

The International Anarchist Congress

By Emma Goldman

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An International Congress! The suspicious mind will at once conjure up horrors of majority rule, of politicians and platforms — platforms carefully devised to appeal to the stupid, and politicians who will make it appear that the stupid themselves have chosen their programs. The majority has but to be made to believe that it enjoys sovereignty and the power of decision, and it will cheerfully seal its own degradation.

However, the [International Anarchist Congress at Amsterdam](#) had none of that. The eighty delegates who had come from monarchies and republics did not assemble to get up a catechism. Their purpose was to crystallize — out of the contrast of temperaments, theories, and opinions — harmonious and concerted action. Of such contrasts there were many, occasionally bursting out at one another like bomb-shells, the Latin temperament readily bubbling over, often threatening to destroy the dearly cherished German sense of “order.” But after the delegates had come into comradely touch with one another, a quieter atmosphere made itself felt, uniting all in a sincere desire to co-operate in every way possible to make the Congress a success.

[Errico Malatesta](#), the senior of the Congress, full of youthful spirit, his eyes glowing with the divine fire for the revolutionizing of mind and body, was one of the most interesting figures. His enthusiasm for the cause, together with his sweet personality, produce an exquisitely harmonious character, the influence of which is both soothing and inspiring.

[Pierre Monatte](#), a representative of the [Confédération \[Générale\] du Travail](#) (Revolutionary Trade Unions of France)¹, an agitator of great force, thoroughly versed in the literature of the economic and anti-militarist movements, simple and unassuming, full of the spirit of solidarity and true comradeship. Together with such men as Pouget, Delesalle, Griffuelhes, he is building up a tremendous economic force, the [Confédération Générale du Travail](#), of which MOTHER EARTH will have more to say in a later issue.

R. de Marmande, *revolutionnaire* and true *bohème*, jovial, full of esprit, with a keen sense of humor. He refuses to see in the Mother of Freedom — Revolution — a black-robed nun, walking about in penitence and despair over the sins of mankind. Revolution, to him, is the great liberator, the joy-bearer.

Henri Feiss-Amoré, the Belgian, was one of the most typical Frenchmen at the Congress: impatient, hot-headed, and impulsive, yet polite and chivalrous; he necessarily proved a failure in everything that required system and self-control.

Broutchoux, a power in the mining regions of France, belongs to the type of workingman who has helped to make revolutionary history — intelligent, daring, and uncompromising. He is beloved by his fellow-workers and hated by all authoritarian parties.

Dunois, from Switzerland, and Chapelier, a Belgian, furnished much human document — the former too democratic to appreciate the real value of the individual; the latter, too sectarian for a universal movement. Chapelier’s internationalism lies in Esperanto. No doubt, much could have been gained at the Congress had all the delegates known Esperanto, as the interpretations from the French, Dutch, and German consumed a tremendous amount of time. But to believe that an arbitrary, mechanical language can ever replace anything that has grown out of the soil, the life, and the customs of a people, is to be sectarian indeed.

Another of the delegates was Luigi Fabri, from Italy, well known through his writings on Anarchism and his affiliation with Mollinari’s *L’Università Popolare*.

Dr. Friedeberg, the German delegate, is an ex-member of the Social Democratic Party, which he represented as Alderman in the city of Berlin. In that capacity he has had ample opportunity to learn the uselessness of parliamentarism, which induced him to turn to Anarchism. Dr. Friedeberg is now one of the foremost champions of the General Strike, direct action, and anti-militarism. Though he is indicted for high treason —

a very serious offense in the land of the Kaiser — he was completely wrapped up in the work of the Congress, unconcerned as to what the future may bring him.

Two Bohemian comrades, Vohryzek and Knotek, were very interesting delegates. Vohryzek, alert and ever ready with suggestions and resolutions, is a fanatical admirer of the achievements of his country, without the slightest sense of relative proportion. His friend, Knotek, was quite a contrast. He never spoke once during the entire session, yet one could not fail to perceive the artistic, dreamy, and refined temperament. I regret that time did not permit me to see more of Comrade Knotek.

Then there was R. Rocker, editor of the *Workers' Friend* and *Germinal*, Jewish papers published in London. German by birth, he has acquired the Yiddish language, and through his able pen he is doing much to bring light and hope into the gloomy existence of the Jewish proletariat in England. He has acted as an impetus to the idealism, the earnestness, and studiousness of the young Yiddish element, both in England and America. But one of his greatest merits is that he has made accessible to the Jewish reading public the revolutionary literature of the world.

