

Syndicalism and Anarchism

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Topics: [The First International](#), [history](#), [intro](#)

We are asked on many sides: “What is Syndicalism? What are its relations to Anarchism?” — and we shall do our best to answer these questions. True, they were answered in our columns a few months ago by one of our friends (“Anarchist Methods in Revolutionary Syndicalism,” *Freedom*, November 1911); but it is always interesting to return to this important subject, and to examine it under its different aspects.

Syndicalism is, in fact, only a new name for tactics long since resorted to with profit by the British workers — that of a *direct* struggle of Labour against Capital on the economic field. Such a struggle was their favourite weapon; and in that above mentioned *Freedom* article it was pointed out that already in the first half of the nineteenth century the British workers, even “without possessing the vote, obtained great economic advantages, created a powerful trade union organisation, and even forced the governing classes to recognise their claims (1869–76) in Labour legislation, including an extended political franchise.”

Direct struggle on the economic field thus proved to be an efficient weapon for obtaining both economic results and some political concessions.

This idea was so strong in England that already, in 1830–1831, Robert Owen tried to found a great “[Grand] National [Consolidated] Trades’ Union” and an international organisation of Labour for the direct struggle against Capital. Only the ferocious prosecutions of the British government compelled him to abandon this idea.

Then came the Chartist movement, which took advantage of the widely spread and powerful, partly secret organisations of Labour, to obtain some substantial political concessions. And the British workers received their first political lesson: they soon saw that though they heartily supported the political agitation, this agitation gave them no economic advantages save those which they themselves imposed upon their masters and their legislators by strikes and revolts. They saw how fallacious it was to trust to Parliament for any serious improvement of their conditions.

The French working men came to exactly the same conclusion. The Revolution of 1848, which gave France a Republic, convinced them of the utter inefficacy of political agitation, and even of political victories, for achieving any vital change in the conditions of Labour, if the working men themselves were not prepared to impose them upon the rich by their own direct action.

It also gave them another lesson. The French workmen saw how utterly helpless were their intellectual leaders when they had to find out the new forms which industrial production ought to take in society so as to give Labour its due and put an end to the exploitation of the workers by the capitalists. Both in the Luxembourg Commission, which sat for this particular purpose on April, May, and June 1848, and in the Chamber elected in 1849, where there sat over a hundred “Social Democratic” Deputies, the workers saw this helplessness of the leaders. They thus understood that the working men themselves had to work out the main lines which the Social Revolution had to take, in order to be practical and fruitful.

Direct struggle of Labour against Capital, and the *necessity of the workmen themselves* to work out the new forms which an organisation without capitalist exploitation should take — these, then, were the two great lessons that the workers had learned, especially in the two countries most advanced in their industrial development.

Consequently, when in 1864–66 the old idea of Robert Owen was at last realised, and an international organisation of Labour was started, the new organisation embodied these two fundamental principles.

When the International Working Men's Association was founded at London by representatives of British Trade Unionists and French working men — chiefly followers of Proudhon — who had come to the second International Exhibition, the Association loudly proclaimed that *the emancipation of the workers must be their own work*; and that henceforth they intended to fight the capitalists by means of *big strikes*, fought with international support.

Thus, the first two acts of the International, which produced a tremendous sensation in Europe and inspired a salutary fear in the middle classes, were two great strikes: one at Paris, supported by the English Trade Unions, and another at Geneva, in the building trade, supported by British and French workers.

Worse than that. The working men at the Congresses of the International were no longer discussing the trash with which nations are amused by their rulers in the representative institutions. They discussed the fundamental question of a revolutionary reconstruction of society, and launched the idea which has since proved so fruitful — the idea of a General Strike. As to the political form which a society reorganised by a social revolution might take, the Latin Federations of the International openly parted with the idea of a centralised State. They distinctly pronounced themselves in favour of an organisation based on the federation of free Communes and agricultural territories, getting rid of capitalist exploitation, and federating to constitute larger territorial and national units.

The two main principles of modern Syndicalism — “direct action,” as they say now, and the elaboration of new forms of social life based on the federation of the Labour Unions — these two principles were at the outset the leading principles of the International Working Men's Association.

However, already then there were within the Association two different currents concerning political action which divided the workers of different nations: the Latin current and the German current.

