

Syndicalism and Anarchism

By Pierre Monatte

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Topics: France, union officials, CGT, sabotage, structure

What I want is not so much to give you a theoretical exposition of revolutionary syndicalism as to show it at work and in this way to let the facts speak. Revolutionary syndicalism, unlike the forms of socialism and anarchism that preceded it, manifests itself less through theories than through deeds, and you must look for it in action rather than in books.

One would have to be blind not to see what there is in common between anarchism and syndicalism. Both seek to root out capitalism and the wage system by means of the social revolution. Syndicalism exists as the proof of a reawakening of the working-class movement, and it revives in anarchism a consciousness of its origins among the workers; on the other hand, the anarchists have contributed not a little towards bringing the working-class movement into the revolutionary path and towards popularizing the idea of direct action. In such ways syndicalism and anarchism have influenced each other to their mutual benefit.

It is in France, among the militants of the Confédération Générale du Travail, that the ideas of revolutionary socialism emerged and were developed. The Confédération occupies an entirely unique place in the international working-class movement. It is the only organization that, in declaring itself entirely revolutionary, has no attachments to any of the political parties, not even the most advanced of them. In most countries other than France, social-democracy plays the leading role. In France, the CGT leaves far behind it, both in terms of numerical strength and of the influence it exercises, the Socialist party; claiming to represent *only* the working class, it has firmly repulsed all the advances that have been made to it over the past years. Autonomy has been its strength and it intends to remain autonomous.

This stand of the CGT, its refusal to have dealings with the political parties, has earned it the title of “anarchist” in the mouths of its exasperated adversaries. Yet nothing could be more false. The CGT, a vast grouping of syndicates and labour unions, has no official doctrine. All doctrines are represented within it and enjoy equal tolerance. A number of anarchists serve on the confederal committee; there they meet and work with socialists the majority of whom — it should be noted in passing — are no less hostile than the anarchists to any idea of an alliance between the syndicates and the Socialist party.

The structure of the CGT deserves some attention. Unlike those of so many other working-class organizations, it is neither centralist nor authoritarian. The confederal committee is not, as the editors and reporters of bourgeois papers imagine, a directive committee uniting in its hands both the legislative and executive functions; it is deprived of all authority. The CGT is controlled from below upwards; each syndicate has no master but itself; it is free to act or not to act; no will outside itself can inhibit or liberate its activity. At the base of the Confédération then is the syndicate. But this does not adhere directly to the Confédération; it can only do it through the intermediacy of its corporative federation on the one hand and its Bourses de travail on the other. It is the union of federations and the union of Bourses that together constitute the CGT.

Confederal activities are co-ordinated by the confederal committee which consists of delegates from both Bourses and federations. Besides the confederal committee there exist commissions which are drawn from its membership. These are the publication commission (for *La Voix du Peuple*), the membership commission, the budget commission, the commission for strikes and for the general strike.

In the regulation of collective affairs, the congress is entirely sovereign. Any syndicate, no matter how small it may be, has the right to be represented by a delegate chosen by itself.

The Confédération’s budget is modest in the extreme. It does not exceed 30,000 francs a year. The continued agitation which climaxed in the great movement of May 1906 for the eight-hour day cost no more than 60,000 francs. Such a paltry figure, when it was divulged, created astonishment among the journalists. What! With these few thousand francs the Confédération could sustain, month after month, such an intense working-class

agitation! It was because, though poor in money, French syndicalism is rich in energy, in devotion, in enthusiasm, and to such riches there is no risk of becoming a slave!

It is neither without effort nor in a short time that the French working-class movement has become what we see today. For thirty-five years — since the Paris Commune — it has been passing through multiple phases. The idea of making the proletariat, organized in “resistance societies”, the agent of social revolution was the basic idea, the seminal idea of the Great International Workingmen’s Association, founded in London in 1864. The motto of the International, as you will all remember, was: “The emancipation of the workers shall be the task of the workers themselves”, and it is still our motto, the motto of all of us who are partisans of direct action and adversaries of parliamentarianism. The ideas of autonomy and federation which are so honoured among us, inspired in the past all those in the International who rebelled against the abuses of power by the General Council and, after the Hague Congress, openly took the side of Bakunin. More important, the idea of the general strike itself, which is today so popular, is an idea of the International, which first understood the power of its embraces.

