

# PACIFISM AND CLASS WAR

Caroline Poland



**A. J. MUSTE**

"In a world built on violence, one must be a revolutionary before one can be a pacifist."



**PLOUGHSHARES** Press

THIRTY FIVE PENCE

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By A.J. Muste

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# Introduction

Published sixty years ago, "Pacifism and Class War" remains a compelling statement of the doctrine of revolutionary nonviolence as extolled by A.J. Muste. Originally addressed to the pacifist movement in the United States, this essay has a great deal to say to the disarmament movements that have grown up throughout the industrial democracies. It is the distilled essence of an extraordinary life.

Muste's Calvinist family emigrated from the Netherlands when he was only six years old. After teaching for a year after college, he entered the theological seminary of the Dutch Reformed Church in New Brunswick, New Jersey in 1906. After ordination and marriage to Anne Huizenga in 1909, theological liberalism drove him out of the Church, initially to the Central Congregational Church. He became radicalised by the experience of living with the oppressed and exploited city work force in New York. Challenged by the outbreak of the First World War, he became a pacifist, felt forced to resign his Congregational ministry, and became a minister in the Society of Friends. Quaker and Anabaptist ideas had a great influence on his decision.

After the war "the gaunt, raw boned, 'Fool-for-Christ' Muste...began an association with labour unparalleled by any other cleric", in the opinion of Robert Moats Miller. He began by involving himself in the great Lawrence textile mills strike which began in February 1919. He came face to face with labour spies, agents provocateurs, police brutality, arrest, machine gun points and had to deal with the demoralisation they created (fortunately the management surrendered just before the workers did). Muste's suggestion of mass nonviolent action was taken up with remarkable support. His organisational skills and dedication gained him trust and respect as a major labour leader. By 1928, when he wrote "Pacifism and Class War", he had become involved in the Brookwood Labour College, and was to move more and more towards Marxism-Leninism.

By 1934 Muste had become the first secretary general of the Trotskyite Worker's Party of the United States. "I chose revolution, recognizing that it might involve violence. I did not, having given up my pacifism, think that I could remain a Christian." Two reasons stood out in his mind in later years: "In the first place, when you looked out on the scene of misery and desperation during the depression, you saw that it was the radicals, the Leftwingers, the people who adopted some form of Marxian philosophy who were doing something about the situation, who were banding people together for action, who were putting up a fight .... Secondly, it was on the Left - and here again the Communists cannot be excluded - that one found people who were truly 'religious' in the sense that they were virtually completely committed, they were betting their lives on the cause they embraced." "The ultimate betrayal, the sacrifice of my inner integrity, would have been to stay out of it, not to resist, not to be on the side of the oppressed."

Two years later Muste was explaining his "Return to Pacifism". In that essay, he ascribed the decline of the international labour movement to a "declension from basic principles and an internal deterioration." "Inextricably mingled with and in the end corrupting all that is fine, idealistic, courageous, self-sacrificing in the proletarian movement is the philosophy of power, the will to power, the desire to humiliate and dominate over or destroy the opponent, the acceptance of the methods of violence and deceit, the theory that 'the ends justify the means'."

Muste contrasted that "acceptance of the methods of capitalism at its worst" with the infusion of "a moral and religious spirit...into every relation of life", including factional strife. At the same time he condemned false pacifisms. For example, the pacifism of "those who are against international war, but who would, and do, use every form of coercion and violence in order to hang on to their own property and prestige and the system that gives them comfort. Lenin was absolutely right when he said that this pacifism simply served as a cover for war preparations." Or the pacifism of "those who are against international war but idealize and glorify class war."

Muste's own views on class war can be found in the essay before us. Having confronted "the basic fact... that the economic, social, political order in which we live was built largely by violence, is now being extended by violence, and is maintained only by violence", Muste became convinced that the "foremost task" of the pacifist is "to denounce the violence on which the present system is based and all the evil - material and spiritual - this entails for the masses of people throughout the world." "In a world built on violence, one must be a revolutionary before one can be a pacifist." The violence of the capitalist system today remains as brutally obvious as in Muste's day. Today we are only too aware of the "militaristic fashion in which practically every attempt of the workers to organize is greeted." Especially "in Nicaragua", where US controlled terrorists are destroying the basis for a decent society. And here in the United Kingdom, "society may (still) permit an utterly impossible situation to develop in an industry like coal", and meet resistance by miners with extraordinary paramilitary operations by a de facto national police force, trampling long cherished rights in order to "suppress the rebels against oppression."

