the State, of authority, divine as well as human — from the socialist point of view, the natural result of this economic solidarity. And the immense practical advantage of the trade sections over the central sections consists precisely in this: that these developments, these principles, are demonstrated to the workers not by theoretical reasoning, but by the living and tragic experience of a struggle which becomes each day more profound and more terrible. The least educated worker, the least prepared, driven by the very consequences of this struggle, ends by recognizing himself as a revolutionist, an anarchist, and an atheist, without in the least knowing how he became such.

It is clear that only the trade union sections can give a practical education to their members and that this alone can lead to the organization of the proletarian masses into the International, without whose powerful participation the Social Revolution will never be realized. If the International, I repeat, consisted only of central sections, they would be souls without a body, magnificent unrealizable dreams. . .

Fortunately, the central sections . . . were founded, not by bourgeois, not by professional scholars, nor by politicians, but by socialist workers [as against the bourgeois youth]. The socialist workers had a highly positive and practical [approach to the organization of the workers]. . . This fortunate circumstance enabled them to avoid the two pitfalls which wrecked all bourgeois revolutionary attempts: empty academic wrangling and platonic conspiracies. They could not wait for the masses. They had to induce the various trades already organized [but not in the International] . . . to affiliate with the general organization [the

International] while still retaining their autonomy. . . And they succeeded in organizing around every central section as many trade union sections as there were different industries. [The central sections also induced unorganized workers to join the International as members-at-large.]

The immense task to which the International Workingmen's Association has dedicated itself is not only economic or purely material. It has, at the same time and in the highest degree, a social, philosophic, and moral objective. . . Far from dissolving, the central sections must pursue this objective and continue to spread the new social philosophy, theoretically inspired by real science — experimental and rational — based on humanistic principles in harmony with the eternal instincts of equality, liberty, and social solidarity.

Social science as a moral doctrine is the development and the formulation of these instincts. Between these instincts and this science there is a gap which must be bridged. For if instinct alone had been sufficient for the liberation of peoples, they would have long since freed themselves. These instincts did not prevent the masses from accepting, in the melancholy and tragic course of their history, all the religious, political, economic, and social absurdities of which they have been the eternal victims. The masses are a force, or at least the essential elements of a force. What do they lack? They lack two things which up till now constituted the power of all government: organization and knowledge.

The organization of the International, having for its objective not the creation of new despotisms but the uprooting of all domination, will take on an essentially different character from the organization of the State. just as the State is authoritarian, artificial, violent, foreign, and hostile to the natural development of the popular instincts, so must the organization of the International conform in all respects to these instincts and these interests. But what is the organization of the masses? It is an organization based on the various functions of daily life and of the different kinds of labor. It is the organization by professions and trades. Once all the different industries are represented in the International, including the cultivation of the land, its organization, the organization of the mass of the people, will have been achieved.

The organization of the trade sections and their representation in the Chambers of Labor creates a great academy in which all the workers can and must study economic science; these sections also bear in themselves the living seeds of the new society which is to replace the old world. They are creating not only the ideas, but also the facts of the future itself.

## **The Structure of the State Contrasted with That of the International**

When the International has organized a half, a third, or even a tenth of the European proletariat, states will have ceased to exist. . . For if even one worker out of ten joins the International seriously and with full knowledge of the cause, the rest would come under its pervasive influence, and in the first crisis all would follow the International in working to achieve the emancipation of the proletariat.

Could such a mobilization of the International's influence over the masses lead to a new system of state domination? No, for the essential difference

between the organized action of the International and the action of all states, is that the International is not vested with any official authority or political power whatever. It will always be the natural organization of action, of a greater or lesser number of individuals, inspired and united by the general aim of influencing [by example] the opinion, the will, and the action of the masses. Governments, by contrast, impose themselves upon the masses and force them to obey their decrees, without for the most part taking into consideration their feelings, their needs, and their will. There exists between the power of the State and that of the International the same difference that exists between the official power of the State and the natural activity of a club. The International is not and never will be anything but the organization of the unforced action of individuals upon the masses. The opposite is true of the State and all its institutions: church, university, law courts, bureaucracy, taxation, police, and military ... all corrupt the minds and will of its subjects and demand their passive obedience...