The defeat of the Commune let loose a terrible reaction in France. The working-class movement was stopped dead, and its militants were murdered or forced into exile. Yet after a few years it reconstituted itself, feeble and timid at first; it would strengthen itself later ... [when the proletariat], justly indifferent to the quarrels of the sects, recreated its unions which acquired a new name, the *syndicates*. Abandoned to itself and ignored because of its own weakness and the jealousies of rival groups, the syndicalist movement gradually acquired strength and confidence. It grew. The Fédération des Bourses was founded in 1892, the Confédération Générale du Travail, which from the beginning was careful to affirm its political neutrality, in 1895. In the meantime a workers’ congress at Nantes in 1894 had voted to accept the principle of the revolutionary general strike. It was round about this time that a number of anarchists, realizing at last that philosophy is not enough to make a revolution, entered into a working-class movement which gave rise — among those who knew how to observe it, to the highest of hopes. **Fernand Pelloutier** was the man who at that period best incarnated this evolution among the anarchists.

All the subsequent congresses have accentuated increasingly the divorce between the organized working class and politics. At Toulouse, in 1897, our comrades Delesalle and Pouget obtained the adoption of the tactics of boycott and sabotage. In 1900, the *Voix du Peuple* was founded, with Pouget as chief editor. Emerging from the difficult period of its foundation, the CGT gives witness every day to its growing strength. It has become a power with which the government on the one hand and the socialist parties on the other must henceforward count.

From the government, supported by all the reformist socialists, the new movement suffered a terrible assault. Millerand, who had become a minister, attempted to nationalize the syndicates and to make each Bourse into a branch of his ministry. Agents in his pay worked for him in the various organizations, and an effort was made to corrupt the faithful militants. The danger was great, but it was exorcized thanks to the accord which was then reached between all the revolutionary factions, between anarchists, Guesdists and Blanquists. That accord was sustained, and the danger passed. The Confédération — strengthened from 1902 onward by the entry of the Fédération des Bourses, which meant the realization of *working-class unity* — takes its strength today from that accord, out of which was born revolutionary syndicalism, the doctrine which sees the syndicate as the organ of social transformation and the general strike its means.

But — and I ask our non-French comrades to give full attention to this very important point — neither the realization of working-class unity, nor the coalition of revolutionaries would have been able on its own to lead the CGT to its present level of prosperity and influence, if we had not remained faithful, in our syndicalist practice, to the fundamental principle which in fact excludes syndicates based on opinions: *only one syndicate for each profession and town*. The consequence of this principle is the political neutralization of the syndicate, which neither can nor should be either anarchist, or Guesdist, or Allemanist, or Blanquist, but simply working-class. In the syndicate divergences of opinion, which are often so subtle and artificial, take second place, and in this way agreement is possible. In practical life, interests come before ideas; in spite of all the quarrels between the schools and the sects, the interests of the workers, by the very fact that they are all subject to the law of wages, are identical. And that is the secret of the accord that was established between them, the accord that made the strength of syndicalism and allowed it last year, at the Congress of

Amiens, proudly to affirm its self-sufficiency.

I would be gravely lacking if I did not show you the means on which revolutionary syndicalism counts in order to arrive at the emancipation of the working class. These means can be summed up in two words: *direct action*. What is this direct action? Long ago, under the influence of the socialist schools and principally of the Guesdist school, the workers confided to the state the task of settling their demands. How one remembers those processions of workers, headed by socialist deputies, carrying to the powers that be the accounts of the fourth estate! This form of action having led merely to deep disappointments, we came gradually to realize that the workers would never obtain any reforms that they could not impose *by themselves*; in other words, that the maxim of the International which I have just quoted should be understood and applied in the strictest manner. To act for oneself, to count only on oneself, that is direct action. But direct action, needless to say, can assume the most various forms.

Its principal form, or rather its most striking form, is the strike. A two-edged weapon, it was once said: we say, a solid and well-tempered weapon, which, wielded capably by the worker, can strike to the heart of capitalism. It is by means of the strike that the working mass enters into the class struggle and becomes familiar with the notions that emerge from it; it is by the strike that the masses receive their revolutionary education, that they understand their true strength and that of the enemy, that they take confidence in their power and learn to be audacious.