Muste's rebellion was based on the belief that "Pacifism - life - is built upon a central truth and the experience of that truth, its apprehension not by the mind alone but by the entire being in an act of faith and surrender. That truth is; God is love, love is of God." Unbelievers may choose different terminology; the "act of faith and surrender" remains the same. It is to follow the programme set out in the final paragraph of "Pacifism and Class War". Referring to that paragraph, Noam Chomsky has written that "it is a remarkable tribute to A.J. Muste that his life's work can be measured by such standards as these. His essays are invariably thoughtful and provocative; his life, however, is an inspiration with hardly a parallel in twentieth century America." Chomsky went on to say that "the lack of a radical critique of the sort that Muste and a few others sought to develop was one of the factors that contributed to the atrocity of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, as the weakness and ineffectiveness of

such radical critiques today will doubtless lead to new and unimaginable horrors."

This essay is an illustration of Muste's thought. We cannot hope to do justice to the richness of his example. And, to the end of his life, A.J. Muste held to the belief expressed in his first published work in 1905, when he was twenty years old; "character is built by action rather than by thought."

Milan Rai and Stephen Hancock  
January 1988



Abraham Johannes Muste  
8th January 1885 - 11th February 1967  
Going over the fence at Mead missile base in  
Nebraska

# Pacifism and Class War

It is expected perhaps that an article dealing with pacifism in relation to class war should consist of an exhortation to labour organizations and radicals to eschew violent methods in the pursuit of their ends, together with an exposition of the use of pacifist methods in labour disputes and social revolutions. If there is such an expectation, this article will be in large measure disappointing. Chiefly, because in my opinion much more time must be spent than has yet been given to clearing away some exceedingly mischievous misconceptions before we can think fruitfully about concrete nonviolent methods of social change; and because there are very, very few individuals in the world, including the pacifist groups and churches, who are in a moral position to preach non-resistance to the labour or radical movement.

Practically all our thinking about pacifism in connection with class war starts out at the wrong point. The question raised is how the oppressed, in struggling for freedom and the good life, may be dissuaded from employing "the revolutionary method of violence" and won over to "the peaceful process of evolution." Two erroneous assumptions are concealed in the question put that way. The first is that the oppressed, the radicals, are the ones who are creating the disturbance. To the leaders of Jesus' day, Pharisees, Sadducees, Roman governor, it was Jesus who was upsetting the people, turning the world upside down. In the same way, we speak of the Kuomintang "making a revolution" in China today, seldom by any chance of the Most Christian Powers having made the revolution by almost a hundred years of trickery, oppression, and inhumanity. Similarly, society may permit an utterly impossible situation to develop in an industry like coal, but the workers who finally in desperation put down tools and fold their arms, they are "the strikers", the cause of the breach of the peace. We need to get our thinking focused, and to see the rulers of Jewry and Rome, not Jesus; the Powers, not the

Chinese Nationalists; selfish employers or a negligent society - not striking workers - as the cause of disturbance in the social order.

A second assumption underlying much of our thinking is that the violence is solely or chiefly committed by the rebels against oppression, and that this violence constitutes the heart of our problem. However, the basic fact is that the economic, social, political order in which we live was built up largely by violence, is now being extended by violence, and is maintained only by violence. A slight knowledge of history, a glimpse at the armies and navies of the Most Christian Powers, at our police and constabulary, at the militaristic fashion in which practically every attempt of workers to organize is greeted, in Nicaragua or China, will suffice to make the point clear to an unbiased mind.

