

# Proudhon and revolutionary syndicalism

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Excerpt from an interview conducted by our Brazilian comrades at the Instituto de Estudos Libertarios in Rio de Janeiro

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**IEL: What are the possible links between revolutionary syndicalism and Proudhon's anarchism?**

How can a socialist thinker who is described as “opposed to strikes” be claimed by revolutionary syndicalism? Which raises the first question: was Proudhon really opposed to strikes? As is often the case with the absurdities that circulate about the anarchist movement, it is Marx who is behind them. So when Marx reports that Proudhon was pleased that the miners of Rives-de-Gier had been repressed after going on strike<sup>1</sup>, he is simply showing that he had only read the *Capacité politique des classes ouvrières* superficially (in fact, the quotation used in the *Capacité* comes from the *Système des contradictions*

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1 Marx, “De l’indifférence en matière politique”. <http://monde-nouveau.net/spip.php?article74>

*économiques*). Proudhon is simply saying that from the point of view of the legislation of the time, the strike was illegal and that repression was, for the same reasons, legal. So he was not happy that the miners had been repressed. Proudhon also emphasised: “the working plebs, whose noble aspirations I am here to serve as best I can, are still, alas! no more than an inorganic multitude; the worker has not placed himself on the same level as the master”. He was explicitly referring here to article 1781 of the Civil Code, which states that in a lawsuit, the boss's word is worth more than that of his workers; a situation he naturally did not approve of<sup>2</sup>. For Proudhon, the fact that the “working plebs” were an “inorganic multitude” meant that they had no collective consciousness and no organisation – which he regretted.

Proudhon also emphasised that “these struggles of coalitions between workers and masters (...) almost always end to the advantage of the latter and to the detriment of the former”<sup>3</sup>. He does not deny that the strikers are acting “under the impulse of a feeling of justice *that I do not deny*” [emphasis added]. What he intends to show is the contradiction between the strike action of the workers “who, I expressly recognise, were not wrong, inwardly, to complain” (my emphasis again) but who at the time “exceeded, outwardly, their right”. (“Externally”, i.e. from the point of view of the law in force.) This contradiction is always resolved in favour of the employers: “it is found, far more odious (sic) in the favour generally accorded to the latter [the employers], and the repression which is the ordinary privilege of the others [the workers].” It's expressed in Proudhon's convoluted way, but I don't think this passage needs to be “deciphered”.

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2 Voir ; “A propos du Manifeste des Soixante”, <http://monde-nouveau.net/spip.php?article74>

3 Proudhon, *De la Capacité politique des classes ouvrières*.

Marx refers to a passage in *Political Capacity* in which Proudhon writes that “the authority that had the miners of Rives-de-Gier shot was in an unfortunate situation”, but that it had to “sacrifice its children to save the Republic”. Naturally, what Proudhon is stating here is the State's point of view, without approving it. The French revolutionary syndicalists, more intelligent than Marx, understood this perfectly well. Proudhon says of strikes that they cannot fundamentally change the state of society (which Marx also says) .... This is a point on which revolutionary syndicalists will agree with Proudhon. And on many other points: the separation of classes, the rejection of parliamentary action, the insistence on economic action, federalism... The proximity between Proudhon and revolutionary syndicalism can no doubt be explained by the fact that his thought was very closely linked to the thinking of the workers' movement of his time. The same problem arose later for Bakunin.

Samuel Hayat poses a very pertinent question: he wonders “whether Proudhon had expressed, at the very heart of his contradictions, a latency of the proletarian condition”<sup>4</sup>. The question is whether the encounter between Proudhon and the workers' movement was a matter of chance, or whether there was an actual kinship. That the labour movement of his time influenced Proudhon should hardly be open to debate: it is hard to imagine a socialist thinker being impervious to his environment. Anarchist militants read a lot<sup>5</sup>. In France, groups

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4 Samuel Hayat, “De l’anarchisme proudhonien au syndicalisme révolutionnaire : une transmission problématique”. Article paru dans Edouard Jourdain (dir.), *Proudhon et l’anarchie*, Publications de la société P.-J. Proudhon, 2012.

5 Gaetano Manfredonia, “Les lignées proudhoniennes dans l’anarchisme français”, *Les Travaux de l’Atelier Proudhon*, n° 11, “Les anarchistes et Proudhon. Actes de la journée d’étude de la société P.-J. Proudhon, 19

of workers met to discuss Proudhon's theories and even to question Proudhon himself. One of these readers, Tolain, was even one of the founders of the International Working Men's Association, although Proudhon did not share his views on workers' candidacies<sup>6</sup>. It is not surprising, therefore, that the French sections of the AIT claimed Proudhon as their own at the organisation's first congresses.

Similarly, it's not surprising that the militants who helped create the CGT and found revolutionary syndicalism were familiar with Proudhon's work, especially as many of them came from the anarchist movement. In "L'anarchisme et les syndicats ouvriers", published in 1895, Fernand Pelloutier spoke of Proudhon's "masterly analysis" of taxation. Émile Pouget took his cue from Proudhon in his pamphlet *L'Action directe*: "Proudhon, [...] anticipating syndicalism, evoked the economic federalism which is in the making and which surpasses, with all the superiority of life, the impoverished concepts of all politicianism..."

