

## CONCERNING BLACK FLAME & LIBCOM

*In May-June 2019 there was an interesting exchange of views posted on Libcom related to Black Flame and the four comments “Concerning Black Flame” that I posted on the website monde-nouveau.net. It was only last week that I became aware of it. I would have liked to comment on these interventions but my answer seems to me too long to appear as a comment on a forum. This is why I invite interested readers to refer to my text on monde-nouveau.net. – René Berthier, September 30, 2019*

### **Answer to sherbu-kteer and MT (May 31 2019 15:04) :**

The thing about Berthier is that he writes <i>a lot</i> , in incredible detail...
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Gaetano Manfredonia, a contemporary historian, presenting his ideas in English for the first time that I know of.
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It is true that I write a lot but it is to make up for lost time. I have been retired since 2003 and during the last 25 years of my active period, I was too busy with my union activity.

In addition, one of my concerns is to transmit the knowledge and experience that I myself owe to the elders of the movement that I have known, and the experience that I have acquired myself.

About Manfredonia: he is an old friend of mine, a guy who publishes unfortunately little but who is brilliant. He is an authentic historian who relies on sources and not on wacky concepts.

He is currently one of the most famous historians of anarchism in France. His book, *Anarchisme et changement social* (Anarchism and Social Change, published in 2007, two years before *Black Flame*), establishes an original typology of the anarchist movement that sweeps all typologies that, until today, have tried to find coherence, to establish a “classification” in the many currents of which anarchism is composed.

Based on Weber’s “comprehensive sociology”, Manfredonia believes that we must “break with the usual interpretations of anarchism that all put forward the history of ideas or movements” and proposes to turn “resolutely towards the study of militant practices”. It is on the basis of this method that he delineates three “ideal” types of libertarian militancy: the insurrectional type, the syndicalist type and the educationist-creator type. (Note that

individualism does not appear in his typology, even though he did a doctoral thesis on this current ...)

Manfredonia's book proposes a perspective that goes beyond the Platform / Synthesis antagonism because it does not freeze the different forms of anarchism in rigid "boxes". Insurrectionalism, syndicalism and educationism do not oppose each other, they are types that can succeed one another chronologically or cohabit in different combinations depending on the needs and the political and social context. For example, in periods of repression, it is the insurrectional type that will tend to dominate. The three types that Manfredonia describes, and their different variations, constitute in a way the different possible strategies of anarchism adapted to the circumstances that make them necessary. So we are not locked up in compartments where everyone claims that it is *only* through insurrection, *only* through unionism or *only* through education that emancipation can be achieved: the strategy adopted by the anarchist movement can refer, depending on the circumstances, to one or more of these types, and to varying degrees.

Another interest of Manfredonia's book lies in the extremely well-documented passages on Proudhon. But *Black Flame's* point of view on Proudhon is, in my opinion, one of the main drawbacks of the book. *Black Flame's* bibliography on the man whom the French anarchist movement considers as the "father of self-management" is limited to a collection of selected texts from Proudhon and to a 96 pages long book about him written in 1934. I had mentioned this in an exchange of mails with van der Walt years ago, as well as Proudhon's methodological contribution to the analysis of the capitalist system <sup>1</sup>, but things remained there.

### **Answer to MT Jun 1 2019 23:33**

I wondered if he is a member of any group in France but the wiki is not really clear, or rather indicates that he was more of a union organizer in traditional unions than in anarchosyndicalist ones.

I was a co-founder of a group called the "Alliance syndicaliste" which was formed shortly after the strikes of May-June 1968. The group self-dissolved

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1 See: "Proudhon and the problem of method", <http://monde-nouveau.net/spip.php?article407>

in 1981, and then I joined the Anarchist Federation in 1984 <sup>2</sup>.

I was actually in a “traditional” union organization (the CGT printworkers federation) because the alternative to this option was not very realistic. There existed in the 70s a “French CNT” but it was a micro-small group consisting mostly of students at the time. Today the situation is hardly more pleasing because there are three or four “CNT” in France who are confronted on issues that I do not understand much. There is, however, a CNT which has a real but modest workers presence, the “CNT-Solidarité ouvrière”, but its establishment is in sectors to which the big trade union confederations have been little interested.