The foremost task, therefore, of the pacifist in connection with class war is to denounce the violence on which the present system is based, and all the evil - material and spiritual - this entails for the masses of people throughout the world; and to exhort all rulers in social, political, industrial life, all who occupy places of privilege, all who are the beneficiaries of the present state of things, to relinquish every attempt to hold on to wealth, position and power by force, to give up the instruments of violence on which they annually spend billions of wealth produced by the sweat and anguish of the toilers. So long as we are not dealing honestly and adequately with this ninety percent of our problem, there is something ludicrous, and perhaps hypocritical, about our concern over the ten percent of violence employed by the rebels against oppression. Can we win the rulers of the earth to peaceful methods?

The psychological basis for the use of nonviolent methods is the simple rule that like produces like, kindness provokes kindness, as surely as injustice produces resentment and evil. It is sometimes forgotten by those whose pacifism is a spurious, namby-pamby thing that if one Biblical statement of this rule is "Do good to them that hate you" (an exhortation presumably intended for the capitalist as well as the labourer),



another statement of the same rule is, "They that sow the wind shall reap the whirlwind." You get from the universe what you give, with interest! What if people build a system on violence and injustice, on not doing good to those who hate them nor even to those who meekly obey and toil for them? And persist in this course through centuries of Christian history? And if, then, the oppressed raise the chant:

Ye who sowed the wind of sorrow,  
Now the whirlwind you must dare,  
As ye face upon the morrow,  
The advancing Proletaire!

In such a day, the pacifist is presumably not absolved from preaching to the rebels that they also shall reap what they sow; but assuredly not in such wise as to leave the oppressors safely entrenched in their position, not at the cost of preaching to them in all

sterness that "the judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether."

As we are stayed from preaching nonviolence to the underdog, unless and until we have dealt adequately with the dog who is chewing her up, so also are all those who would support a country in war against another country stayed from preaching nonviolence in principle to labour or to radical movements. Much could be said on this point, but it is perhaps unnecessary to dwell on it here. Suffice it to observe in passing that, to one who has had any intimate contact with labour, the flutter occasioned in certain breasts by the occasional violence in connection with strikes seems utterly ridiculous, and will continue to seem so until the possessors of these fluttering breasts have sacrificed a great deal more than they already have in order to banish from the earth the horrible monster of international war.