There were many other delegates, who, for lack of space, cannot be discussed here; but they added much interesting material on the growth of our ideas in their respective countries.

After a few preliminaries, the Congress began its real work Monday afternoon, August 26th. Reports were read from France, Italy, Switzerland, Belgium, Germany, Austria, Bohemia, Russia, Servia, Bulgaria, Holland, England, and the United States. The report on the American situation our readers will be able to follow in MOTHER EARTH. A résumé of the other reports will appear later.

The first subject for the consideration of the Congress was “Anarchism and Organization,” with Dunois as speaker.² The constant misrepresentation of Anarchism by its opponents has resulted in the widespread notion that Anarchism is merely destructive. That it is also constructive, our enemies carefully avoid stating.

In his opening remarks Dunois regrets that so little attention has hitherto been paid to the necessity of organization. “The individualistic notion, as expressed by Dr. Stockman in Ibsen’s ‘Enemy of the People’, that the strongest is he who stands alone, has been very detrimental to the Anarchist movement. This statement has no relation to Anarchism, since Stockman merely voiced the egoistic notion of the bourgeoisie.” After a lengthy discourse on similar lines the speaker proposed the following resolution to the Congress: “Anarchism and organization are not antagonistic; on the contrary, the common material interests of the workers as well as the mutual interests in ideas necessitate federated organizations.”

In opposition to Dunois’ conception, the Dutch comrade Croiset spoke of the individualistic phase of Anarchism — not in the sense, however, of private property, mutual banking, contracts, and a voluntary police force — but of the importance of the individual in society. He is not opposed to organization, on principle. But, believing egoism the main-spring of all our desires and actions, he holds that organization can be founded only on purely individual interests. “Egoists may combine to more successfully carry out some mutual project. But organization, not based on individual interests, is in danger of developing into an arbitrary and authoritarian factor.”

Max Baginski and myself spoke in favor of organization, laying stress on the fact that it is always the self-conscious, free individualities which decide the character and influence of an organization. We further illustrated our point by the following paper on “The Relation of Anarchism to Organization,” read by Max Baginski:

The charge that Anarchism is destructive rather than constructive, and that, therefore, Anarchism is opposed to organization, is one of the many falsehoods spread by our opponents. They confound our present social institutions with organization; therefore they fail to understand how we can oppose the former and yet favor the latter. The fact, however, is that the two are not identical.

The STATE is commonly regarded as the highest form of organization. But is it in reality a true organization? Is it not rather an arbitrary institution, cunningly imposed upon the masses?

INDUSTRY, too, is called an organization; yet nothing is farther from the truth. Industry is the ceaseless piracy of the rich against the poor.

We are asked to believe that the ARMY is an organization, but a close investigation will show that it is nothing else than a cruel instrument of blind force.

The PUBLIC SCHOOL! The colleges and other institutions of learning, are they not models of organization, offering the people fine opportunities for instruction? Far from it. The school, more than any other institution, is a veritable barrack, where the human mind is drilled and manipulated into submission to various social and moral spooks, and thus fitted to continue our system of exploitation and oppression.

Organization, as *we* understand it, however, is a different thing. It is based, primarily, on freedom. It is the natural and voluntary grouping of energies for the achievement of results beneficial to humanity; results which should endow life with meaning, worth, and beauty.

It is the harmony of organic growth which produces variety of color and form, the complete whole we admire in the flower. Analogously will the organized activity of free human beings, endowed with the spirit of solidarity, result in the perfection of social harmony, which we call Anarchism. In fact, Anarchism alone makes non-authoritarian organization of common interests possible, since it abolishes the existing antagonism between individuals and classes.

Under present conditions the antagonism of economic and social interests results in relentless war among the social units, and creates an insurmountable obstacle in the way of a co-operative commonwealth.

There is a mistaken notion that organization does not foster individual freedom; that, on the contrary, it means the decay of individuality. In reality, however, the true function of organization is to aid the development and growth of the personality.

Just as the animal cells, by mutual co-operation, express their latent powers in the formation of the complete organism, so does the individuality, by co-operative effort with other individualities, attain its highest form of development.

An organization, in the true sense, cannot result from the combination of mere nonentities. It must be composed of self-conscious, intelligent individualities. Indeed, the total of the possibilities and activities of an organization is represented in the expression of individual energies.

It therefore logically follows that the greater the number of strong, self-conscious personalities in an organization, the less danger of stagnation and the more intense its life-element.

