

Syndicalism

By Hippolyte Havel

Published in the October 1912 issue of Mother Earth (Vol. VII, No. 8, pp 255-257)

Topics: [book review](#), [France](#)

Alma Mater Columbia bestowed upon our Comrade [Louis] Levine the mysterious shibboleth Ph.D. I do not know whether friend Levine gained in wisdom in the intellectual factory of Nicolas Murray Butler, but he certainly succeeded in writing a good book on Syndicalism, the subject which he chose as his thesis. The study appears in the series on History, Economics and Public Law, edited by the faculty of Political Science of Columbia University. It is called "The Labor Movement in France, a Study in Revolutionary Syndicalism,"¹ and has an introduction by Professor Franklin H. Giddings. This book is undoubtedly the best work on Syndicalism which has so far appeared in the English language, and it will surely help to dispel many false conceptions on this subject, at present so much abused. Of course, one must take into account the limitations under which the author labored. Yet notwithstanding all limitations he was able to give us in his book not only a good account of Syndicalism in theory and practice, but also a short but very precise history of the workingmen's movement in France during the last century. Most of the recent effusions of our bourgeois writers who have just discovered Syndicalism are simply "borrowed" from Levine's book. As usual they succeed only too well in ignoring the point of the subject. They use their newly acquired knowledge merely to embellish their daily or weekly pabulum.

Syndicalism produces nowadays a veritable nightmare in the lives of the Socialist politicians. For decades they fed the proletariat on promises. They thought they were clever when they called upon the workingman to "strike at the ballot box," and now they are surprised to see that he really strikes at the ballot box; that he refuses to elect his own betrayers. No wonder the politicians are enraged at Syndicalism, for what else is Syndicalism but direct action against corrupt political participation in the bourgeois society? The workers turn their backs on their leaders and accept direct tactics as propagated by the Anarchists since the days of the old Internationale.

"It is necessary," writes [Léon] Jouhaux, secretary of the [Confédération Générale du Travail](#), "that the proletariat should know that between parliamentary Socialism, which is tending more and more toward a simple democratization of existing social forms, and Syndicalism, which pursues the aim of a complete social transformation, there is not only divergence of methods, but particularly divergence of aims."

And our comrade [Yvetot](#), secretary of the section of Bourses du Travail, declares at the Congress of Toulouse: "I am reproached with confusing Syndicalism with Anarchism. It is not my fault if Anarchism and Syndicalism have the same ends in view. The former pursues the integral emancipation of the individual; the latter the integral emancipation of the workingman. I find the whole of Syndicalism in Anarchism."

This new revolt of the conscious workingman is not "made" by intellectuals like Sorel, Berth, and Lagardelle, but comes direct from the rank and file of the manual worker. This Levine accentuates especially, and on this point too much stress cannot be laid. It is the worker who forms his theory from the practice of his daily life.

We do not agree with Levine when he declares that "some Anarchists are only too glad to be considered the creators of the movement and to maintain a view which is a tribute to their organizing ability and to their influence."

In the last issues of *Freedom*, Peter Kropotkin says very well:

[...] the Anarchists have never imagined that it was they who gave to the Syndicalist movement its present conception of its duties toward 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 [...] fundamental ideas are not our invention. They are nobody's invention. Life itself has dictated them to nineteenth century civilization, and upon us lies now the duty of realizing them in life. Our pride is only that we have understood them; that we defended them through those dark years when they were trampled underfoot by the Social Democratic politicians and their would-be philosophers; and that we still intend to remain true to them.²

Endnotes

1. The Labor Movement in France. By Louis Levine, Columbia University, New York. To be had at the office of Mother Earth. Price, \$1.50.
 2. Peter Kropotkin, "[Syndicalism and Anarchism](#)", *Freedom*, 1912. We added the first two ellipses in the quote and formatted it as a blockquote. —[Syndicalism.org](#) eds.
-

Additional Information

Taken from [HaithiTrust](#).

The Internet Archive has [a copy of the dissertation](#) this article is about.