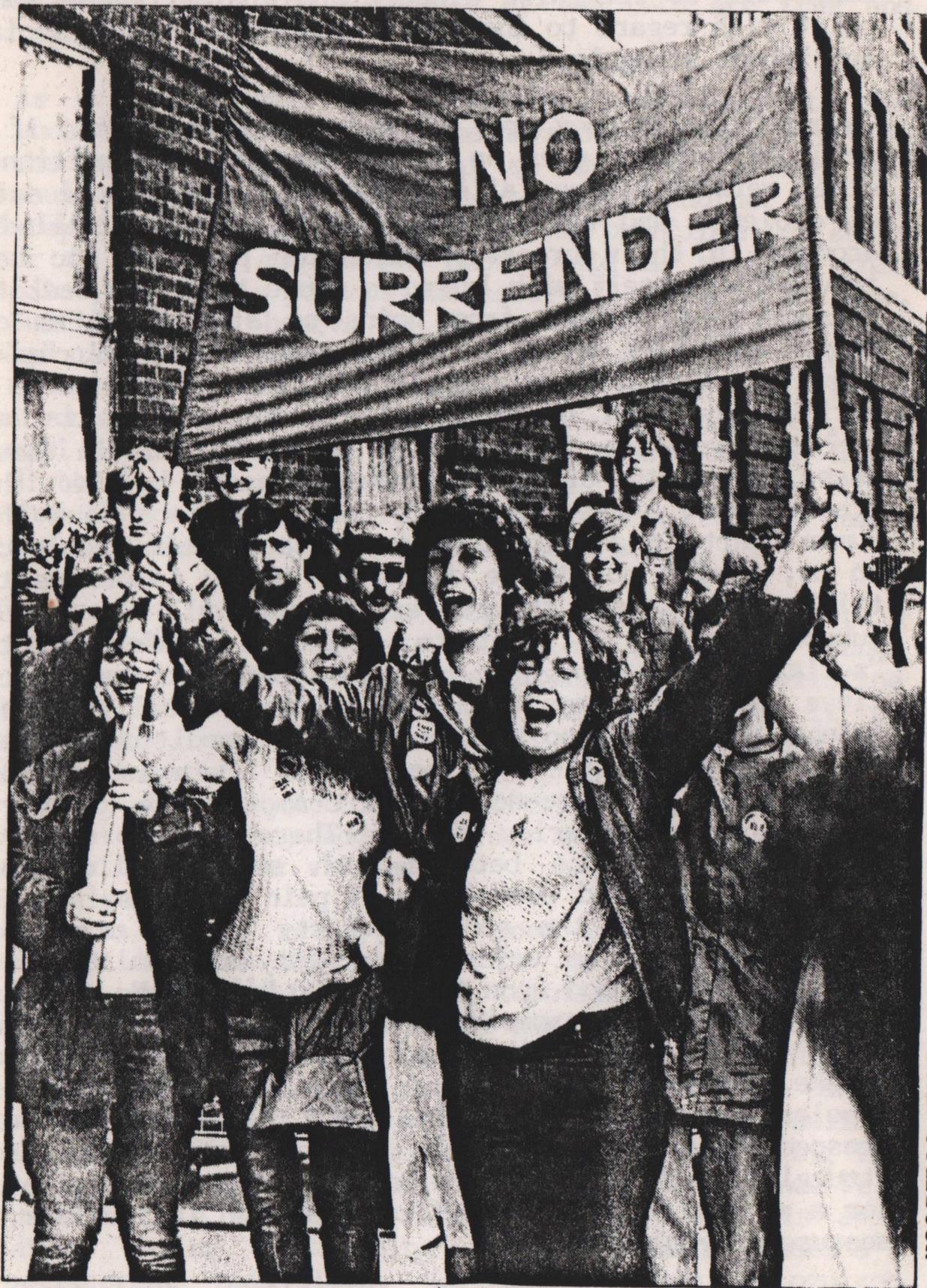
We are not, to pursue the matter a little further, in a moral position to advocate nonviolent methods to labour while we continue to be beneficiaries of the existing order. Those who profit by violence, though it be indirectly, unwillingly and only in a small measure, will always be under suspicion, and rightly so, of seeking to protect their profits, of being selfishly motivated, if they address pious exhortations to those who suffer by that violence.

Nor can anyone really with good conscience advocate abstention from violence to the masses of labour in revolt, unless she is herself identified in spirit with labour and helping it with all her might to achieve its rights and realize its ideals. In a world built on violence, one must be a revolutionary before one can be pacifist; in such a world a non-revolutionary pacifist is a contradiction in terms, a monstrosity. During the war, no absolute pacifist in America would have felt justified in exhorting Germany to lay down its arms while saying and doing nothing about America's belligerent activities. We should have recognized instantly the moral absurdity, the implied hypocrisy of such a position. Our duty was to win our own "side" to a "more excellent way." It is a sign of ignorance and lack of realism in our pacifist groups and churches that so

many fail to recognize clearly and instantly the same point with regard to the practice of pacifism in social and labour struggles.

Things being as they are, it is fairly certain that if a group of workers goes on strike for better conditions, other methods having failed, they will commit some acts of violence and coercion; some evil passions will be aroused in their breasts. Shall the pacifist who has identified herself with labour's cause therefore seek to dissuade the workers from going on strike? (I am of course confining myself here to a question of principle, leaving out of account questions of the expediency of a strike in given conditions.) My own answer is an emphatic negative, because I am convinced that in these cases the alternative of submission is by far the greater evil. Appearances are deceiving here, and the human heart is deceitful. There is a certain indolence in us, a wish not to be disturbed, which tempts us to think that when things are quiet all is well. Subconsciously, we tend to give the preference to "social peace", though it be only apparent, because our lives and possessions seem then secure. Actually, human beings acquiesce too easily in evil conditions; they rebel far too little and too seldom. There is nothing noble about acquiescence in a cramped life or mere submission to superior force. There is as vast a spiritual difference between such submission of the masses and the glad acceptance of pain by the saint, as there is between the sodden poverty of the urban or rural slum and the voluntary poverty of St. Francis "that walks with God upon the Umbrian hills." No one who has ever inwardly experienced the spiritual exaltation and the intense sisterhood and brotherhood created by a strike, on the one hand, and the sullen submission of hopeless poverty or the dull contentment or "respectability" of those who are too fat and lazy to struggle for freedom, on the other hand, will hesitate for a moment to choose the former, though it involves a measure of violence.