Anarchism asserts the possibility of an organization without discipline, fear, or punishment, and without the pressure of poverty: a new social organism, which will make an end to the terrible struggle for the means of existence — the savage struggle which undermines the finest qualities in man and ever widens the social abyss. In short, Anarchism strives towards a social organization which will establish well-being for all.

The germ of such an organization can be found in that form of trades unionism which has done away with centralization, bureaucracy, and discipline, and which favors independent and direct action on the part of its members.

Malatesta, discussing the various attitudes towards organization, finds the difference not so much in principle as in the method of expression. "One is apt to lay too great stress on some particular pet phrase, whereas in reality all the speakers are agreed as to the necessity of organization. I, too, can see little in the position of Dr. Stockman. Were he a worker in some factory, at the mercy of poverty and exploitation, he would soon descend from his lofty pedestal."

Baginski and myself opposed the opinion expressed by Dunois and Malatesta, that Ibsen represented, in his art, the attitude of the egoistic bourgeoisie. Anarchism does not mean **Kropotkin** or Ibsen: it embraces both.

While Kropotkin has explained the social conditions which lead to a collective revolution, Ibsen has portrayed, in a masterly manner, the psychological effects which culminate in the revolt of the human soul — the revolt of the individuality. Nothing would prove more disastrous to our ideas, were we unable to unite the external, the physical, and the internal, the psychological, motives of rebellion against the existing institutions.

Vohryzek agreed with us, adding: “Stirner is not opposed to organization; on the contrary, a close study of ‘The Ego and his Own’ will show that Stirner saw in the organization of free individuals a lofty aim of human endeavor.”

Cornelissen, of Holland, took exception to the views of the American delegates. “Individual liberty is desirable, yet a limit must be set as to how far it is admissible; it must not be allowed to become injurious to the movement, as a whole.”

After several others had spoken, Dunois consented to accept my amendment to his resolution, to the effect that collective activity in no way denies individual action; that, on the contrary, they complete each other. In this form the resolution was accepted by the Congress.

The evening sessions, lasting until midnight, were turned into public meetings wherein reports of the day’s work and some of the speeches were interpreted into the Dutch language.

Wednesday afternoon’s session was of a private nature, to which the press was not admitted. Incidentally, I wish to say a few words in regard to the Amsterdam press. Coming from the land of yellow journals, it was refreshing to read Dutch papers. All the important publications, even those of the most extreme conservative type, had correct and honest reports; not a word of misrepresentation or sensationalism. When I think of what our New York papers would have made of the Congress, I am grateful to Fate that in “free” America, with its “free” immigration laws, an Anarchistic Congress is out of the question. That the New York papers would bring some sensational and blood-curdling news was to be expected; thus they reported, for instance, that Malatesta and I had advised a “reign of terror.” Poor, dull brain of our penny-a-liners that must forever invent a “story”!

The formation of an Anarchist International Federation was thoroughly discussed and finally agreed upon. The International is to be composed of groups and federations, as well as of individual comrades who wish to join. The groups, federations, and individual members are to retain their full autonomy. A Bureau of Correspondence, consisting of five members, has been chosen, the purpose of which is to bring about closer communication and greater solidarity between the groups of various countries; also to keep them posted on the current events of the movement. Individual comrades, desiring to become members of the International, must be identified by their organization, the Bureau, or some comrade known to the Bureau. The expenses of the Bureau are to be defrayed by contributions of the groups and comrades belonging to the International.

Various views were expressed as to the merits of a Bureau, some of the delegates being apprehensive of the resurrection of the General Council of the **International** — an authoritarian clique, full of national and international intrigue and gossip. The fact that such irreproachable characters as Malatesta, Rocker, etc., have been chosen as members is safe guarantee, however, that the new Bureau will have a different character. The American delegates were in favor of a Bulletin, which should furnish all countries with data on the growth of our ideas. However, those who preferred the Bureau hope that such a Bulletin may be issued as soon as money will be forthcoming.

Syndicalism was discussed by **Pierre Monatte**, from whose paper I quote a few paragraphs: “Syndicalism is the arena where the proletariat can gather for the battle, whose final object is the overthrow of the present economic and social institutions. There are various means, of course, but the most effective ones have proven to be *sabotage* (the despoiling of property and material), direct action, and the General Strike. All these means, in contradistinction to the old authoritarian and political methods, have already caused a great deal of consternation among the enemy. It is to be regretted that many Anarchists still cling to

the tradition of the old political revolution. No wonder they often despair of the means of realizing their ideals. Syndicalism, however, organizes the proletariat into a revolutionary phalanx giving the workingman confidence in himself, in his own power. Syndicalism, imbued with the true spirit of Internationalism, also propagates anti-militarism, anti-political and anti-parliamentary action, seeing in all these dangerous obstacles in the way of human liberation.”

