

Digression on anarchism and syndicalism

My work is based on a periodization that probably diverges from that which is generally accepted.

1871-1890

The French Republic which was set up after the crushing of the Paris Commune was much less tolerant than the Second Empire. Every attempt to reconstitute any sort of working-class structure, even the most benign, was followed by arrests and court-martials. However, the repression failed to prevent the reconstruction of class organisations. And while the bourgeois newspapers made their front pages with anarchist terrorism, the discreet work of the militants continued to build their unions.

The survivors of the IWA and the working class militants were, so to speak, “orphans” of an International organisation, so the activists who claimed the legacy of the IWA participated in the international socialist congresses organized by the social-democracy.

For most of the grass-roots socialist activists, that was not a problem, but the social-democratic leaders strove by all means to exclude them. After several failed attempts, they succeeded in 1896 at the London Congress of the Second International. During this period there was indeed a nucleus of anarchist militants in the unions, but most of the movement was outside, and often they were hostile to the presence of anarchists in the labour movement.

This period is extremely important because all the constitutive themes of revolutionary syndicalism will be put in place. Naturally the repression against the Paris Commune provides the basis for the anti-statism and anti-militarism of revolutionary syndicalists. The stifling moral order imposed by the Catholic Church will nourish their opposition to religion. The attempts of the bourgeois radicals to get their hands on labour organizations for electoral purposes will explain anti-parliamentarism. All these combined cases will explain the originality of revolutionary syndicalism.

1890-1902

Jean Grave's publication, *Le Libertaire* gathered, at least until 1899, the anarchists who were vigorously hostile to trade unionism. This anti-unionism was based on the idea that it was useless to claim better wages, for instance, because the wages of a worker could not be below what was necessary for him or her to live, and could not either exceed this sum¹. The workers joined the unions so as to be able to obtain a greater share of the incompressible part that the capitalists granted the working class, which was an injustice for the others. In short, the idea was that capitalism had a fixed global mass that it could devote to wages, and that if part of the working class got better, it was to the detriment of the others.

The result was that to unionise was "to do bourgeois, reactionary work"². The worker, therefore, should be discouraged from entering the trade unions, which were an "element of weakness from a revolutionary point of view"; if he did, he would become a "ferocious conservative, authoritarian and almost governmental". The unionised workers were the "worst enemies of the revolution".³

These ideas were shared by a very substantial part of the anarchist movement of the time, deeply imbued with the themes of individualism and insurrectionism.

Those who had the favours of the militants of *Le Libertaire* were "the raging, the impatient, the revolutionaries: the black mass, the mass of the unemployed and the famished who must serve as starting point to the anarchist claims"⁴.

In another article of *Le Libertaire*, the "social base" of the anarchist movement is constituted by the "unemployed, vagabonds, beggars, prostitutes, downgraded", qualified as "revolutionaries of tomorrow": "By claiming the unemployed, the individualist and anti-union anarchism will have an economic base and will have a social significance."⁵ It is therefore with these socio-professional categories, of which I do not dispute the worthiness, that these anarchists intended to reorganize the society of tomorrow. Jean Grave had no doubt that in such a society, these downgraded people would produce the food with which he fed himself, the coal with

1 H. Dhorr, « La Loi des salaires », *Le Libertaire*, n° 77, 29 avril-4 mai 1897.

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

3 Imanus, « Les Syndicats », *Le Libertaire*, n° 17, 7-14 mars 1896.

4 E. Girault, « Les Sans-travail », *Le Libertaire*, n° 82, 3-9 juin 1897.

5 G. Paul, « L'Anarchie et les sans-travail », *Le Libertaire*, n° 23, 7-14 avril 1907

which he warmed himself, the clothes with which he dressed himself ...

When Kropotkin finally came to the conclusion that the terrorist attacks had been a dismal failure, he published in *La Revolte* (September-October 1890) a series of articles in which he wrote that it was necessary “to be with the people who no longer demand the isolated act, but men of action in its ranks”⁶. The wording is rather singular, because it suggests that the people had, at one moment, “demanded” isolated acts, and that now they have changed their minds. This raises an interesting question: who is competent to know what the people are “demanding”? It is doubtful that the “people” ever “demanded” for “isolated acts” – euphemism for terrorist acts. Kropotkin’s formulation serves only to evacuate any serious reflection on the resounding failure of the terrorist period and also the implicit complicity of certain anarchist intellectuals, including Kropotkin himself, in supporting these acts.