We could argue endlessly about whether it was Proudhon who influenced the workers' movement of his time or vice versa. Such a question is of absolutely no interest, because it boils down to the chicken and the egg. It is obvious that Proudhon was very strongly influenced by the workers' movement of his time; that he developed a general theory inspired by this influence; that this theory, much better than those of Victor Considérant, Louis Blanc and others, was recognised by the proletarians of the time, a recognition which

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octobre 1991", Paris, Atelier Proudhon – EHESS, p. 37-66

6 Cf. : "Manifeste des Soixante", <http://monde-nouveau.net/spip.php?article72>.

Also: "A propos du Manifeste des Soixante" <http://monde-nouveau.net/spip.php?article7>

provided Proudhon with new subjects for reflection. It's a permanent movement between practice and theory.

Samuel Hayat explains the recognition of Proudhon's thought as follows <sup>7</sup>:

“It is Pierre Ansart who is responsible for the most convincing formalisation <sup>8</sup>. As we have seen, according to Ansart, Proudhon does not have an abstract link with the workers' movement. There is a structural homology between Proudhon's thought and certain social structures. (...) This homology is coupled with a homology of practices with those of the *mutuellisme* of the Canuts?”<sup>9</sup>

This very schematic summary of the relationship between Proudhon and revolutionary syndicalism makes it all the more astounding that the authors of *Black Flame* have overlooked the author of *The System of Economic Contradictions*<sup>10</sup>.

Proudhon's stance on strikes did not in any way “isolate him from the nascent workers' movement”<sup>11</sup>, contrary to what Schmidt & van der Walt write, which is completely wrong. This opposition to partial strikes, considered useless and counter-productive, was shared by the whole of the anarchist movement<sup>12</sup>, and then by the revolutionary syndicalist

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7 S. Hayat, *loc. cit.*

8 Cf. Pierre Ansart, *Naissance de l'anarchisme*, PUF, 1970, p. 131.

9 S. Hayat, *loc. cit.*

10 “We reject the view that figures like William Godwin (1756–1836), Max Stirner (1806–1856), Proudhon, Benjamin Tucker (1854–1939), and Leo Tolstoy (1828–1910) are part of the Broad anarchist tradition.” Schmidt-van der Walt, *Black Flame*, AK Press, p. 9

11 Proudhon “...was hostile to strikes, which isolated him from the emerging labour movement” (*Black Flame*)

12 Schmidt & van der Walt forget or ignore that in France, as in Italy, the anarchist movement supposedly the “heir” of the IWA (but which in fact

movement, which had recognised Proudhon as a precursor! This is a paradox that Schmidt-van der Walt would naturally find hard to understand. The French CGT itself, at its 5th Congress, voted for a resolution which is perfectly in line with Proudhonian thinking:

“...We do not believe that we should encourage partial strikes, which we consider to be harmful even if they produce appreciable results, because they never compensate for the sacrifices made and the results they may produce are powerless to change the social question<sup>13</sup>”.

At the risk of surprising our South African comrades, the early years of the CGT were perfectly in line with Proudhonism.

In his study “Proudhon et le syndicalisme révolutionnaire” (Proudhon and revolutionary syndicalism)<sup>14</sup>, Daniel Colson discusses the reasons why “revolutionary syndicalists were able to identify with Proudhon even though the proposals of the two could differ so widely”: “We underestimate,” he says, “or we completely misunderstand the extraordinary practical and *theoretical intelligence of the workers' movements of the time*” [emphasis added]. The revolutionary syndicalists, led by Pelloutier, were well aware that the advantages obtained by strikes were going to be cancelled out by the system, and they

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had forgotten its heritage) was at first vigorously opposed to syndicalism. It's an episode that we obviously tend to gloss over when we want people to believe that syndicalism is in essence an anarchist “strategy”.

13 XI<sup>e</sup> Congrès national corporatif (V<sup>e</sup> de la C.G.T.) tenu à la bourse du travail de Paris, les 10, 11, 12, 13 et 14 septembre 1900, Paris, Imprimerie nouvelle, 1900.

14 <http://1libertaire.free.fr/DColson20.html>

were clearly did not blame Proudhon for not having understood that, despite this, strikes served as a training ground for the working class – something that Bakunin had understood perfectly well – or as “revolutionary gymnastics”, as Pouget put it.

There is one final point to underline the proximity of Proudhon and revolutionary syndicalism (and, needless to say, anarcho-syndicalism). It is the question of class organisation. During the revolution of 1848, Proudhon was elected to the Constituent Assembly. He had a lot of illusions, but he quickly realised that there was nothing to be done: the parliamentary regime was a system that allowed the bourgeoisie to come to power, and the working class had nothing to hope for. It was on this basis that he envisaged another mode of organisation and intervention for the workers. Naturally, he described this in his own language, which doesn't correspond to today's language, but transposed it gives this result: workers must organise themselves in structures where people are not grouped together as citizens but as workers, in other words according to their role in the production process.

In *Idée générale de la Révolution* and *Capacité politique des classes ouvrières*, for example, he devoted lengthy passages to the “workers' production companies” that were to replace the capitalist organisation of production. The great sociologist Georges Gurvitch (not mentioned in *Black Flame's* bibliography) described *Political Capacity* as “the catechism of the French workers' movement”.

Naturally, the revolutionary syndicalists, who had read Proudhon, understood his point of view perfectly.