The Frenchmen in the International were chiefly followers of Proudhon, and Proudhon's leading idea was: Get rid of the present bourgeois State organisation, and put in its place your own organisation of *Labour Unions*, which will themselves organise all that is substantial in society. The production of all that is needed for life, the equitable exchange of all the products of human labour, and the distribution and consumption of what has been produced — it is you, working men, who must organise it, then you will see that very little will remain for the State. Production of all that is needed, an equitable exchange of produce, and its equitable consumption — these are *Labour problems*, which you alone can solve. And if you solve them — What remains to your present rulers and to their hierarchy of functionaries which constitutes the State? Nothing that you yourselves could not organise.

But among the French founders of the International there were also men who had fought for the Republic and the Commune. They understood that political action must not be ignored: that it is not a matter of indifference to the proletarians whether they are under a Monarchy, a Republic, or a Commune. They knew by their own experience that the triumph of the Conservatives or the Imperialists, means *a backward movement in all directions* and an enormous expenditure of energy by the workers to fight the aggressive capitalist policy (such as the Taff Vale or the Osborne decisions, which we have had lately). *They were not indifferent to politics*; but they refused to see in electoral agitation, in electoral successes, and in the seesaw of political parties an instrument for the emancipation of Labour.

Accordingly, the French, the Italian, and the Spanish workers agreed to put in the statutes these words: “*All political action must be subordinated to the economic.*”

As to the English workers, there were among them a number of Chartists who had lived for political struggles. And the Germans had not yet had the experience of two Republics as had the Frenchmen. They laid faith in the coming Parliament of the future German Empire. Even Lassalle¹ had paid — it is now known — a tribute to some faith in a Socialist Emperor of that United Germany which he saw coming.

Consequently, neither the English nor the Germans would part entirely with Parliamentary action; they still had faith in it, and they put in the English and German text of the same statutes: “*All political action must be subordinated to the economic as a means.*”

The old idea of trusting to bourgeois Parliaments had thus reappeared!

The result was that when Germany had triumphed over France in the war of 1870–71, when France lay helpless after a crushing defeat, and 35,000 of the Paris proletarians, the flower of the French workers, had been murdered by the bourgeois armies after the fall of the Commune, when the International Working Men's Association was forbidden in France — Marx and Engels and their supporters tried to introduce the old political action into the life of the International, in the shape of the *Labour candidature*.

Thereupon a cleavage took place in the International, which hitherto had inspired such enthusiastic hopes in the proletarians and such terror in the rich.

The Latin Federations — Italy, Spain, the Jura, and Eastern Belgium (France was represented by a few refugees only) — refused to accept the new course. They then constituted their own Federated Union, and since that time these Federations inclined more and more towards Revolutionary Unionism (later on Syndicalism) and towards Anarchism; while Germany took the lead in the development of a political Social Democratic Party — the more so as Bismarck had introduced universal suffrage for the elections to the Parliament of the German Empire, constituted by the victorious war.

Forty years have now passed since that division took place in the International, and we can judge its results. We shall analyse them more in detail in a next issue. But already here we can point out the striking sterility of all that was done during these forty years by those who pinned their faith to what they described as the Conquest of Power in the present middle-class State.

Instead of conquering the State, as they believed they would, *they have been conquered by the bourgeois State*. They are its tools: they serve to maintain the power of the upper and middle classes over the workers. They are the docile tools of Church and State, of Capitalism and Monopoly.

And all over Europe and America we see growing a new movement, a new force in the Labour movement; a force which reverts to the old principles of the International: Direct Action, direct struggle of Labour against Capital; and the workers recognising that it is *they* who have to free themselves — not the Parliaments to free them.

Of course, this is not Anarchism. We go further. We say that the workers will never attain their emancipation if they do not abandon the fallacy of the State. We say that they must throw overboard the fallacy of centralisation and hierarchy, and the fallacy of State-nominated functionaries maintaining Law and Order — *the Law made by the rich against the poor, and the Order which means submission of the poor to the rich*.

But during all these forty years the Anarchists have worked in common with those workers who took their emancipation in their own hands and who resorted to the direct struggle as a means of preparing for the final struggle of exploited Labour against the hitherto triumphant rule of Capital. For the last forty years the Anarchists have combated those who amused the workers with resultless electoral agitation. And they have worked all the time to awaken amongst the toiling masses a desire to work out those principles upon which the trade organisations could take possession of the docks, the railways, the mines, the factories, the land, and the stores, and work them in the interest, no more of a few capitalists, but of society as a whole.²

Many episodes of this action of ours were given in the aforementioned *Freedom* article of November 1911. But we hope to return once more to this interesting subject.

In our first article on “Syndicalism and Anarchism,” it was shown how, in this country since the years 1820–1830, and in France after the unsuccessful political revolution of 1848, the efforts of a considerable section of the workers were directed towards a direct struggle of Labour against Capital, and to an endeavour to create for that purpose the necessary Labour organisations.