Here it may be well to point out that, as a matter of fact, the amount of violence on the part of workers on strike is usually grossly exaggerated; and that, on the other hand, practically every great strike furnishes



John Sturrock

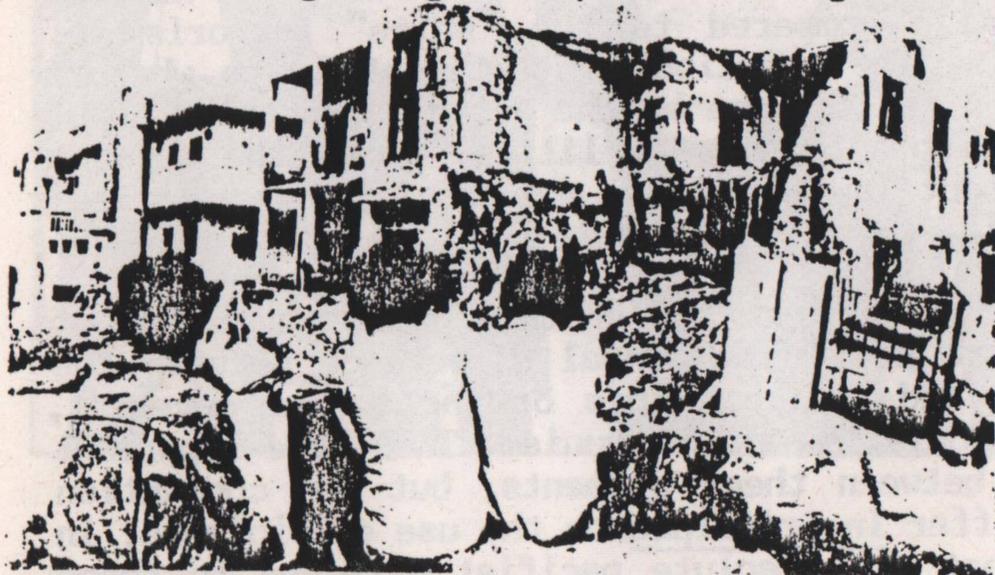
inspiring examples of non-resistance under cruel provocation and victory by "soul force" alone - victory through patient endurance of evil and sacrifice, even unto death, for spiritual ends. I have witnessed these things repeatedly. More than once, I have exhorted masses of strikers to fold their arms, not to strike back, to smile at those who beat them and trample them under their horses' feet, and the strikers' response has been instantaneous, unreserved, exalted. I have also appealed to police heads to call off violence-provoking extra forces and to employers to discharge labour spies, and have been laughed at for my pains.

Much of what has already been said bears upon the special problem of the Communist, with her frank espousal of terrorism, her conviction that no great and salutary social change can be accomplished without violence and that the workers must therefore be prepared for armed revolt. Our whole focus on this problem also is wrong unless we get it clear that violence inheres first in the system against which the Communist revolts; that they who suffer from social revolt in the main reap what, by positive evil-doing or indifference, they have sown; that practically every great revolution begins peacefully and might proceed so, to all appearances, but for the development of violent counter-revolution; that the degree of terrorism employed in such an upheaval as the the French or Russian revolution is always directly proportionate to the pressure of foreign attack; that in general the amount of "red" terrorism in human history is a bagatelle compared to the "white" terrorism of reactionaries. The question is pertinent as to whether the "Lord's will" is done by the servant who talks about terrorism and practices very little, or by the servant who talks about law and order and practices a vast deal of terrorism.

