

(PART 8)

**INTERVIEW FOR THE INSTITUTE OF LIBERTARIAN STUDIES
OF RIO DE JANEIRO**

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IEL : Can you define the role of Pierre Besnard in revolutionary syndicalism?

Pierre Besnard, born in 1886, is not part of the first generation of revolutionary syndicalism. After the Great War, he was an active militant in the CGT railway workers' federation where he held important mandates in the Paris region. He was dismissed from his job in May 1920 for going on strike. On 20 May 1921, Besnard replaced Monatte as general secretary of the Central Committee of the Revolutionary syndicalist Committees (*Comités syndicalistes révolutionnaires*) which brought together the opponents of the reformist line of the confederal leadership of the CGT. In the CSR were communist militants (who followed the recommendations of the Communist International), anarchists, and revolutionary syndicalists (anarcho-syndicalism strictly speaking did not exist as a movement yet). The CSR had been created after the Lyon congress of the CGT (1919) and were at the origin of the split that constituted the CGTU ("U" for "Unified"). Besnard is undoubtedly the figure who expresses in the most significant way the transition between revolutionary syndicalism and anarcho-syndicalism.

When the Russian revolution broke out, revolutionary syndicalism, which was the dominant revolutionary current in the world labor movement, enthusiastically supported the revolution. But little by little, as information began to leak out and activists became aware that the Soviet regime was repressing the working class and all those who raised a discordant voice, the revolutionary syndicalist current split into two: one current, with Pierre Besnard, who refused to support such a regime, and one current, with Pierre Monatte, who chose to remain deaf to the tragic news coming from Russia.

The two currents cohabited for some time within the CGTU. The breaking point came on the question of membership of the Red Trade Union International, the trade union annex of the Communist International¹. Part of the revolutionary trade unionist movement declared itself in favour of membership and in fact disappeared as a current, being absorbed by the Communist Parties, when they did not contribute to their creation; the other part, after having participated in the first meetings of the Red Trade Union International and having realised the impossibility of collaborating with the Bolsheviks, participated in 1922 in the creation in Berlin of the (second) International Workers' Association. The founding documents of this new International do not speak of anarcho-syndicalism, only revolutionary syndicalism. Indeed, the activists considered themselves to be the *real* revolutionary syndicalists. The term “anarcho-syndicalism”, a recent creation in Europe, was not yet in use. However, the Berlin AIT was unquestionably an anarcho-syndicalist organization.

Within the CGTU, the rupture was consummated at the Saint-Etienne congress (25 June-1 July 1921). Communists and revolutionary syndicalists of the Monatte tendency won by 743 mandates, against 406 for Pierre Besnard. At that time, “anarcho-syndicalist” and “anarcho-syndicalism” were pejorative terms used by communists and pro-communist revolutionary syndicalists to designate those who refused to join the Red Trade Union International. Moreover, even within the anarchist movement, anarcho-syndicalism was not well received: Pierre Besnard wrote in 1937 that in 1917, “the communist anarchists were excessively reserved, even hostile, to this new anarchist formation.”² We know that in Russia itself, the two currents were in a situation of extreme antagonism. All of this does not agree with the theses of those who write that anarcho-syndicalism is a “strategy” of anarchism. Pierre Besnard himself has long refused to use this term. It was not until the 1937 International anarchist congress that the term appeared in a report he wrote as secretary of the IWA, entitled “Anarcho-syndicalism and Anarchism”³.

1 A German historian, Reiner Tosstorff, has recently published a book that will become a must-read on the *The Red International of Labour Unions* . (translated into): Reiner Tosstorff, *The Red International of Labour Unions (RILU) 1920-1937*. Publié en 2016 par Haymarket Books, Chicago, Il. (918 pages) First edition in German: *Profintern: Die Rote Gewerkschaftsinternationale 1920-1937*, Schöningh, Paderborn, 2004

2 Rapport de Pierre Besnard, Secrétaire de l’A.I.T., au Congrès anarchiste International de 1937.

monde-nouveau.net/IMG/pdf/rapport_de_pierre_besnard_1937.pdf

On January 11, 1924, two anarchists were killed by the Communists during a meeting at the “Maison des Syndicats” in Paris ⁴. The Besnard tendency withdrew from the CGTU and formed an autonomous federal union, which later became the Confédération générale du travail-Sindicaliste révolutionnaire (CGT-SR) in 1926.

At the 1929 CGTU congress, the communists passed a motion:

“The congress finally specifies its determination to work on all terrains in close agreement with the CP, the only party of the proletariat and of revolutionary class struggle, which through all the battles of the past period has conquered its place as the sole proletarian vanguard leader of the workers movement.”