It was also shown how this idea became, in the years 1866–1870, the leading idea of the newly created International Working Men's Association; but how, after the defeat of France in 1870, the paralysis of its

revolutionary forces after the fall of the Paris Commune, and the triumph of Germany, the political element got the upper hand in the International, and became for a time the dominating element in the Labour movement.

Since that time, the two currents have continued to develop, each of them in that direction which was already implied in its programme. Political Labour Parties were organised in all Constitutional States. They did their best to increase as rapidly as possible the number of their representatives in their respective Parliaments, and as was foreseen from the outset, their representatives, hunting for votes, inevitably reduced their economic programmes, so as to have them limited by this time to such minor restrictions of the rights of the employers as only give a new force to the capitalists and help them to maintain the present conditions. At the same time, as the Socialist politicians combated the representatives of the political bourgeois Radicalism, who competed with them for Labour votes, they helped — against their own will — to give a new lease to triumphant reaction all over Europe.

Their ideology itself — that is, the ideas and the ideals they were spreading among the masses — was modelled in accordance. They were resolute partisans of State centralisation, as against local autonomy and the independence of the smaller nations; and they worked out a philosophy of history to support these foregone conclusions. They threw cold water on the hopes of the masses — preaching to them, in the name of “historical materialism,” that no substantial change is possible in the Socialist direction until the number of capitalists has been reduced by their mutual competition,³ and they left unnoticed the fact, which becomes so striking now in all industrial countries, that, owing to the growing facilities for exploiting the peoples that are backward in industries, the English, the French, the Belgian, and other capitalists are now exploiting the labour of hundreds of millions of men in Eastern Europe, Asia, and Africa; the result being that the number of people living upon the work of other people, far from being gradually reduced in the chief industrial countries of Europe, goes on *increasing* in an appalling proportion. And with the increase of their numbers grow also the numbers of those who are interested in the maintenance of the present capitalistic State. Finally, the advocates of political agitation for the conquest of power in the present State bitterly opposed everything that could spoil their chances of acquiring political power. They excluded from the International Socialist Congresses all those who dared to criticise the results of their Parliamentary tactics;⁴ they deprecated strikes; and later on, when the idea of the General Strike began to penetrate even into their Congresses, they wildly opposed it by all possible means.

For full forty years these tactics have been pursued, and now it is evident to every one that all over Europe the working men have had enough of it: many turn away from it in disgust. This is the reason why we hear so much now of “Syndicalism.”

However, during these forty years the other current — the direct struggle of Labour against Capital — also continued to develop, notwithstanding all the persecutions of the Governments and the denunciations of the capitalist politicians. It would be an extremely interesting history to show the steady development of this current and to analyse its relations, intellectual and personal, with the political Social Democratic parties on the one hand and the Anarchists on the other. But the time has not yet come to write such a work, and, after all, perhaps it is better that it should not be written now. It would divert attention towards personal influences, while it is the influence of the great currents of modern thought and the growth of self-consciousness among the working men of America and Europe, independent of the influence of the intellectual leaders, which has to be examined, if a real history of the Syndicalist movement be written.

All we need say at the present moment is, that quite independently of the teaching of the Socialists — in virtue of the very fact that masses of working men were brought together in the industrial centres, and that they had retained from times past the tradition of their professional [i.e., trade] Unions, both open and secret — they continually organised Unions, in order to put a bridle on the ever-growing exploitation and on the haughtiness of the employers. And in proportion as the organised masses of workers grew larger and stronger, and more conscious of the great struggle that is the very essence of the life of civilised nations since the Great French Revolution, their anti-capitalist tendencies became more and more definite.

During the last forty years, while all possible effort was made by the political leaders in different countries to

prevent the revolts of Labour, and to subdue those of them which were of a menacing character — precisely during these years we saw the Labour revolts growing more widely spread, more violent, and more significant of the intentions of the workers. More and more they lost the character of mere outbursts of despair; more and more, when we came into contact with the workers, we saw ripening among them a dominating thought, which could be expressed almost in a word, full of deep sense: “Go! Leave us, you ‘captains of industry,’ if you cannot manage the industries so as to give us a living wage and security of employment. Go! if you are so shortsighted and so incapable of coming to a common understanding among yourselves, that you rush like a flock of sheep into every new branch of production which promises you the greatest momentary profits, regardless of the usefulness or noxiousness of the goods you produce in that branch. Go! if you are incapable of building your fortunes otherwise than by preparing interminable wars, and squandering a good third of what is produced by every nation in armaments for robbing other robbers. Go! if all that you have learned from the marvellous discoveries of modern science is that you see no other way of obtaining one’s well-being but out of that squalid misery to which *one-third* of the population of the great cities of this extremely wealthy country are condemned. Go! and ‘a plague o’ both your houses’ if that is the only way you can find to manage industry and trade. We, workmen, will know better how to organise production, if we only succeed in getting rid of you, the capitalist pest!”