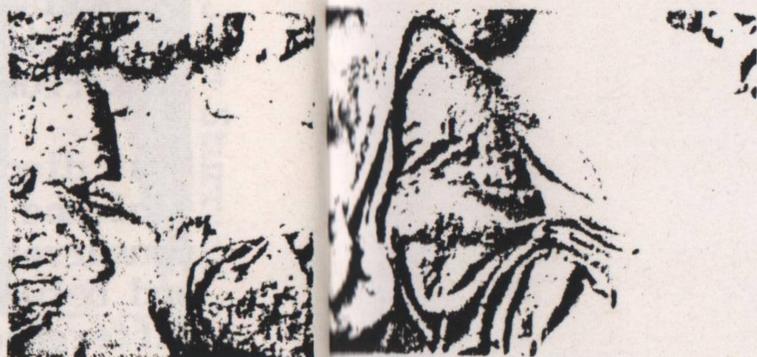
Most discussions assume that on this point of the use of violence there is a fundamental difference between the conservative and radical wings of the labour movement, and between Socialism and Communism. There are important differences between these elements, but the contention that they differ in principle on the use of violence, in the sense that the absolute pacifist attaches to these

terms, cannot be sustained. Among the unions in the United States, many of the more conservative ones practice violence in industrial disputes more extensively than do radical unions. Gangsterism in the American labour world is not an invention of the Communist unions, though the latter have not refrained from employing it. The Socialist parties do not commit themselves in advance to the inevitability of violent revolution, but neither do they promise to refrain from the use of force to defend a Socialist order if they deem that necessary. If Ramsay MacDonald, for example, is to be called a pacifist because he favours the League of Nations and disarmament - though he helps to keep the British navy in trim when he is in power, and tells Indian revolutionists he will have the British army shoot them down if they go too far - then it will be difficult to prove that Stalin and Litvinov are not entitled to the same designation.

All this does not mean that the labour movement is not confronted with a serious problem as to the means to which it will resort to advance its aims. Many times employers, on the one hand, and workers, on the other hand, are approached by the most crude and self-defeating psychological methods. Money is spent on gangsters, for example, that might well net a thousand fold better return if devoted to the education of workers and of the public. Violence begets violence by whomever it is used. War is a dirty business and entails the use of degrading means, whoever wages it.



U.S. bombing of residential districts of Tripoli resulted in many civilian casualties and much property damage.



Fragment of a body after the bombing.

The labour movement in New York City has recently given a striking illustration of the law, upon which the pacifist so often insists, that the means one uses inevitably incorporate themselves into her ends and, if evil, will defeat her. Some years ago, employers in the garment trades resorted to the practice of employing armed gangsters to attack peaceful picketers. It became impossible to send men and women on the picket line to meet such brutal attacks, so the union also resorted to hiring gangsters. Once you started the practice, you had to hire gangsters in every strike, of course. Thus a group of gangsters came to be a permanent part of the union machinery. Next, it was easy for officers who had employed the gangsters in strikes to use these same gangsters, who were on the pay roll anyway, in union elections to insure continued tenure to the "machine". The next step in the "descent to Avernus" was for the gangsters on whom the administration depended for its tenure of office to make themselves the administration - the union "machine". In the meantime, the union gangsters naturally came to a gentleman's agreement with those hired by the employer, so that both sides were paying out large sums of money to gangsters no longer doing any decisive work in strikes or lockouts; both sides had likewise to pay graft to the police so that they would not interfere with their private armies; and the rank and file of union members, having come to look to gangsters to do the real picketing, no longer had the desire, courage or morale to picket peacefully, appeal to strike-breakers to join them, and so on. The whole



Libyan peasants surveying damage to what was their barn.

process, working itself out so fatally, and from the aesthetic viewpoint so beautifully, had not a little to do with the deterioration undergone by these unions in which the bitter left-right factional strife was rather a symptom than a cause.

Those who can bring themselves to renounce wealth, position and power accruing from a social system based on violence and putting a premium on acquisitiveness, and to identify themselves in some real fashion with the struggle of the masses toward the light, may help in a measure - more, doubtless, by life than by words - to devise a more excellent way, a technique of social progress less crude, brutal, costly and slow than humankind has yet evolved.



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Further reading:

"The Essays of A.J. Muste", ed. Nat Hentoff  
Clarion Books, Simon and Schuster 1967

"Peace Agitator: the story of A.J. Muste",  
Nat Hentoff  
Macmillan, New York, 1963