These remarks, followed by an interesting discussion, left the impression that the keeping aloof, in the past, from the trade union movement has been a mistake. The destructive, as well as the constructive, forces for a new life come from the working people. It, therefore, behooves us to keep in close contact with the latter. There was little diversity of opinion on this point. The various speakers merely considered whether syndicalism is to be looked upon as an aim or as a means. Malatesta was particularly brilliant in his remarks anent this question. “I, too, regret that most of the comrades isolated themselves from the trades union movement; but there would be still more cause for regret were they to go to the other extreme and dissolve in the present syndicalist agitation. To regenerate society, more is required than the battle on the economic field. Direct action and the General Strike are to be hailed as glorious weapons in the present struggle; but to assume that they will bring about a Social Revolution, as we conceive the latter, is to be guilty of great *naïveté*. Such a revolution goes far beyond every class interest, its aim is the liberation of man in all phases of life. Therefore, our methods must never become one-sided. It may be impossible and, in fact, inadvisable for *all* workingmen to join the General Strike — railroad men, sailors, carmen, and others, holding the means of transportation in their hands, may serve the cause of labor infinitely more by carrying the necessities of life to their striking brothers. Statistics prove that a city like London has provisions only for three months. What would become of the strikers after three months, if the railroad employees, too, were to join them?”

Malatesta has in view, particularly, periods of a great uprising or an insurrection. So far as ordinary strikes, however, are concerned he will probably agree with me that, if those employed in transportation were to join the strikers, the question at issue could be settled long before the supply of any large city would give out.

The subject closed with two propositions. One, signed by Monatte, Nacht, Dunois, and Marmande, was to the effect that they see in syndicalism and in the material interests of the proletariat the principal basis of revolutionary activity.

The second, signed by Malatesta, myself, and others, explained that revolutionary trade unionism and the General Strike are only means and can in no way replace the Social Revolution. It also expressed the conviction that the capitalistic régime can be abolished only through an insurrection and expropriation, and that our battle must be directed against all authoritarian forces.

As the first resolution was merely an addition to the second, both were accepted by the Congress. So also was the following declaration as to “Individual and Collective Terror,” signed by Max Baginski and myself:

We recommend that the International Anarchist Congress declare itself in favor of the right of rebellion on the part of the individual, as well as on that of the masses.

We hold that most terroristic acts, especially those directed against representatives of the State and the plutocracy, must be considered from a psychological viewpoint. They are the results of the profound impression made upon the psychology of the individual by the terrible pressure of our social injustice.

As a rule, only the noblest, most sensitive, and tender spirits are subject to such deep impressions, which manifest themselves in internal and external revolt. Thus viewed, terroristic acts can justly be characterized as the socio-psychological consequences of an unbearable system; as such, these acts, together with their causes and motives, must be understood, rather than praised or condemned.

During revolutionary periods, such as the present one in Russia, for instance, terrorism — apart from its psychological character — serves a twofold purpose: it undermines the very foundation of tyranny, and kindles in the timid the divine fire of revolt. Especially is this the case when terroristic activity is directed against the most brutal and hated agents of despotism.

The Congress, endorsing this resolution, manifests its understanding for the act of the individual rebel, as well as its solidaric feeling with collective insurrection.

The paper on “The General Strike and the Political Strike,” by Dr. Friedeberg, was an able critique of the Social Democratic notions in regard to the merely political General Strike. The speaker stated that the latter was being advised merely to infuse new life into the anemic condition of the political activity of that party. A résumé of Dr. Friedeberg’s resolution follows:

The class struggle and the economical liberation of the proletariat are not identical with the ideas and aims of Anarchism. The latter extend beyond the class aims and stand for the complete material and psychological regeneration of human individuality. Anarchism sees in the abolition of class régime and economic dependence the first step towards a free society. It cannot, however, employ those means of combat which are contradictory to itself and its purposes. Anarchism, therefore, refuses to recognize parliamentary action, conservative trade unionism, and the right of the majority to dictate to or coerce the minority.