The revolutionary syndicalists who were still in the CGTU, Monatte's friends who led a rearguard struggle, managed to have the following sentence added: “The proclamation of this leading role and its recognition cannot be interpreted as the subordination of the trade union movement.”

In other words, the union recognizes the leadership role of the party, but is not subordinate to it! This lamentable situation clearly showed the limitations of revolutionary syndicalists in an organization dominated by communists.

Monatte, whose prestige among the working people had served the communists well, had naively joined the party. He was expelled from the party shortly after, in 1924 and was treated by his former communist comrades in the worst possible way.

In the 1930s, anarchists and revolutionary syndicalists were in three organizations:

3 In France, research on the emergence of the term "anarcho-sindicalism" is not recent. Daniel Colson's book: *Anarcho-sindicalisme et communisme* is a useful reference. (Saint-Etienne 1920-1925, Centre d'études foréziennes-Atelier de créationlibertaire, 1986). It is unfortunate that Schmidt and van der Walt did not consult this French-language source, as it would have saved them from making many unfortunate approximations. See also René Berthier: «De l'origine de l'anarcho-sindicalisme»<http://monde-nouveau.net/spip.php?article603>

4 https://cras31.info/IMG/pdf/1924_assassinat_des_anarchistes_nicolas_clos_et_adrien_poncet_rue_de_la_grange-aux-belles_paris.pdf

• First of all, many anarchist activists, disapproving of both the split of the CGTU and the split that had led to the CGT-SR, remained in the historical, reformist CGT to carry on the struggle within it.

• The remnants of the Monatte current that had not been excluded or that had not joined the CP were in the CGTU and fought a rearguard battle there. Ironically, Monatte, who was a fervent supporter of the CGTU, was unable to join it and follow his pro-communist comrades since his union had not split and had remained in the reformist CGT!

• The Besnard current was in the CGT-SR, which was officially created on 2 November 1926 in Lyon and which adopted a charter, known as the Lyon charter, which constituted a clear break with the Amiens charter⁵. Besnard became secretary of the organisation in July 1929, which welcomed at best 15,000 members but had only 4,000 left in July 1939. In reality, even if the CGT-SR did have active trade unions, it practically played the role of a specific organisation. Many anarchists were opposed to the creation of the CGT-SR, an opposition that manifested itself in the anarchist congresses of the time. At the congress of the Union Anarchiste of 1930, only two groups out of twenty-two were in favour of the new confederation, which some derisively called the CGT-SR, “CGT Sans Rien” (CGT without anything), because of its small membership.

The CGT-SR became affiliated to the IWA, which had been formed in Berlin on 22 December 1922.

The IWA took up the idea of breaking with the Amiens charter: Alexandre Shapiro wrote that “the Great War swept away the Charter of trade union neutralism. And the split within the First International between Marx and Bakunin was echoed-within the distance of almost half a century in the historically inevitable split in the post-war international labor movement.” These words are in Alexandre Shapiro's introduction to a speech by Pierre Besnard, then secretary of the IWA, at the 1937

5 Sur la CGT-SR, voir :

- Claire Auzias, *La CGT-SR 1926-1928 : un épisode de décentralisation syndicale*, Le Mouvement social suppl. 144 (1988)
- Jérémie Berthuin, *La CGT-SR et la révolution espagnole – De l'espoir à la désillusion – Juillet 1936-décembre 1937*, Ed. CNT-RP, 2000 (ISBN 978-2-9504-9487-0)
- Pierre Besnard, *Les syndicats ouvriers et la révolution sociale*, Paris, 1930.
- Pierre Besnard, *Le monde nouveau*, CGT-SR, 1936.
- Michel Laguionie, *1924 – 1939, l'échec de la troisième CGT (CGT-SR) à Limoges.* »

International Anarchist Congress. This report was significantly entitled “Anarcho-syndicalism and Anarchism” and was, in a way, the baptismal act of anarcho-syndicalism, which was erected there for the first time as a doctrine. All this does not correspond very much with *Black Flame's* perfectly artificial and non-historical construction of the formation of anarcho-syndicalism and its relations with revolutionary syndicalism.

After the Second World War, Pierre Besnard resumed his trade union activities, participating in several attempts to rebuild a revolutionary syndicalist organization. He contributed to the creation of the French National Confederation of Labour (CNT), but died a few months later.