The issue, in my opinion, is not to create *ex nihilo* trade unions that are specifically syndicalist. You don't create a revolutionary syndicalist organization with a snap of your finger, thinking that workers will flock to it. Moreover, even if I and a handful of my libertarian comrades had split off the union in which we were militating, no one would have followed us. It doesn't work that way. There is no point in creating “anarchist” unions. Malatesta would agree with me, but so would Monatte.

Currently, the CNT unions have extremely small numbers of members and their main activity is to provide legal support.

The CNT missed an incredible opportunity after World War II. It was created in France as the heir to the “CGT-syndicaliste révolutionnaire” (CGT-SR), which had been founded in 1926 (a split of the CGT-U, itself a split of the CGT – a complicated story). After the war, therefore, many unions were exasperated by communist domination in the unions and a splitting movement took place, many of these unions going to see the French CNT. The latter was in fact controlled by Spanish FAI refugees, who asked candidates who wanted to join if they were anarchists. Of course they weren't, so they left. This story is unfortunate because the unions that left the Stalinist CGT eventually formed a major trade union centre called “CGT-Force ouvrière”, one of the main confederations in France today.

And that's not all. The CGT-SR used to have premises in different cities before the war, but it had been banned by the German occupier. After the war, the question of the recovery of these premises arose. All they had to do was make a request to get them back. The hyper-revolutionaries of the French CNT (in fact militants of the Spanish FAI), refusing “to owe anything to the State”, refrained from making this request. No need to dwell on the consequences of this stupid attitude.

All this is not in the history books, but it was revealed to us by an old comrade of the Alliance syndicaliste who witnessed these events and who

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2 Battlescarred could give some information about the Alliance syndicaliste.

had been the treasurer of the CGT-SR.

## Answer to Agent of the In... May 31 2019 16:05

It's kinda surprising that aside from the comments posted by Red Marriott, I haven't come across any negative reviews on the book. It's reception was unanimously favourable among class struggle oriented anarchists at the time of it's release.

I have read critical reports but very few, it is true. The fact that *Black Flame* has received almost nothing but favourable opinions seems worrying to me and reveals, in my opinion, a lack of critical thinking in the English-speaking anarchist movement but also in Latin America, where the book has been well received by the “Platformists” and the “especificistas”. (I can't say anything about the French anarchist movement because it hasn't been translated)

I understand that *Black Flame* can be qualified as “revisionist”, but the term seems too weak to me. Strictly speaking Schmidt and van der Walt do not “revise” history: at best they obliterate entire sections, at worst they transform it. That is why I have undertaken to write a text to counterbalance their methodological errors and incredible factual deficiencies. The fact that few activists have identified these shortcomings confirms my concern about the libertarian movement.

This text I wrote, which I have named *Commentaires sur Black Flame* (Comments on Black Flame), was originally asked of me by Brazilian comrades, with whom I have a close relationship. They were concerned about the growing influence of the book among Platformists and academics in their country. I had uploaded *Commentaires sur Black Flame* on monde-nouveau.net but then I withdrew it because I wasn't satisfied with it. However, I translated some passages in English.

I am an anarcho-sindicalist and I do not feel “favoured and flattered by BF's revisionism”. The distinction made by the authors of BF between syndicalism and anarcho-syndicalism is the complete negation of any authentically historical approach and the proclamation of the reign of dogma<sup>3</sup>.

Syndicalism is a movement that was born in France in the 1890s (it makes no sense to fix a specific date) and has spread to other countries by adapting

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3 On syndicalism and the formation of anarcho-syndicalism, see (in French): “De l'origine de l'anarcho-syndicalisme”, <http://monde-nouveau.net/spip.php?article603>

to the context of these countries.