Now, Kropotkin advocates joining the unions, which allows Schmidt and van der Walt to say that Kropotkin “advocated syndicalism”, but what he has in mind is the British trade union model, that is something very far from syndicalism. Kropotkin’s remarks were very badly received by anarchist circles, and aroused violent criticism, according to a police report of October 23, 1890. Here is what this report says: “... Numerous protests were heard; some shouted 'treason!', individual or collective letters, some coming from abroad and very lively in tone, were sent to the newspaper.”⁷

These protests are indicative of the degree of disaffection of much of the anarchist movement towards trade union action. Admittedly, such reactions can not incriminate the entire anarchist movement: indeed, many anarchists had *already* been involved in the labour movement, often for a long time. But it clearly shows that the anarchist movement was incapable of having any coherent strategy towards the workers and the trade union world.

In spite of all that, the period between 1890 and 1902 can be considered as the properly “anarchist” period of the labour movement, particularly in the “Bourses du travail” (Labour Exchanges), which were not founded by anarchists but in which they quickly played a leading role.

The “Bourses du travail” were geographical structures established on the locality. They were formed naturally in many cities to meet the need of

6 « Le 1^{er} mai 1891 », *La Révolte*, n° 6, 18-24 octobre 1890. Cité par Jean Maitron, *Le mouvement anarchiste en France*, Tel Gallimard, t.I.

7 Cité par Jean Maitron, tome I, p. 266.

workers to organize themselves locally to fight and exchange information, but also to promote popular education, but until 1892 they were not organised in a federation.

The anarchists had nothing to do with the creation of this federation, which was formed as the result of a split in the National Federation of Unions, a Guesdist-Oriented organisation.⁸ Tensions had arisen between the supporters of the general strike and the Guesdists, who were opposed to it. The anti-Guesdists therefore created in 1892 the “Fédération des Bourses du travail”, Federation of Labour Exchanges. But within this new organization harsh conflicts broke out between the many socialist currents that coexisted there. That is why the direction of the organization was entrusted to an anarchist, Fernand Pelloutier: the anarchists appeared as those who were able to moderate conflicts.

It was during this period, in 1895, that the CGT was created, but it was only an embryo of trade union organization, without any real strength,

To mechanically link the foundation of revolutionary syndicalism to the founding of the CGT in 1895 is a mistake. At this date, the new organization is very weak, small, not very active, without real structuring and still tainted by the Guesdist influence of the National Federation of Trade Unions. At its foundation, “the CGT seemed stillborn,” writes Jacques Julliard⁹, adding that the day after its founding congress in Limoges, “it was not without difficulty that the CGT succeeded in constituting an embryo of organization”! At that time, the “real business” was going on in the “Bourses du travail”.

So we are far from the mythology of revolutionary syndicalism usually conveyed in texts intended to support this or that thesis.

At the risk of thwarting the construction developed by Schmidt and van der Walt, the militants and leaders of the Fédération des Bourses du travail were very reluctant to the CGT at its creation. For several years, they showed an open opposition to the new organization. It is only in 1902,

8 Although not having participated in the Commune, Guesde went abroad to avoid repression. Settled in Geneva, he became associated with James Guillaume, who converted him to anarchism. Guesde adhered to the Jura Federation, militated for the autonomy of sections in the columns of his newspaper, *Le Réveil International*. It was not until he returned to France in 1876 that he would move closer to Parisian Marxist circles. As a socialist leader, he was a supporter of the union's submission to the political party – a sort of pre-Leninist, in short. His current was powerful within the CGT.

9 In : *Fernand Pelloutier et les origines du syndicalisme*. Le Seuil, 1971.

when the two federations merged to form a Confederation, that one can consider that the CGT was really constituted.

At the Congress of Montpellier in 1902 the CGT virtually became a “double organisation” with a vertical structure (industrial unions) and a horizontal, geographical structure (the Labour Exchanges). I would add that this double structure, which defines revolutionary syndicalism and later anarcho-syndicalism, is very much in keeping with Bakunin's scheme.¹⁰

It is (to my knowledge) during this Congress that we find for the first time the expression “revolutionary syndicalism”¹¹. It appears also in socialist publications at the end of 1903 and the beginning of 1904. We find the expression used once at the Congress of Bourges (1904) and once at the congress of Amiens (1906).