Sabotage is hardly less valuable. It can be formulated in this way: *For bad pay, bad work*. Like the strike, it has always been employed, but only in the last few years has it acquired a truly revolutionary significance. The results produced by sabotage are already considerable. On occasions when a strike has been powerless, sabotage has broken the resistance of management. A recent example is given by the sequence to a defeated strike of the building workers of Paris in 1906: the masons returned to the worksites with the resolution to give the management a peace that would be worse than war: and, by a unanimous tacit agreement, they began to slow down the rate of daily production: as if by chance, sacks of plaster or cement were found to be slashed, etc., etc. The war continues right to the present moment, and, I repeat, the results have been excellent. Not only has management given way on many occasions, but out of this campaign lasting for several months the building worker has emerged more conscious, more independent, and more rebellious.

But if I consider syndicalism as a whole, without lingering further over its particular manifestations, what apology need I make for it? The revolutionary spirit was dying in France, languishing from year to year. The revolutionarism of Guesde, for example, was no more than verbal or, even worse, electoral and parliamentary; the revolutionarism of Jaurès went even further in the same direction; it was simply, and even frankly, ministerial and governmental. As to the anarchists, their revolutionarism has taken superb retreat in the ivory tower of philosophic speculation. Among so many falterings, perhaps even because of them, syndicalism was born; the revolutionary spirit was reanimated and renewed by its contact, and the bourgeoisie — for the first time since the great voice of anarchist dynamite was silenced — the bourgeoisie trembled.

It is important that the proletarians of all countries should profit from the syndicalist experience of the French proletariat. And it is the task of the anarchists to make sure that the experience is repeated everywhere that there is a working class working towards its emancipation. To that partisan unionism which has produced, in Russia for example, anarchist unions, and in Belgium and Germany Christian and social-democratic unions, the anarchists should oppose a syndicalism in the French style, a syndicalism that is neutral or, more exactly, independent. In the same way as there is only one working class, there should be, in each industry and each town, no more than one working-class organization, a single syndicate. Only on that condition can the class struggle — ceasing to be hindered at every moment by the squabbles of rival schools and sects — develop in all its breadth and achieve its maximum effect.

Syndicalism, as the Congress of Amiens proclaimed in 1906, is sufficient unto itself. That statement, I know, has never been fully understood, even by the anarchists. It means that the working class, having at last attained majority, means to be self-sufficient and to rely on no-one else for its emancipation. What fault can an anarchist find with a will to action so finely expressed?

Syndicalism does not waste time promising to the workers an earthly paradise. It calls on them to conquer it, assuring them that their actions will never be entirely in vain. It is a school of will, of energy, and of fertile

thinking. It opens to anarchism, which has been too long closed in upon itself, new perspectives and new hopes. Let all anarchists then come to syndicalism; their work will be all the more fertile for it, their blows against the social regime all the more decisive.

As with every human endeavour, the syndicalist movement is not without its faults, but far from wishing to hide them, I believe it is useful to remember them constantly so that we can act to overcome them.

The most important is the tendency of individuals to entrust the task of struggle to their syndicates, to the Federation, to the Confederation, to rely on collective strength when their individual energy would be enough. By constantly appealing to the will of the individual, to his initiative and his daring, we anarchists can react vigorously against this negative tendency to resort continuously to the collective strength for small and large matters alike.

Syndicalist fonctionnairisme, furthermore, provokes lively criticism which, it must be said, is often justified. It can and does happen that some militants no longer fulfil their function in order to fight in the name of their comrades, but in order to make a living. But we must not deduce from this that the trade union organizations must do without officials. Many organizations cannot do without them. But they are a necessity whose defects can be corrected by an ever-vigilant spirit of criticism.

Additional Information

This speech was translated from French by [George Woodcock](#) and appeared in his 1977 edited volume [The Anarchist Reader](#) as “Syndicalism: An Advocacy.” We use the title “Syndicalism and Anarchism,” as that is what Monatte used when he published the speech in *La Vie Ouvrière* in 1913.

The final three paragraphs of the text shown here were not included in Woodcock’s text; we added them from an English translation (by Nestor McNab, Black Cat Press, 2009) of Maurizio Antonioli’s Italian translation (1978) of the same French source (from 1908) that Woodcock used. (We favor the Woodcock translation in general because it’s a direct translation from the French rather than a translation of a translation.)

See [the response](#) given by Errico Malatesta the following day.