During the revolution in Russia there was an anarcho-syndicalist current to which communist anarchists vigorously opposed. It is the Bolshevik Lozovsky who probably launched the “fashion” in France at the founding congress of the CGT-U, a split of the CGT: in his speech he violently attacked the militants who refused membership in Red International of Labour unions and called them “anarchist syndicalists”. Anarcho-syndicalism is a current that appeared in Western Europe after the Russian revolution ; it results from a fracture that appeared within the syndicalist movement between those who supported the CGT-U’s admission to the Red International of Labour unions (RILU) and those who opposed it. Originally “anarcho-syndicalist” was an insult by which the pro-Bolshevik syndicalists and communists designated the syndicalists who refused membership in the RILU. It took more than ten years for the term to be adopted by the syndicalists.

The reason for their reluctance regarding the term “anarcho-syndicalist” is understandable. The trade union movement broke up in two: one part was pro-Bolshevik, the other was opposed to Bolshevism. Activists who refused to join the Red International of Trade Unions saw themselves as the *real* revolutionary syndicalists. Moreover, when one reads the founding documents of the IWA of Berlin in 1922, it is only a matter of "syndicalisme révolutionnaire". There is no mention of anarcho-syndicalism.

All the writings of the authors of BF on the whimsical difference between syndicalism and anarcho-syndicalism have strictly no historical basis. When I was young I knew old syndicalist comrades who were active in the 1920s and 1930s and who perfectly knew why they were not anarcho-syndicalists.

I share Red Marriott’s view that BF fans “turn a blind eye to its ‘narrow idealised’ history’ which privileged their political current at the expense of historical accuracy/truth”.

Schmidt and van der Walt have, in my opinion, invented a “typology” of the libertarian movement that is nothing more than a new dogmatism and just as (if not more) artificial than “synthesism”. I bitterly regret that there are so few “bridges” between the French libertarian movement and the English-speaking libertarian movement. In my opinion, Gaetano Manfredonia’s book seems to be the best antidote against *Black Flame*’s sophistics (although there are some minor points on which I do not agree with him).

**Answer to robot Jun 3 2019 12:03:**

There are quite a number of French syndicalists (CSR, parts of AL) that are critical in respect to forming specific revolutionary syndicalist unions and advocate to turn the CGT back into a revolutionary syndicalist union again.

To carry out revolutionary activity in the CGT in the hope of “turning it back to revolutionary syndicalism” is a sympathetic but completely illusory fantasy. I think that libertarians should carry out this activity when they are in a position to do so, but simply with the aim of developing libertarian themes and *practices* in basic and intermediate structures, assuming responsibilities (to promote the idea of general assemblies, control and rotation of mandates, etc.). That is what the Alliance syndicaliste did in its time. Imagining taking control of the CGT is absurd. It's unrealistic, it's ignoring the resilience of these huge bureaucratic masses which the trade union leaderships are at the highest level of the hierarchy.

In France there is a group called “Comité syndicaliste révolutionnaire” (CSR) which claims filiation with a structure of the same name created in the early 1920s within the CGT. A little like the Trotskyists live the capture of the Winter Palace over and over again, the CSR militants live in a loop the achievements of the syndicalist activists of the 1920s in their struggle against the reformist leadership of the CGT.

The problem is their extreme mental rigidity: they have developed a very fallacious argumentation, but coherent if we accept it's erroneous bases, according to which the anarcho-syndicalists were responsible for the failure of the Red International of Trade Union (a trade union annex of the Komintern), which would have taken the destinies of the Russian revolution in hand if revolutionary syndicalists of anarchist obedience had not founded the International Workers' Association of Berlin in 1922. (My summary of their positions may seem caricatural, but it is their positions that are caricatural.) According to them, all the failures of the international labour movement after that are the work of anarcho-syndicalists. To tell the truth, I have not heard from them for a moment, perhaps they have “put water in their wine”, as we say in France. You probably have the same in GB. If you want a powerful antidote to their ramblings on the Red International of Labour Unions, there is an exciting book by a German historian, Reiner Tosstorff, translated into English<sup>4</sup>. I made a review (in French, Spanish and

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4 Reiner to Tosstorff, *The Red International of Labour Unions (RILU) 1920-1937*. Haymarket Books, Chicago, I  
<http://monde-nouveau.net/spip.php?article698> (French)  
<http://monde-nouveau.net/?lang=pt> (Portuguese)

Portuguese).