These are the ideas which were budding, were thought over, and were discussed in the workers’ dwellings all over the civilised world; and these were the ideas which resulted in those tremendous upheavals of Labour which we saw every year in Europe and the United States, in the shape of dockers’ strikes, railway strikes, miners’ strikes, and weavers’ strikes, until at last they began to take the shape of general strikes — general strikes which soon took the character of great struggles of the elements of Nature, and in comparison with which all the petty Parliamentary struggles were such pitiful child’s play.

And while the Germans were jubilating with red flags and torchlights at their steadily increasing electoral successes, the more experienced nations of the West were silently pursuing an infinitely more serious task — the task of the *inner* organisation of Labour; and the thoughts which worried them were of a far more serious nature. They asked themselves: What would be the outcome of the now inevitable world-conflict between Labour and Capital? *What new forms of industrial life and social organisation would come out of this conflict?*

This is the true origin of the Syndicalist movement, which the ignorant politicians discover now as something new to them.

For us, this movement is not new. We greeted it when its tendencies were expressed in the programme of the International Working Men’s Association. We defended it in the International, when the German political revolutionists assailed it and saw in it an obstacle to their conquest of political power. We advised the workmen of all nations to do as the Spaniards did when they kept the Trade Unionist organisations in close touch with the “Sections” of the International. And since that time we have followed with deep sympathy all the phases of the Labour movement, knowing that, whatever the conflicts between Labour and Capital may be in the near future, it is this movement which will open the eyes of society at large to its duty towards the producers of all riches, the only movement that will induce thinking men to find a way out of the blind alley into which the recent development of Capitalism has been driving our generation.

Of course, the Anarchists have never imagined that it was they who gave to the Syndicalist movement its present conception of its duties towards the regeneration of society. They have never put forward the absurd pretension of being the leaders of the great movements of thought which lead mankind to a progressive development. But what we may claim for ourselves in full confidence is, that we understood from its beginnings the immense importance of the ideas which now constitute the leading aim of Syndicalism. These are the ideas which were developed in this country by Godwin, Hodgskin, Gray, and their followers, and in France by Proudhon — namely, the idea that Labour organisations for production, exchange, and consumption must take the place of the present capitalist exploitation and of the State; and that other idea, that it is the duty, the function, of the Labour organisations to work out this new form of society.

These two fundamental ideas are not our invention. They are nobody’s invention. Life itself has dictated

them to nineteenth century civilisation, and upon us lies the duty of realising them in life. Our pride is only that we have understood them; that we defended them through those dark years when they were trampled under foot by the Social Democratic politicians and their would-be philosophers; and that we still intend to remain true to them.

Endnotes

1. Ferdinand Johann Gottlieb Lassalle (1825–1864) was a German State socialist. He helped create the General German Workers' Association in 1863 and was the first president of the first German labour party. It aimed to win universal suffrage by peaceful and legal means as well as State aid for co-operatives. He considered the State as an instrument of justice essential for the achievement of the socialism, willing to work and compromise with the Imperial powers to achieve reforms. [—McKay]
 2. In this connection, we recommend those of our readers who understand French to read the recently published book by Pataud and Pouget, *Comment nous ferons la Revolution (How we Shall Make the Revolution)*, with a preface by Kropotkin. They will see from it how a number of French workers understand the coming Syndicalist revolution. [In 1913 this book was translated as *How We Shall Bring About the Revolution*. Kropotkin's preface is included in this volume. —McKay]
 3. Another reference to the Marxist “concentration of capital” thesis. [—McKay]
 4. The 1891 conference of the Second International in Brussels started this process, much to the joy of Engels. The 1893 conference at Zurich passed a resolution limiting membership to only those socialists who accepted the need to win power using political (electoral) means or sought to win those rights. After anarchists sought to attend the conference as delegates from trade unions, the 1896 conference in London saw the final, definitive, exclusion of libertarian socialists from the Second International. The authoritarian activities of the German Social Democrats alienated many of the British delegates who attended the protest meeting organised by the anarchists. [—McKay]
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Additional Information

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