The State is the organized authority, domination, and power of the possessing classes over the masses ... the International wants only their complete freedom, and calls for their revolt. But in order that this rebellion be powerful and capable enough to overthrow the domination of the State and the privileged classes, the International has to organize itself. To attain its objective, it employs only two means, which, if not always legal, are completely legitimate from the standpoint of human rights. These two means are the dissemination of the ideas of the International and the natural influence of its members over the masses.

Whoever contends that such action, being a move to create a new authoritarian power, threatens the freedom of the masses must be a sophist or a fool. All social life is nothing but the incessant mutual interdependence of individuals and of masses. All individuals, even the strongest and the most intelligent, are at every moment of their lives both the producers and the products of the will and action of the masses.

The freedom of each individual is the ever-renewing result of numerous material, intellectual, and moral influences of the surrounding individuals and of the society into which he is born, and in which he grows up and dies. To wish to escape this influence in the name of a transcendental, divine, absolutely self-sufficient freedom is to condemn oneself to non-existence; to forgo the exercise of this freedom upon others is to renounce all social action and all expression of one's thoughts and sentiments, and to end in nothingness. Such absolute independence and such a freedom, the brainchild of idealists and metaphysicians, is a wild absurdity.

In human society, as in nature, every being lives only by the supreme principle of the most positive intervention in the existence of every other being. The character and extent of this intervention depend upon the nature of the individual. To abolish this mutual intervention would mean death. And when we demand the freedom of the masses, we do not even dream of obliterating any of the natural influences that any individual or group of individuals exercise upon each other. We want only the abolition of artificial, privileged, legal, and official impositions. If the Church and the State were private institutions, we would, no doubt, be against them, but we would not contest their right to exist. We fight them because they are organized to exploit the collective power of the masses by official and violent superimposition. If the International were to become a State

we, its most zealous champions, would become its most implacable enemies.

But the point is precisely that the International cannot organize itself into a State. It cannot do so because the International, as its name implies, means the abolition of all frontiers, and there can be no State without frontiers, without sovereignty. The universal State, the dream of the greatest despots in the world, has been proven by history to be unrealizable. The universal State, or the *People's State*, of which the German Communists dream, can therefore signify only one thing: *the destruction of the State*.

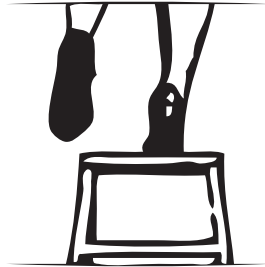
The International Workingmen's Association would be totally devoid of meaning if it did not aim at the abolition of the State. It organizes the masses only to facilitate the destruction of the State. And how does it organize them? Not from the top down, not by constricting the manifold functions of society which reflect the diversity of labor, not by forcing the natural life of the masses into the straitjacket of the State, not by imposing upon them a fictitious unity. On the contrary, it organizes them from the bottom up, beginning with the social life of the masses and their real aspirations, and inducing them to group, harmonize, and balance their forces in accordance with the natural diversity of their occupations and circumstances. . . This is the true function of the trade union section.

We have already said that in order to organize the masses and with them solidly to establish the influence of the International, it would be sufficient, strictly speaking, that one out of ten workers should join. . . In moments of great political or economic crisis, when the rebellious instincts of the masses boil over, at a time when these herds of human slaves . . . rise up at last to throw off their yoke, they find themselves bewildered, powerless because they are completely unorganized. They are in the mood to listen to all worthwhile suggestions; ten, twenty, or thirty well-organized militants, acting together, knowing what they want and how to get it, can easily rally several hundred courageous activists. We saw an example of this during the Paris Commune [1871]. A serious organization coming to life only during the siege, nowhere near as strong as the situation demanded, was, despite these drawbacks, able to constitute a formidable power with a vast resistance potential.

What will happen when the International is better organized, when a great many more sections — above all, agricultural sections — are enrolled in its ranks, when each section triples its membership? What will happen when each and every member knows better than he does now the ultimate objectives and true principles of the International, as well as the means to insure its triumph? The International will have become an invincible power.

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