### **Answer to Anarcho (Jun 2 2019 16:41)**

Reading Berthier's comments on Kropotkin, I would say that he seems intent on mis-understanding (or misrepresentating) Kropotkin's ideas. Much of what he says is wrong -- Kropotkin, for example, repeatedly suggests that unions should be the means of organising production during and after a revolution. He raises this idea before the rise of syndicalism in the mid-1890s.

I have never denied that Kropotkin had encouraged “participation in the workers movements”, I say that “participation in the workers movements” is not enough to make a syndicalist. This confusion is due to a deliberate or unintentional error on the terms “syndicalism” and “trade-unionism”. I never denied Kropotkin had written in the anarchist press, I only say that reporting trade-union activity in the anarchist press does not make a syndicalist.

Despite Anarcho's clarifications, I maintain my general view of Kropotkin: he recognized the need for trade unions, *which I never denied*, but he was not a syndicalist. If he happens to say that trade unions will be the “cells” of the future social organisation – a fact I mention in my text – this idea does not constitute (in my opinion) the basis of his thinking on the trade union movement. Anarcho is misled by the fact that he considers that the mere fact of advocating workers' unions is enough to make a syndicalist. He makes the same mistake as the authors of *Black Flame* who try to artificially broaden the social base of anarchism by categorizing as “syndicalists” people who are not. I think that Schmidt & van der Walt simply don't understand what syndicalism is.

Many of Anarcho's objections to me therefore fall. That being said, I will carefully consider his remarks about Kropotkin and I will change my point of view if necessary. The advantage of online documents is that they can be modified.

The criticism that “Anarcho” makes of me about Jean Grave is perfectly justified, I apologize for that, I made a “lapsus calami”, I should have written “Sébastien Faure”.

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<http://monde-nouveau.net/?lang=es> (Spanish)

However, Anarcho (and *Black Flame*) greatly underestimate the fact that the anarchists have been vigorously anti-unionist, and that was not a minority, far from it, and not limited to France. A fact that *Black Flame* unfortunately passes under silence, but which is widely attested by the anarchist press of the time.

To a large extent, the history of the relations between anarchism and syndicalism is the history of their confrontation, sometimes very violent. It is the story of the confrontation between the Bakuninian heritage and the Kropotkin/Malatesta heritage. The authors of *Black Flame* seem to have missed that point: the literature dealing with this point is not lacking, especially concerning Spain (see Cesar M. Lorenzo).

For a long time, anarchists vigorously discouraged workers from joining unions: an attitude that was categorically opposed to Bakunin's instructions. Their argument was interesting, but of course misleading. They were based on a curious interpretation of the "iron law of wages". Capital could only have a fixed overall mass to pay wages. Consequently, when workers obtained a wage increase in a company, it could only be to the detriment of other workers. To unionise was to do a "bourgeois, reactionary act" (*sic*)<sup>5</sup>. Workers must therefore be discouraged from entering trade unions, which are an "element of weakness from a revolutionary point of view", and because they would then become "fierce, authoritarian and almost governmental conservatives"<sup>6</sup>. This attitude was not limited to France, it was widespread in the international anarchist movement. Another point that *Black Flame* fails to mention, which is understandable because it contradicts the dogma that syndicalism is a "strategy", a "variant" of anarchism.

It is said that anarchists turned to trade unions because of the repression at the time of the bombings, because they found "shelter" there. That may be true, marginally. But long before that, anarchists had "participated" in, if not created unions. Many anarchists had joined the unions long before the creation of the CGT, as soon as after the crushing of the Commune's insurrection. This is particularly the case for Emile Pouget who created a Textile union as early as 1879. When the CGT was formed in 1895, there already were many anarchists organised in trade unions. Their presence can be seen in all the workers' congresses. They were in particular organised in Labour Exchanges which regrouped in federation in 1892. A national congress organized by the Labour Exchanges in 1893, before the foundation of the CGT, unanimously voted in favour of a general strike in case of war with Germany. At its foundation in 1895 the CGT did not represent much, it

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5 H. Dhorr, "La Loi des salaires", *Le Libertaire*, n° 78, 5-11 mai 1897.

