

Sabotage

By Georges Yvetot

Published in 1934 in The Anarchist Encyclopedia

Topics: [France](#), [transportation and warehousing](#), [sabotage](#)

According to the *Larousse Dictionary*, this word deals only with the making of sabots — wooden shoes. For that dictionary, it's nothing but a masculine noun. Learning sabotage means learning the craft of the *sabotier* — the clog maker. It is also the operation of obliquely cutting sleepers on railroad rails in order to attach bearing cushions or rails. Even so, the dictionary also indicates that “Sabotage is the action of executing a task quickly and badly. Printing: dishonest act of the typesetter who knowingly introduces errors in the composition or damages the printing material entrusted to him.”

The latter definition of sabotage is not ours. It is not acceptable that a worker does damage to his work or material without reason. When an activity is understood in this way it's because the worker is a bad worker who doesn't love his profession, doesn't have the love of labor that makes — or should make — man proud and free. And in any event, why cite the printshop as an example and the typesetter as the type of a saboteur, when there are so many other professions where the task is more serious and the material more precious? The saboteur of *Larousse* is poor in spirit or a discontented sneak taking revenge.

Thus, in a few lines the *Larousse Dictionary* says all it can about sabotage. In a few words it nevertheless touches on what interests us here. But it is necessary to be clear about the form of direct action that in our theory of revolutionary syndicalism we have propagated under the name sabotage.

It is precisely because the enemies of the organized working class have never ceased distorting the meaning or ridiculing the meaning, the action, and the goal of sabotage that it has seemed indispensable to syndicalist militants to explain it in speech and writing whenever the occasion arises.

According to the *Larousse Dictionary*, sabotage is simply the act of executing a task quickly and badly. A saboteur is nothing but a worker, an employee, a wage earner who, fully aware of what he's doing, quickly and badly executes his task.

Here is something clear and brief.

But the good *Larousse Dictionary* isn't acting unthinkingly when it abstains from digging deeper into the action of sabotage and knowingly failing to develop more fully the value we attribute to it in the daily struggle in support of our demands and in defense of the exploited against the exploiters. We will attempt to fill this gap here.

The following is an excerpt from a pamphlet already old (1908)¹ but still topical on this subject:

Direct action also includes sabotage — What has not been said and written about sabotage? Lately the right-thinking press has set itself to distorting its meaning. Fortunately, writings of syndicalist militants or their declarations before tribunals have reestablished the exact meaning of worker's sabotage, which should not be confused with bosses' sabotage.

The sabotage of the bosses attacks the public by tampering with products, by fraud in wines, butter, milk, flour, et cetera, by the poor quality of material necessary for works of public utility. [...]

Worker sabotage, against which the newspapers have sabotaged the public's judgment, against which judges have sabotaged justice and equity, is completely different.

In the first place, it consists, for the worker, in giving his labor for the price paid: for bad pay, bad work. The worker practices this system quite naturally. It can even be said that there are workers who carry it out unconsciously, instinctively. This is doubtless what explains the poor quality and cheapness of certain products. It's commonly said of poor products sold cheaply that it's work that comes from a prison workshop.

[...]

The intelligent sabotage of the worker generally attacks the direct interests of the exploiter. It is legitimate; it is defensive; it is vengeance. The bosses' sabotage attacks only the public interest, since it harms the public's health, security, and life. No confusion is possible.

Sabotage is thus direct action, since it attacks the boss with no intermediary. Sabotage is direct action that can be exercised in moments of relative peace between employers and wage earner, as well as in times of strikes and conflict.

Here then is a definition of sabotage that corresponds quite well to what the worker understands when it is a matter of protesting or defending himself by the best means within his reach and that, far from being harmful to a collective, protects it at the expense of the interests of the bosses.

We could cite many examples of sabotage. During a strike of registered seamen, the strikers committed an act of intelligent sabotage by printing posters denouncing the villainous sabotage of the *Compagnies Maritimes*. These posters warned travelers that such and such a boat was dangerous, given the poor condition of the boiler (duly inspected) or machinery; that another ship might suddenly stop in mid-voyage due to the unquestionable fact that the horizontal axis was cracked and was certain to break at any moment, consequently immobilizing the ship in the middle of the ocean. It should also be remarked that the seamen, called saboteurs, warned the passengers of the risk they ran, placing their confidence in the incompetence of the *Compagnies Maritimes*. The latter, from criminal rapacity, remained silent about dangers they were aware of, but they made the passengers pay — in advance — enormous sums for the trip. Even with this, they only paid the crew after the voyage and never paid out wages in advance. This self-interested calculation is the same for all. These firms never allow their dishonest actions to be considered sabotage. The clientele and users of the transport companies have never protested against this system. As for the state, it never intervenes against the companies: their legal proceedings are reserved for the exploited of these companies when they denounce these crimes. The police forces of provocation and repression are eagerly employed against strikers demanding security, well-being, and respect for their dignity as workers. The state also never fails to intervene with the same old speeches lamenting shipwreck victims and then bailing out the navigation companies, always in deficit. This kind of capitalist and governmental sabotage has never caused as much ink to spill as a simple act of worker sabotage, knowingly distorted by a servile press serving its own interests. The latter always knows how to make an act of sabotage seem criminal, excelling in sabotaging the facts. For contemporary journalism the sabotage of public opinion in service to capitalism is a professional duty. There is sabotage and there is sabotage — this is something that must be said.