“Anarchism and Anti-Militarism” was referred to the anti-militaristic Congress that had been arranged by comrade Domela Nieuwenhuis. The opening session, Friday afternoon, August 29th, was attended by all the delegates of the International Anarchist Congress. Interesting reports were read as to the growth of anti-militarism in various countries. Switzerland furnished the most gratifying results, seventy men having refused military service. The delegates expressed their solidarity with all those imprisoned for such heroism. Pierre Ramus and R. de Marmande spoke on “Anarchism and Anti-Militarism.” All agreed on the necessity of a vigorous agitation among soldiers and militiamen, urging them to refuse obedience when ordered to shoot strikers. Also to impress upon the workingman the necessity of abstaining, as much as possible, from the manufacture of all articles of wholesale slaughter. A letter of greeting from Dutch soldiers, also one of sympathy from Ferrer — recently rescued from the clutches of the Spanish authorities — were read.

Saturday, August 30th, the last day of our own Congress, was taken up by a paper on co-operative societies in Holland, by comrade Samson; a paper on co-education, by Leon Clement, read by Marmande; an exposition of Esperanto, by Emile Chapelier; and a paper on Alcoholism, by a Christian Anarchist. As time was limited and the delegates worn out, the subjects were not discussed. A letter of greeting was received from comrade Yvetôt, now serving four years for syndicalistic activity. In reply, a letter of solidarity was sent to Yvetôt and his fellow-sufferers, of the following contents:

The Congress declares that the French government acts toward the workingmen as brutally and severely as all other governments of the world. We, therefore, send our brotherly greetings to Yvetôt, Marck, Levy, Bousquet, Corton, Loubot, Berthet, Clementine Delmotte, and Gabrielle Petit (who are now in prison). At the same time we express our sympathy and solidarity with all the champions of liberty, suffering under the capitalistic régime. We urge that the International Bureau consider it one of its first steps to defend and assist all these.

A resolution in behalf of Russia, signed by Rogdaeff, Zabregneff, Cornelissen, Baginski, Munjitsch, Fabri, Malatesta, and myself, was enthusiastically accepted by the Congress. It follows:

Considering that with the development of the people of Russia the proletariat of the cities and country will never be satisfied with mere political liberties, it is their aim to free themselves from economical as well as political bondage, and to employ in their struggle such means as have been propagated by the Anarchists for a considerable time. They can not expect anything from above, and they must, therefore, conquer their rights by direct action.

The Russian revolution is not only of local or national importance, but the near future of the international proletariat depends on it. The bourgeoisie of the new and the old worlds co-operate to defend their privileges and to postpone the abolition of their régime. They furnish moral and material support to the government of the Tsar, even supplying it with ammunition for the destruction of the Russian people.

We therefore urge that the proletariat of all countries should inaugurate an energetic activity, opposing capitalist, monarchical, republican, democratic, and constitutional government. It is in the interest of all workingmen to refuse any compromise in their attitude toward the Russian Revolution. Never, under any circumstances, ought they to be willing to assist any foreign power in its attempt to crush the revolt. If during a strike in Russia a General Strike cannot be declared in the corresponding industries in other countries, the proletariat should resort to such means which would spoil or injure the material sent to the Russian government, refusing to carry arms or other sinews of war into Russia.

The Congress recommends to all comrades the necessity of furthering Anarchism in Russia and the Russian Revolution.

Two Christian Anarchists, who seemed to think that the régime of the Tsar can be met with Bible texts, refused to vote.

The Congress closed with a few warm and expressive remarks by Malatesta, and the singing of the “Internationale.”

The delegates were in no way molested by the authorities at Amsterdam, except for a few Dutch detectives, who were occasionally following some of us.

I may mention that on the 2d of September, the day when Queen Wilhelmina came to Amsterdam, Baginski and I were supposed to have been watched very carefully. As if Anarchists were engaged in the slaughter of geese!

Whatever may come of the work or the resolutions of the Congress, it has undoubtedly brought about a closer international feeling and proven to the world that the Anarchist movement can no longer be treated as the “pastime of a few cranks,” but that it is a wide-spread, earnest endeavor to wage war against all power and oppression.

Endnotes

1. It might seem like Goldman is using “Revolutionary Trade Unions of France” as the translation into English, but we suspect this is just a casual (and incorrect) description of the General Confederation of Labor. The CGT certainly included non-revolutionary unions, even if the general thrust was revolutionary at the time. —Syndicalism.org eds.
2. This was on the second day of the Congress — Tuesday, August 27. —Syndicalism.org eds.

Additional Information

Taken from [HathiTrust](#).

See [our excerpt](#) of the proceedings of the Congress.