6 Imanus, "Les Syndicats", *Le Libertaire*, n° 17, 7-14 mars 1896.

was a fragile structure, unstable. It was not until 1902, when the Federation of Labour Exchanges merged with the CGT that it became consistent. The mass arrival of revolutionaries made it possible to eject the reformists who were at its head. The real foundation of the CGT as we know it dates from 1902. The authors who mythologize the date of 1895 as the foundation of the CGT are mistaken.

Anarcho says I am “somewhat negative towards Kropotkin (and Malatesta)”. I am not negative about them.

It is true that I do not have much consideration for Malatesta, but unlike Schmidt and van der Walt who eject from their “anarchist pantheon” the authors with whom they do not agree, it would not occur to me to deny him the status of an anarchist and revolutionary. But that's another matter.

Concerning Kropotkin, I have written several essays on him in which I recognize his value, although I don't occasionally cover up my restrictions <sup>7</sup>. I wrote a fairly large book to explain, without anathema, the positions he defended during WWI, based on the principle that even in a libertarian society, an accused person has the right to have a defence <sup>8</sup>. I therefore *categorically* reject the accusation of being negative against Kropotkin. But whether it's Kropotkin or Malatesta, I can't stand it when they are made to look like they're not, and *they are not syndicalists*. If *Black Flame* and its fans didn't try to exploit these two activists for the purpose of ideological recuperation, Anarcho would never have had the opportunity to notice that I am “somewhat negative towards Kropotkin (and Malatesta)”.

Concerning Malatesta, I translated (see below) from Italian two passages dating from 1921 and 1926 which do not allow any ambiguity (and I attach the Italian text for the comrades who would like to check).

#### First passage:

“The truth is that I have always been an opponent of trade unionism and a warm partisan of the labour movement. I am an opponent of trade unionism, as a doctrine and as a fact, because it seems to me a hybrid thing that leads, perhaps not

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- 7 “Kropotkine: une tentative d'approche scientifique de l'anarchisme”, <http://monde-nouveau.net/spip.php?article603>  
“Kropotkine et le fédéralisme”, <http://monde-nouveau.net/spip.php?article336>  
“Kropotkine: Utopie et expérimentalisme”, <http://monde-nouveau.net/spip.php?article335>  
“Kropotkine et les Communes du Moyen Âge”, <http://monde-nouveau.net/spip.php?article337>
- 8 *Kropotkine et la Grande Guerre. Les anarchistes, la CGT et la social-démocratie face à la guerre*, Éditions du Monde libertaire

necessarily to reformism as Santillán thinks, but always to class exclusivism and authoritarianism.

Instead, I am a partisan of the workers' movement because I believe it to be an effective means of moral elevation of the workers and because, on the other hand, it is a grandiose and universal fact that cannot be ignored without putting oneself out of real life; but I do not hide the fact that the movement, aiming to defend the immediate interests of the workers, naturally tends towards reformism and therefore cannot and must not be confused with the anarchist movement<sup>9</sup>.”

### Second passage:

“And in fact, especially in France, there were anarchists who, having entered the workers' movement with the best intentions, in order to bring our word and methods among the masses, were then absorbed and transformed, they raised the cry ‘trade unionism is enough for itself’... and soon ceased to be anarchists. (...) But if unionist intoxication can be explained and forgiven, this is nothing more than a reason to be on our guard and not to take for a single and sure means of revolution a dilute form that has in itself much revolutionary potential, but can also, if left to its natural tendencies, become an instrument of preservation of privilege and adaptation of the most evolved masses to the present social institutions<sup>10</sup>.”