It should be not be forgotten that laws and decrees almost always emerge from resounding protests by parliament, public opinion, and the press after a catastrophe. But these laws and decrees are almost always unapplied and un-applicable, so sabotage continues against the lives of miners, railroad employees, seamen, and all those workers who risk death daily in order to earn a living and enrich exploiters of all categories: entrepreneurs and administrators as well as those who profit by doing nothing but amassing dividends and enjoying them all their lives.

[...]

It remains to us to define in what form sabotage should be implemented. We all know that to increase our enslavement the employer usually chooses the moment when it is most difficult to resist his encroachments through a partial strike, the sole method employed until now. The results have not always been all that was hoped for. While not neglecting the means of struggle that is the strike, it is necessary to employ other methods, with or without strikes.

Lacking the power to go on strike, workers who've been attacked have no choice but to submit to the demands of the capitalist.

With sabotage things are completely different. Resistance is possible. The exploited are no longer at the complete mercy of the exploiter; they have the means of asserting their virility and proving to the oppressor that they are men. They have in their hands a defensive weapon that can become an offensive weapon, depending on the circumstances and the use made of it.

What is more, sabotage is not as new as is thought: workers have always practiced it individually, though not methodically. It was not always ineffective. It inspired in those who profit from exploitation a salutary fear that only grew when the power of collective sabotage asserted itself. Workers instinctively slowed down their production when the boss increased his demands. The workers more or less consciously applied the slogan “for bad pay, bad work.”

The bosses thought they had parried this defensive tactic of the slaves of the factory and the building site by substituting piece work for daily wages. They realized that their interests, less harmed on the quantity side, became more so on that of quality. When, for example, it was the contrary, that is, when the boss substituted daily wages for piece work, thinking in this way to enslave the worker, the latter, naturally also employed the opposite method to reach the same result. Let it not be said that it was bad workers who acted this way, for we insist that they were the most skilled, the most intelligent, and consequently those most conscious of their value. The bad worker is the eternal saboteur and can never be anything but, and the boss knows this. The former only has any value through the group he is part of, for individually he counts for little. It is in his interest to follow the boldest in order to keep his job and not be employed at disagreeable tasks.

Sabotage can be adapted to all kinds of tasks. It is practiced in all professions and modernizes in step with progress in production. It becomes fearsome with the perfecting of mechanization. We can't say all there is to be said about the application of sabotage, but during the years from 1900 until 1914, France amply demonstrated the awesome power of revolutionary syndicalism, inciting the direct action of the conscious and organized proletariat with the aim of freeing themselves of the exploitation of man by man. The report to the workers' conference of Toulouse (1897) concluded thusly:

Sabotage can and must be practiced in piecework labor by striving to show less care for the work performed while still producing the quantity required to avoid reducing the wage paid. The boss, thus ensnared, will have the choice of meeting his workers' demands or losing his customers. If he is intelligent he will turn the tools he owns over to the producers who know how best to use them without sabotaging them.

But this would be the beginning of the end for the employers and exploitation. We should not count on it.

Sabotage in the factories, in centralized production, on building sites, and in large-scale enterprises can be exercised with discernment and intelligence against tools and engines without posing the least danger to the public and strictly to the detriment of capitalism. The emotion produced in the bourgeois world is still remembered when the secretary of the railway workers union declared thirty-three years ago that an employee, a trainman, or a railroad mechanic could, with ten centimes worth of a certain ingredient totally paralyze — and for a long time — one or even several locomotives.

We could write an apology here for sabotage and the boycott by citing nothing but our memories.

In France, and particularly in Paris, there were incidents of sabotage that were, in some cases, comic, and in others tragic or that threatened to become so. There were some days and some nights that allowed us to hope for the social revolution, making war impossible.

The agendas of our workers' congresses prior to 1914 presaged victories that in the end were nothing but bitter and cruel disappointments. We prefer not to linger over them in order not to sabotage the new hopes that still animate us, so unshakable are our revolutionary convictions, so immutable is the anarchist ideal in the heart and mind of the sincere and modest man who believes in the future of freedom and harmony between men of good will.

Endnotes

1. Georges Yvetot, *A.B.C. Syndicaliste*, 1908.

Additional Information

The Anarchist Encyclopedia was originally published in French on a serial basis between 1925 and 1934 by editor Sébastien Faure, and then released in book form in four volumes in 1934. This entry by Yvetot was taken from [the abridged version of the Encyclopedia published by AK Press in 2019](#), edited and translated by Mitchell Abidor.

Note that this is not the complete text of Yvetot's entry on sabotage, as indicated by several ellipses ("[...]"). (This book is an abridged version about one-tenth the size of the original, which was nearly 3,000 pages, after all.) By looking at [the original](#), it appears that nearly half of the entry was excluded. If we find a more complete translation, we will use it to replace this version.