Of course I don't mean that the labour movement as a whole was “anarchist” strictly speaking: there were other currents of ideas, but undeniably the anarchists were the driving force. The attacks launched against them by the reformists at the Congress of Amiens (1906) attest to this thesis. It goes without saying that revolutionary syndicalism existed in fact before existing in words. The sources of syndicalism are already germinating in the debates that took place within the First International and in the documents that mention these debates.

1902-1908

The years 1902-1908 mark the ascendant period of syndicalism. The revolutionary strategy was adopted at the Congress of Bourges, in 1904, during which it was decided to organize a general strike to obtain the 8-hour day. Within the unified CGT (that is CGT+Fédération des bourses du travail), a movement was forming, standing out clearly from anarchism to form a separate doctrine.

We can say that the “birth” of syndicalism can be situated between

10 Voir : René Berthier, « Bakounine : une théorie de l'organisation », <http://monde-nouveau.net/spip.php?article378>

11 See the minutes of the debates of the Congress of Montpellier, 1902: “Very sincerely, Bourchet believes in the superiority of the strictly syndicalist revolutionary action on half-union, half-political action ...” (p. 220) “... We are convinced that the profound discussions they will bring will show to everybody the ever-growing force of revolutionary syndicalism and the increasingly enlightened awareness of the legitimacy of workers' demands ...” (p. 40). See: http://www.ihs.cgt.fr/IMG/pdf_09_-_1902_-_Congres_Montpellier.pdf

1902 at the Congress of Montpellier, where the expression “syndicalisme révolutionnaire” was used for the first time¹², and January 1, 1905 when in a socialist publication, *Le mouvement socialiste*, Victor Griffuelhes, General Secretary of the CGT, wrote an article entitled “Revolutionary Syndicalism”, giving it an “official” character. (Griffuelhes was not an anarchist but a former Blanquist.)

In a way, 1908 marks the beginning of the end of syndicalism. Several extremely violent strikes supported by the CGT, during which workers were killed, failed. The repression came down hard. For a short time almost all of the Confederal Committee was in prison, which the reformists took advantage of to fill the empty spaces. The revolutionaries, however, managed to restore the situation but for a short time. While the syndicalists had benefited from the extreme division of the socialist movement (there had been up to six socialist parties competing for the favours of the proletariat!), a unified socialist party had been formed in 1905, constituting a new pole of identification for the working class and proposing an electoral strategy that was less likely to lead the army to fire on the workers. The Confederal leadership realized that the time had come to prioritize negotiations over direct action.

At that time a fracture had been created within the syndicalist movement. There were the partisans of the maintenance of syndicalist traditions, who reaffirmed the principle of direct action and the usual tactics of this current, and those, with Pierre Monatte, who could be described as “modernists”, who wanted to adapt the strategy to the evolution of the capitalist system.

We will find later this fracture, and the same men, after the Russian revolution, when it was about promoting or rejecting the adhesion to the **Red** International of Trade Unions: anarcho-syndicalism will be one of the consequences of this fracture.

However, the anarchists remained very present in the CGT but, through the elections, they were gradually removed from the main mandates by the reformists. The attentive reading of the minutes of the Amiens congress reveals a clear decline of the revolutionary movement. The comments of the reformist opponents to the Confederal leadership, after the Amiens congress, show that the “charte d'Amiens” (a congress resolution, in fact) was a serious failure for the anarchists. It is significant that two great figures of the anarchist movement, Pouget and Delesalle, left the CGT in 1908.

12 But a closer examination of the texts can bring up earlier occurrences.

1906. The Amiens Congress

The Amiens Congress held in 1906 is often presented as the founding act of revolutionary syndicalism. I do not share this opinion at all. I think on the contrary that the provisions voted at Amiens represent the *negation* of syndicalism: it is on the contrary the beginning of the decline of syndicalism. The full reading of the minutes of the Congress shows a reality that is far from the myth that has been made, but at the same time we see a much more appealing reality. We see a revolutionary current, certainly still powerful, but cornered, on the defensive against representatives of powerful reformist federations that had recently joined the CGT. The reality we perceive is not that of the myth that was built after the facts. We see that the oppositions to the Confederal policy (that is to say syndicalist) are extremely vigorous, that the blows sent are sometimes quite low. Revolutionary syndicalists were facing powerful opponents; they were closely followed and harassed by the reformist socialists whose forces were far from negligible, and they defended themselves step by step.