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- 9 Malatesta, “Ancora su movimento operaio e anarchismo” *Pensiero e Volontà*, 1° marzo 1926. Quoted in *Errico Malatesta IL Buon Senso della Rivoluzione*, a cura di Giampietro N. Berti, ed. Eléuthera, p. “La verità è ch’io sono stato sempre avversario del sindacalismo e caldo partigiano del movimento operaio. Sono avversario del sindacalismo, come dottrina e come fatto, perché esso mi pare una cosa ibrida che mette capo, forse non necessariamente nel riformismo come pensa Santillán, ma sempre nell’esclusivismo classista e nell’autoritarismo. Sono invece partigiano del movimento operaio perché lo credo un mezzo efficace di elevazione morale dei lavoratori e perché d’altronde esso è un fatto grandioso ed universale che non si può ignorare senza mettersi fuori della vita reale; ma non mi nascondo che esso movimento, mirando alla difesa degli interessi immediati dei lavoratori, tende naturalmente verso il riformismo e che perciò non può e non deve essere confuso con il movimento anarchico.”
- 10 “Ed infatti vi furono, specialmente in Francia, degli anarchici che, entrati nel movimento operaio con i migliori propositi, per portare la parola ed i metodi nostri in mezzo alle masse, furono poi assorbiti e trasformati, innalzarono il grido «il sindacalismo basta a se stesso»... e ben tosto cessarono dall’essere anarchici. (...) Ma se l’ubriacatura sindacalista è spiegabile e perdonabile, ciò non è che una ragione di più per stare in guardia e non prendere per un mezzo

(*Umanità Nova*, 6 aprile 1921)

It seems to me that this is clear enough.

I leafed through Ian McKay's anthology on Kropotkin and came across a note about the CGT Amiens Congress (1906). Like many activists (especially those close to Platformism, it seems to me), he tends to considerably overestimate the weight of anarchists and syndicalists in the conduct of this congress.

When Kropotkin writes that the anarchists “have become a serious revolutionary force among the workers' unions in the Latin countries: France, Spain, French Switzerland, and part of Italy”, McKay adds in a note:

“The French congress of workers in Amiens [in 1906] proved the foregoing words to be true. There an incredible number of resolutions put forward by the social democrats were brought to a vote but the resolutions put forward by the anarchists were voted for almost unanimously [at the CGT conference].”  
(Note 245, p. 786)

McKay's formulation is curious: he says that many resolutions were presented by the Socialists (which is true), but that the resolutions (plural) presented by the anarchists were voted almost unanimously.

It is true that socialists and anarchists presented resolutions, but the only one voted almost unanimously was a resolution that will become known as the “Charter of Amiens”, which can not be said to have been “presented by the anarchists”. This idea is no doubt part of a myth created by authors who tend to provide an apologetic and ideological view of the anarchist movement. To say the simple historically verifiable truth draws nothing, in my opinion, from the balance sheet of the anarchist movement of the time. On the contrary.

In fact the resolution that would be known after 1910 as the “Amiens Charter” was the result of a compromise between the reformist socialists of the CGT, the syndicalists and the anarchists, against the so-called “guesdist” socialist tendency (which could be described as pre-Leninist: subordination of the unions to the party and all that). Among the authors of this document (which was written on a paper tablecloth in a restaurant, it is said), we have: Pouget (anarchist, deputy secretary of the CGT), Griffuelhes (ex-blancquist,

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unico e sicuro di rivoluzione una forma dilotta che ha in sé molta potenzialità rivoluzionaria, ma può anche, se abbandonato alle sue sole naturali tendenze, divenire uno strumento di conservazione del privilegio e di adattamento delle masse più evolute alle presenti istituzioni sociali.”

secretary general of the CGT), Delesalle (anarchist), Niel (reformist), Merrheim (syndicalist, not anarchist). The resolution was passed by an overwhelming majority of *830 votes out of 839*; in other words, the anarchist delegates of the congress (who were not in the majority, far from it, but many) all voted for the resolution. Why did they do that? In all probability to avoid a split on the part of the socialists. The question of whether they were right remains academic.

But under no circumstances can the “Charte d’Amiens” be considered as an “anarchist” resolution, or even a “syndicalist” resolution. Indeed, all the specifically anarchist themes that had characterized the CGT’s propaganda so far, particularly under Pouget’s impulsion, had been withdrawn: struggle against the State, against religion, the army, anti-parliamentarism, etc.