Pierre Besnard's intervention is situated in the declining period of the revolutionary syndicalist movement in France. Majority at the time of the split in 1921, the decline of the movement was the consequence of the fracture following the choice of a part of the militants to support the strategy of Russian communism. Besnard was among the militants who were able to resist the illusions of Soviet communism and who knew how to keep, as my old comrade Jacky Toublet wrote, their “libertarian compass”.

The CGT-SR played a very active role during the Spanish civil war. Besnard participated in the creation of the anarchist trade unionist committees for the defence of the Spanish proletariat and was chosen as secretary of the Conference of these committees, which met on 24 and 25 October 1936. He was confirmed in this function by the Plenum of the IWA, which was held in Paris from 11 to 13 November with the aim of intensifying international propaganda in favour of “Red” Spain. But at this plenum, Besnard had expressed severe criticism of the governmental participation of the Spanish CNT. At first moderate, his criticisms had then become increasingly harsh.

The CNT, which had threatened to leave the IWA, therefore took over the International at its extraordinary congress in December 1937. The other sections bowed out: a “resolution on self-discipline” was passed by the congress, with each section pledging not to make any public criticism of the Spanish CNT. In a similar move, Pierre Besnard was ousted as secretary general and replaced by Horatio Prieto of Spain. The IWA was thus “normalized” and from January 1938 the *Combat Syndicaliste*, the CGT-SR newspaper, was content, with a heavy heart, to pass on the official communiqués of the CNT.

The Spanish libertarian movement was, on the eve of the Civil War, very deeply divided into a “communist” current, or anarchist-communist,

inspired by Kropotkin (who can be considered as a precursor of what we call “horizontalism” today), and a collectivist – or syndicalist – current, inspired by Bakunin, to which Rudolf Rocker, Cornelissen, Higinio Noja, Juan Peiro, Angel Pestana, Gaston Leval, Pierre Besnard and others adhered. Confronted with the lack of a “communalist” programme, apart from idyllic Kropotkinian-type visions, the “syndicalists” decided to react against spontaneism, optimism and rural visions. Until the establishment of the Popular Front in 1936, the libertarian movement was marked by vigorous polemics about the role of the trade unions in post-revolutionary society: “From 1932 onwards, calls for the construction of the libertarian communist project multiplied and, both in Spain and abroad, discussions began to take place about the future organisational, economic and social structure of anarchism. »

Diego Abad de Santillan had participated in 1931 in the 4th Congress of the IWA, during which he opposed Pierre Besnard's proposal to create industry federations. Besnard's book, *Les syndicats ouvriers et la révolution sociale* (The workers' unions and the social revolution), translated in 1931, had a great influence on the Spanish anarcho-syndicalists and played a decisive role in their decision to create industrial federations, which in turn played a decisive role in the ability of Spanish anarcho-syndicalism to regain control of the economy in areas that the fascists did not control⁶.

Besnard's book puts into perspective the role of workers' unions in an international context of rising fascism: it is a programmatic work that develops a number of transitional demands aimed at mobilizing workers in the period of global crisis that was to lead to the Spanish Civil War and World War II. An essential principle addressed in the book is that the establishment of a socialist society (libertarian, obviously) cannot be achieved without the producers being organized in their class organization as producers, on the basis of their role in the production process: vertically in industry federations, horizontally in local, regional federations, etc. Whether such an organization is called a “union” or otherwise is of no importance whatsoever.

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

6 Sur les débats extrêmement vigoureux entre partisans et opposants aux fédérations d'industrie dans la CNT, voir : Myrtille, Giménologue, *Les chemins du communisme libertaire en Espagne 1868-1937*, ch. 5. Éditions Divergences, 2018. »

passage you quote from Dave Berry, you are referring to certain "radical" anarchist activists who opposed Besnard. I have an idea who these militants were.

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 had this right withdrawn, but not the CGT-SR *which had not collaborated*. All they had to do was therefore to fill in a form and make an official request. The "true revolutionaries" categorically refused, on the pretext that "they did not want to owe anything to the state". So the new organization was reconstituted with the handicap of not having premises. Such a situation was conceivable for a specific organization, which could meet in pubs, but not for a trade union organization.

The comrades decided not to use the historical acronym "CGT-SR" but "CNT", obviously in reference to the Spanish. At that time there was not much left of the membership of the first re-constitution meetings. The French CNT was in the hands of an FAI refugee named Malsan, whom I knew when I was young. It was a time of great questioning in the post-war trade union movement. Many CGT militants could no longer stand the Communist Party's stranglehold on the organization and were looking for something else. Trade unions came knocking at the door of the (French) CNT: they were asked if they were anarchists. Naturally they were not and went away looking for something else. 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 US anticommunism policy but I don't know if there is any proof about that.)