The minutes of the congress show the reformists' offensive against the pretended non-compliance of the "neutrality" rule by the confederal leadership. Whereas originally the concept of union neutrality was understood as the possibility for the union to define its choices independently of the parties, the reformists intended to interpret it as the union's prohibition to adopt any position that could be interpreted as "political": anti-electoral propaganda is violently attacked because it is considered a political position that shocks the beliefs of members who trust political parties. In the same way anti-militarism is attacked because it shocks the opinions of the nationalists.

The resolution of the Amiens congress

The resolution passed at Amiens at the 1906 Congress, which acquired over time a mythical character, did not become the "charter of Amiens" until 1910. This resolution is a 152-word document that still remains extremely radical today in view of what trade-unions have become. It asserts that the union brings together all workers "apart from any political school"; it has for objective "the disappearance of wage labour and of capitalists"; it recognises class struggle; it intends to fight "against all forms of exploitation and oppression, both material and moral". It says that in the immediate future it aims to obtain "reduced hours of work, and increased wages". Integral emancipation "can only be achieved through capitalist expropriation", which is why trade unionism "advocates a general strike as a means of action". This is not bad considering what trade unions have become today.

Perhaps the most important point of the document, in terms of principles, is this: "the union, now a resistance group, will in the future be the production and distribution group, the basis of social reorganization". The union has therefore a "double task, daily and future". Moreover, "all workers, whatever their opinions or their political or philosophical tendencies", have the duty "to belong to the essential group, that is the union".

The resolution affirms "complete freedom for the union member to participate, outside the corporate group, in such forms of struggle corresponding to his philosophical or political conceptions", but in return the union asks him, in reciprocity, "not to introduce into the union the opinions he professes outside".

Finally, the resolution concludes: "Economic action must be exercised directly against employers, since the Confederate organizations do not, as trade union organizations, have to worry about parties and sects which, outside and besides it, can freely pursue social transformation."

As we see, all the specific anarchist themes have been removed: the struggle against the state, against religion, anti-militarism, anti-parliamentarism.

The vote of the famous "charte d'Amiens", in fact a resolution, by an overwhelming majority of delegates¹³ – *including the anarchists, therefore* – reveals in itself the extent of the concessions that had been made to the reformists, who fully understood that this was a defeat for the *anarchists*, not for the syndicalists. The question is: why did an *overwhelming* majority

13 The resolution was adopted with 834 votes in favor, 8 against and 1 blank.

vote this resolution, including the anarchist delegates?

The reason is simple: there was then a real threat of splitting on the part of the reformists, and it was necessary to avoid it at all costs. The working class was at the time imbued with the idea that division was a catastrophe, that the workers needed "One big union". Rightly or wrongly, the anarchists made concessions: although the resolution of Amiens stipulates that the union will be the organ of the organization of the future society, it drops all that made the anarchist specificity of the French syndicalist movement: it was no longer question of fighting against the state, of anti-parliamentarism. of anti-militarism. In retrospect, there is every reason to believe that the resolution of Amiens resulted from a compromise between the socialists and the "modernist" fraction of the syndicalist movement against anarchism. Reading the minutes of the two congresses of the Socialist Party that followed reveals that the leaders of the Party were *extremely satisfied* with the results of the CGT Congress of 1906.

Presented as a compromise with a fraction of the reformist movement to block the Guesdists, the resolution of Amiens establishes in fact the division of labour between party and union *which is the basis of the Guesdist doctrine*.