There is a relatively reliable criterion for measuring anarchist influence in the Confederation: the result of votes on anti-militarist motions. In Amiens in 1906 the Yvetot anti-militarist motion had received only 56.7% of the votes, which does not argue in favor of a massively “revolutionary” or “anarchist” CGT: the reformist current was very important and we are witnessing a regression of the revolutionary syndicalist current. At the Congress of Marseilles, in 1908, the vote on the antimilitarist resolution, *presented by the confederal leadership*, received 58.4% of the votes.

The “Charte d’Amiens” (in fact a simple resolution) in no way constitutes a definitive proclamation of syndicalism but a *considerable step backwards*, actually marking the beginning of the end of this current in France. After 1906, the mandates held by the revolutionaries were gradually replaced by reformists. When the war broke out in 1914 it was no longer possible to consider the CGT as “revolutionary syndicalist”.

### **Answer to syndicalist, Jun 23 2019 23:49**

Funny you mention Sorel. I recall some many years ago, I heard about Sorel. Picked up his book "Reflections on Violence" (or something like that). I didn't get his connections to libertarian syndicalism. Sometime thereafter I asked, Dolgoff, about Sorel. All I remember is something like "That piece of shit. Never an anarchosyndicalist. A real marxist son of a b\_\_ch"..... Anyone who knew Sam can hear is gravely voice uttering these words. I also asked Paul Avrich who was a tad more different in his academic reply. Both left me with the impression that a whole lot of misinformation on Sorel and his ties to French (and global)

revolutionary unionism was out there at the time (mid-1970s).

Georges Sorel is paradoxically known as a theorist of revolutionary syndicalism and one of the main introducers of Marxism in France. In 1919 he published a “Plea for Lenin”. Documented studies of his writings between 1919 and 1922, the date of his death, highlight his sympathies and illusions about the Russian revolution but show nothing convincing about his possible sympathies for fascism, *except if we rely on indirect sources*. “The legend of Sorel, 'father of fascism' can only be nourished by 'testimonials', apocryphal 'statements', indirect and suspicious 'quotes',” writes a French historian <sup>11</sup>. Others want to make him a “left-wing fascist”. I will not enter this debate of scholars, I’ll stick to his position on revolutionary syndicalism.

Sorel was a shooting star in the French revolutionary syndicalist movement. He was in contact with some of its leaders but the mass of CGT militants did not know him. His role was amplified by “dissident” socialists, Édouard Berth, Charles Guieysse and especially Hubert Lagardelle, who were his disciples and wanted to bring revolutionary syndicalism closer to socialism. Sorel's relationship with syndicalism should not be conceived in the same way as Marx's relationship with communism or Bakunin's with anarchism. Sorel had strictly no influence on the actual movement, he was one of those eclectic intellectuals who pecked right and left according to the fashion of the day. I fully share the opinion expressed in *Black Flame* on Sorel: he is by no means a “founder” of revolutionary syndicalism.

### **Answer to Anarcho, Jun 28 2019 21:25**

It is completely false to say that “anarchists have supported ‘syndicalist’ strategies since the late 1860s”. Syndicalism did not exist in the 60s, nor in the 70s’. The International imploded at the Verviers Congress in 1877, forming two currents: a current that I describe as “pre-syndicalist” and an anarchist insurrectionalist current that did not support union strategy at all. That Kropotkin, Malatesta, Goldman etc. “advocated” or “championed” *trade union* activity is one thing, but calling them “syndicalists” is quite another.

The French terms “syndicalisme” or Italian “sindacalismo” simply mean “trade unionism”. They must under no circumstances be translated into

11 Charzat Michel. “Georges Sorel et le fascisme. Éléments d'explication d'une légende tenace.” In: *Cahiers Georges Sorel*, n°1, 1983. pp. 37-51.

