

## Black Flame & Monatte

Often when I read pages of *Black Flame* dealing with subjects I know a little bit about, I find myself in the best of cases faced with very regrettable approximations, in the sense that if a reader were to be interested in that particular point, he or she would be seriously misled.

This is the case, for example, of a passage dealing with the French CGT and Pierre Monatte:

“While the French CGT was first made syndicalist through boring from within, the loss of syndicalist control in the 1910s saw two main responses: some French syndicalists broke away to form the CGT Revolutionary Syndicalist in 1921 as a minority union (this later evolved into the contemporary French CNTs); others, like Monatte, continued to bore from within the CGT, where they exerted some influence.” (*BF*, p. 229)

In a single sentence we have so many inaccuracies and approximations that it becomes incomprehensible.

The observation that the revolutionary syndicalist current began to lose ground around 1910 is correct, but all that follows is false: the revolutionary syndicalists continued to fight in the CGT to defend their views, because despite their decline, their positions remained strong. The confederal leadership managed to organize, despite the strong opposition of the reformists, a general strike against the war which was in preparation: there were 600,000 strikers, which is obviously not spectacular, but in the context of strong state repression it was a good result. There was no equivalent initiative in Germany. Until the declaration of war, the anti-militarist motions presented by the anarchists received a majority of votes – a small majority, it is true.

The reduction of the influence of the revolutionary syndicalist current was manifested by the adhesion to the CGT of powerful reformist federations, but also by the progressive replacement of elected revolutionaries by reformists in the trade union elections. Thus, when the war broke out, it was no longer possible to describe the CGT as “revolutionary syndicalist”.

It was only after the war that a split took place, in 1921, but absolutely not the one Schmidt and van der Walt are mentioning. At the end of the war, there was a very strong revolutionary minority in the CGT, which

wanted to make the leadership of the organization pay for its support to the Allies. This revolutionary minority was composed of revolutionary syndicalists, anarchists but also communists. The Confederal leadership excluded the revolutionary minority in September 1921. In December 1921 the minority formed the CGT-U ("U" for "unitary" – it is a tradition, in France when one splits up one calls oneself "unitary"). Its provisional leadership was dominated by Pierre Besnard's tendency. The pro-Moscowers organized themselves behind the ex-revolutionary syndicalist Gaston Monmousseau<sup>1</sup>.

The CGT-U was certainly in the minority, but not by much: it had brought with it 350,000 members against 488,000 who had remained in the "historic" CGT. It should be noted that many anarchists had not left the CGT after the split, most of the time by choice. In the case of Monatte it was only that his union had not joined the CGT-U<sup>2</sup>. He was therefore in the contradictory position of a man who supported a scission but who could not join it.

In the CGT-U, the revolutionary syndicalist current was at first in the majority but it committed catastrophic errors: in particular it split in two, one current led by Gaston Monmousseau, which supported the Soviet policy and advocated the CGT-U's adhesion to the Red International of Labour Unions (a trade-union annex of the Komintern); the other current led by Pierre Besnard who refused to collaborate with the bolsheviks and which founded the Berlin IWA in 1922.

The revolutionary syndicalists of the CGT-U ended up either leaving it or joining the Communist Party. Among the latter was the naive Monatte, whose prestige had been used extensively for communist propaganda. Indeed at the beginning of the war he had resigned from his CGT mandates to protest against the alignment of the Confederal leadership with the government in the war.

Monatte supported Soviet international policy, but he had then imagined that the Communists would respect trade union democracy in France. He was quickly expelled from the Communist Party as soon as he became useless.

We can see, therefore, that through ignorance of history, Schmidt and van der Walt miss an essential point in the history of the workers' movement, a pivotal point since it is a period during which the communist parties were created (often with the very active support of revolutionary

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1 Gaston Monmousseau was a revolutionary syndicalist fascinated by the Russian Revolution and Bolshevism. He contributed to placing the CGTU under the control of the Communist Party. In 1925, he became one of its leaders.