Shortly after the Amiens congress (1906), two socialist congresses were successively held, during which we can read the testimonies of the party leaders. The delegates of the Socialist Congress were extremely satisfied. Edouard Vaillant (socialist MP, ex-anarchist) declared that the congress of Amiens was a victory *over* the anarchists. Victor Renard, Guesdist (ex-anarchist also) and leader of the powerful CGT federation of Textile, triumphed by saying that "the anarchists who predominate in the CGT agreed to put on a muzzle"¹⁴. A careful reading of the debates at the Amiens congress shows that the enemy of the reformists were the anarchists. Edouard Vaillant, again, declared at this socialist congress: "The members of the General Confederation of Labor have shown, in Amiens, that their conception agreed with ours much more than we thought and the Congress of Amiens came to a conclusion that no one of us could have hoped. That's all we could expect and the decision of Amiens gives us complete satisfaction."¹⁵ This does not fit very well with the commonly accepted idea that

14 Cf. « L'anarchosyndicalisme, l'autre socialisme », Jacky Toublet, Préface à *La Confédération générale du travail* d'Émile Pouget, Editions CNT Région parisienne, 1997.

15 Minutes du congrès socialiste de Limoges, novembre 1906, pp. 94-95. Cf. <https://bataillesocialiste.files.wordpress.com/2008/07/congres1906o.pdf>

the Amiens congress resulted in the elaboration of the charter of revolutionary syndicalism.

These remarks reveal, alongside a powerful reformist movement in the CGT (Victor Renard Textile, Keufer printing federation, and many others), the presence of an anarchist current obviously strong, but who suffered a defeat; and we know that within the revolutionary syndicalist movement there existed a “modernist” faction, that of Pierre Monatte and the group around *La Vie ouvrière*, which was opposed to the anarchists. It can be assumed that this “modernist” fraction is likely to have allied with the reformists against the anarchists. Later, Monatte played a key role in the CGT's refusal to participate in the revolutionary syndicalist congress of 1913. And after the Russian revolution, he opposed the anarchists and the syndicalists who refused to join the Red International of Trade Unions. There is real consistency in this series of positions.

The reason I mention this is to show that the examination of the facts does not fit at all into Schmidt and van der Walt's mythological and ideological construction, according to which syndicalism is “a variant of anarchism”. We cannot reduce revolutionary syndicalism to a form that makes no explicit connection with anarchism, “due to ignorance or a tactical denial”. As we can see, some revolutionary syndicalists knew very well why they were not anarchists, and it was not due to “ignorance or a tactical denial”. Obviously, the theoretical construction of Schmidt and van der Walt lacks the methodological tool to understand this.

1909-1914

The years 1909-1914 show a revolutionary current on the defensive, which still maintains itself by its driving force. It still holds the confidence of many workers, but it is in decline and has to face at the same time the ferocious repression of the government, a succession of serious failures in the struggles, and serious internal crises provoked by the reformists whose power grows in the CGT.

1912: the CGT and the War

It is customary to say that the choice of the CGT not to call for a general strike at the outbreak of WWI marks the bankruptcy of syndicalism. The choice made by the Confederal leadership not to oppose the war in 1914 is

the result of a number of complex factors, among which, mainly:

- The *systematic* and haughty refusal of the German Social-Democrat leaders to envisage joint action with French syndicalists and socialists in the event of a conflict between the two countries. Until the eve of the war the leaders of the CGT tried to negotiate with the German workers' representatives a joint action, without success;
- The rise of Reformism within the CGT, the scale of which we tend to underestimate: on the eve of the war, it is impossible to describe the CGT as a revolutionary syndicalist organization. The decline of this current, which we perceive the premise in 1906, accelerates from 1909

In 1912 the Confederal leadership succeeded in organizing a general strike against the war – an initiative of which there was no equivalent in Germany. On the contrary, the German Social-Democrats voted in 1913 for exceptional war credits of a considerable amount. The general strike, to which the reformists had vigorously opposed, had exhausted the reserves of energy of the Confederation and provoked a terrible repression within the syndicalist militants as well as within the anarchist movement. This is not to exonerate the leaders of the CGT but to emphasize that the general strike against the war, if it had taken place, could not be unilateral: it was to be triggered by the two countries. Now everyone knew at the time that the German socialists would never take such an initiative.

The grip of Reformism on the CGT in 1914 was such that it was no longer possible to call it “syndicalist”¹⁶.

René Berthier

16 The debates on the general strike in case of war are developed in René Berthier, *Kropotkine et la Grande guerre*, Editions du Monde libertaire.

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