English by “syndicalism”. I consider that maintaining confusion is not only revisionism, it is falsification. It should therefore be checked in all English texts translated from French or Italian (or Spanish) whether linguistic accuracy has been respected and whether “syndicalism” should not be replaced by “trade unionism”. Thus Malatesta's article entitled “Syndicalism and anarchism” should be amended to “Trade-unionism and Anarchism”.

I think that the debate on Kropotkin in *Black Flame* first, and among other comrades, is distorted by an ambiguity about the concept of “revolutionary syndicalism”. I never said that Kropotkin was opposed to the workers' movement, or to the workers' organization, on the contrary. I say that most of the time he talks about trade unionism and not revolutionary syndicalism, and that his trade union model was the model of British trade unions.

It is regrettable that Schmidt and van der Walt and other comrades maintain the confusion between trade unionism and syndicalism. This confusion maintains the illusion that Kropotkin or Malatesta were supporters or “founders” of revolutionary syndicalism. They were obviously not so stupid as to ignore the role that trade unions could or should play, but they were content to “champion” trade union action: that does not make them revolutionary syndicalists.

In Malatesta's texts translated into English, we read the English word “syndicalism”, whereas we should read “trade-unionism”, since Malatesta speaks of “sindacalismo” which in no case should be translated by the English word “syndicalism”. The original Italian versions of his articles are without ambiguity. This confusion is a manoeuvre to insert into the “perimeter” of revolutionary syndicalism authors who do not fall under it at all. The same is true for Kropotkin, I think, but things get complicated with the fact that he also wrote in French.

### **Answer to Red Marriott, Sep 12 2019 18:43**

If Malatesta did indeed advocate (“champion”) that anarchists engage in trade union activity – because after all that is where the workers were – he set the condition that the said anarchists should not get bogged in it: “if it is really necessary to compromise, to give in, to come to impure contacts (*sic*) with the authority and with the bosses so that the organization can live or because the union members feel the need to do so or because it is their will, so. But let others do it, not anarchists <sup>12</sup>.” [*My emphasis*]

In other words, anarchists must join trade unions to make anarchist

12 Malatesta, *Pensiero e Volontà*, 16 avril 1925, in : *Malatesta, Écrits choisis*, III, Annecy, Groupe 1er Mai, 1982, p. 14.

propaganda but not to take on mandates! As if workers would give the slightest credit to speech providers who do not want to get their hands dirty and who refuse to get involved in practical questions! In addition to the fact that Malatesta's attitude strangely resembles religious hypocrisy (“impure contacts”), it literally leads to leaving the hands free to other political currents in the unions.

Which reminds me of what Ariane Miéville and Maurizio Antonioli wrote in their book on the anarchist congress in Amsterdam:

“This strategy seems difficult to implement.

“It's a bit like asking anarchists to walk in the mud without getting their feet dirty. How can we have any credibility in a union if we leave the responsibilities and the care of conducting negotiations to other political currents?”

“Malatesta's point of view can be explained in two ways. First of all, he was not a real trade unionist. Has he ever been a wage-earner? His biographers describe him as an apprentice mechanic with an old friend, a gold digger in Argentina, a candy seller on the streets of London, and again a mechanic or electrician in his own workshop... But that may not be the main thing. <sup>13</sup>.”

It seems to me that Miéville and Antonioli are much more “negative” about Malatesta than I am.

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It is true that Malatesta sometimes say the contrary, but in this passage, it is not a matter of trade union struggle but of activity as “specific” anarchists. :“Noi in questi ultimi anni ci siamo accostati per un'azione pratica ai diversi partiti d'avanguardia e ne siamo usciti sempre male. Dobbiamo per questo isolarci, rifuggire dai contatti *impuri*, e non muoverci o tentare di muoverci se non quando potremo farlo con le sole nostre forze ed in nome del nostro programma integrale? Io non lo credo.” (*Rivoluzione et lotta quotidiana*, 6. L'alluvione fascista. [www.liberliber.it](http://www.liberliber.it).

13 *Anarchisme et syndicalisme. – Le congrès anarchiste international d'Amsterdam (1907)*. Introduction d'Ariane Miéville et Maurizio Antonioli. Nautilus/Éditions du Monde libertaire, 1997.