2 As an anecdote, I joined the same union as Monatte in 1972.

syndicalists), where the revolutionary syndicalists broke off support for the Russian revolution, founded the Berlin International Workers' Association, and where anarcho-syndicalism as such was founded.

Contrary to what Schmidt and van der Walt write, it is not in 1921 that the "CGT Revolutionary Syndicalist" was created. After two anarchist syndicalists had been assassinated by communists during a trade union meeting in January 1924, many unions left the CGT-U and reintegrated the CGT, some left it to remain autonomous, others ended up forming the CGT-SR in 1926.

It should be pointed out that the constitution of the CGT-SR did not raise unanimous enthusiasm among anarchists and syndicalists. Many anarchists were hostile to it, while many syndicalists considered it more useful to remain in the CGT.

To say then that "Monatte, continued to bore from within the CGT, where they exerted some influence" is a bit exaggerated. His union had remained within the CGT. Having joined the Communist Party in May 1923, he was expelled from it in November 1924 and was treated ignominiously by his former party comrades<sup>3</sup>. He then founded with a few comrades a magazine, *La Révolution prolétarienne*, whose first issue appeared in January 1925. The review tackled all the practical and theoretical problems facing the workers' movement, and published in-depth articles in which the question of communism and anti-stalinism held the greatest place, but also well-documented studies on trade union life, strikes, the economic and industrial situation; it condemned French imperialism in Indochina, Madagascar and North Africa.

The magazine was the refuge of all revolutionary syndicalists who gradually left or were excluded from the Communist Party. None of these militants questioned the choice they had made to divide the revolutionary syndicalist movement by supporting the pro-Moscow option.

Although anarchists participated in the review, *La Revolution prolétarienne* was the typical representative of the revolutionary syndicalist current that had completely and consciously detached itself from anarchism.

To conclude, an anecdote about the formation of the French CNT that will probably not be found in the history books. I hold the information from veterans of the CGT-SR who witnessed the event.

After WWII, the question of the reconstitution of the CGT-SR arose. Naturally, Pierre Besnard was one of the activists who initiated the project.

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3 *L'Humanité* of September 11, 1925 had the headline: "Pierre Monatte, saboteur of the labour movement?" <http://monde-nouveau.net/spip.php?article593>

The new organization, or the one that was to succeed it, had the possibility of reclaiming the premises it occupied before the war. All organizations that had collaborated with the Germans were denied that right, but not the CGT-SR. All they had to do was therefore to fill in a form and make an official request. Few veterans of the CGT-SR were left. The new “true revolutionary” activists categorically refused, on the pretext that “they did not want to owe anything to the state”. So the new organization was reconstituted with the serious handicap of not having premises.

The comrades decided not to use the historical acronym “CGT-SR” but “CNT”, obviously in reference to Spain. The French CNT was in the hands of a FAI refugee whom I met when I was young. It was a time of great questioning in the post-war syndicalist movement. Many CGT militants could no longer stand the Communist Party’s stranglehold on the organization and were looking for something else. Indeed, during the great strikes of 1936, the two CGTs came closer together and finally reunited in March 1936. This reunification had largely favoured the hold of Stalinism on the organisation.

So after the war, trade unions came knocking at the door of the (French) CNT and they were asked if they were anarchists. Naturally they were not and were sent away. In the meantime, Pierre Besnard had died in February 1947. In 1949 the trade unions that had been rejected by the CNT(f) found themselves in a confederation called CGT-Force Ouvrière, which today is one of the main trade union organizations in France. *[To be honest, it is said that it had been initially supported by the CIA, which could be consistent with the post-war US anticommunist policy but I don’t know if there is any proof about that.]*

Today there are several “CNT” in France but I can’t say what their differences are.

Of course one cannot blame authors dealing with a subject as vast as the one announced in *Black Flame* for not knowing *absolutely everything* about the subject. However, there is a limit beyond which approximations and errors end up invalidating the whole work insofar as the reader with a minimum of knowledge of *one* of the questions raised in the book can wonder if these approximations do not extend to *all* the questions that are addressed.

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### Some references

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