

Digression on anarchism and syndicalism, 1871-1914

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The following text is a synthesis of a more important work in progress, provisionally entitled “Revisited History of Revolutionary syndicalism”. My work is based on a periodization that probably diverges from that which is generally accepted. – April-May 2019

1871-1890

The French Republic which was set up after the crushing of the Paris Commune was much less tolerant than the Second Empire.

After the Commune there was a period of reconstitution of the working class organizations, first slow, then more and more important. Every attempt to reconstitute any sort of working-class structure, even the most benign, was followed by arrests and court martials. However, repression failed to prevent the reconstruction of class organizations. This process was accompanied by a significant increase in the number of strikes as well ¹. It was a time when radical democrats, the “bourgeois socialists” as Bakunin called them, showed intense activity in trying to control the workers’ organizations and channelling them towards the reconciliation of capital and labour in order to create a “trade unionism of social pacification”. So while the bourgeois newspapers made their front pages with anarchist terrorism, the discreet and obstinate activity of the militant workers continued to build their unions.

The survivors of the IWA and the working class militants were, so to speak, “orphans” of an International organization, 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 so-

1 Michelle Perrot, *Les ouvriers en grève, 1871-1890*, Éditions de l’École des hautes études en sciences sociales, 2001.

cialist 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 anarchists were not involved in the reconstruction of the unions, 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 were then developed. Naturally the repression against the Paris Commune provided the basis for the anti-statism and anti-militarism of revolutionary syndicalists. The stifling moral order imposed by the Catholic Church nourished their opposition to religion. The attempts of the bourgeois radicals to get their hands on labour organizations for electoral purposes explained anti-parliamentarism. All these combined cases explain the originality of what revolutionary syndicalism will be.

1890-1902

Le Libertaire, one of whose founders was Sébastien Faure (1895), 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 sum². 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 join a union was “to do bourgeois, reactionary work”. 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 unionized 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 insurrectionist.

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

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

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 was 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 sociology-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 which he warmed himself, the clothes with which he dressed himself ... and the paper on which he wrote such nonsense.

When Kropotkin finally came to the conclusion that the terrorist attacks had been a dismal failure, he published in *La Revolt* (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 had 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 Michael Schmidt and Lucien van red Walt ⁷ 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

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

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 *Black Flame*, AK Press.

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.”⁸

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 had formed naturally in many cities to meet the need of workers to organize themselves locally to fight and exchange information, but also to promote popular education, but until 1892 they were not organized in a federation⁹. 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 organization.¹⁰ 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

8 Quoted par Jean Maitron, *Le mouvement anarchiste en France*, Gallimard, tome I, p. 266.

9 “The *bourse* was a combination of a labour exchange (dealing with job placement), a workers’ club and cultural centre, and a central labour union. The federation advocated direct action to bring about a more equitable economic system that would emancipate workers.” (*Encyclopaedia Britannica*.)

10 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.

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 was 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 Julliard¹¹, 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 sometimes conveyed by authors who situate the foundation of revolutionary trade unionism at the foundation of the CGT.

At the risk of thwarting the construction developed by Michael Schmidt and Lucien 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 and vigorous opposition to the new organization. It is only in 1902, when the two federations merged to form a Confédération, 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.¹²

It is (to my knowledge) during this Congress that we find for the first time the expression “revolutionary syndicalism”¹³. It appears also in socialist publications at the end of 1903 and the beginning of 1904. We find again the expression used once at the Congress of Bourges (1904) and once at the

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

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

13 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

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 at that time 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.

1902-19088: "Golden age" of syndicalism?

There was a period that could be described as "idyllic" in the relations between anarchism and revolutionary syndicalism: it was the period when the anarchists "rediscovered" the positions of the Jura Federation and Bakunin, which James Guillaume, based in Paris, helped to disseminate by publishing, between 1903 and 1907, texts that revived the memory of the International. In 1903, James Guillaume published a series of articles that were then compiled into a brochure: "Le Collectivisme dans l'Internationale" (Collectivism in the International). In 1905 he published the first volume of "L'Internationale documents et souvenirs". Amédée Dunois published on 16 September 1905 in *Les Temps Nouveaux* an article on the Jura Federation, "Les Précurseurs", which was then translated into Italian and published by Fabbri in *Il Pensiero*. Luigi Fabbri wrote a brochure in 1906, "The Workers' Organization and Anarchy", about which *La Vita Operaia* of Ancona wrote in July 1906: "Trade unionism is the concept given first by Bakunin and then by the International to workers' resistance organizations based on the abolition of capitalism and the replacement of the bourgeois state by the federal workers' organizations through the direct and revolutionary action of the proletariat." ("A proposito di sindacalismo", in *La Vita Operaia*, July 14, 1906.) Finally, in 1907, while continuing to publish *L'Internationale documents et souvenirs*, James Guillaume began publishing Volume II of the Works of Bakunin, the first volume of which had appeared in 1895¹⁴.

14 See : Maurizio Antonioli, « Bakunin tra sindacalismo rivoluzionario e anarchismo », in : *Bakunin cent'anni dopo*, Edizioni Antistato, 1976. Translated in French, éditions Noir et Rouge, 2014.

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. If it is undeniable that the labour exchanges constituted the initial womb in which syndicalism was formed, with men like Fernand Pelloutier who openly claimed to be anarchists and invoked the heritage of the IWA, we can say that the “birth” of syndicalism can be situated between 1902 at the Congress of Montpellier, where the expression “syndicalisme révolutionnaire” was used for the first time¹⁵, 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”¹⁶, giving it an “official” character. (Griffuelhes a former Blanquist who became very close to anarchism.¹⁷)

Gaston Leval published in the 60s a study entitled “Bakounine fondateur du syndicalisme révolutionnaire” (Bakunin Founder of Revolutionary Syndicalism)¹⁸, the title of which is explicit. This text reinforces the thesis of these authors who consider that revolutionary syndicalism dates back to the period of the International Workers’ Association. I do not share this view. It is undeniable that the main themes of revolutionary syndicalism were anticipated by Bakunin, but the historical phenomenon known as “revolutionary syndicalism” is the product of historical determinations in which the reference to Bakunin has little to do with it: the crushing of the Paris Commune, state repression, opposition to bourgeois radicalism and reformist socialism, etc. But there is no doubt that the documents published by James Guillaume at an active period of revolutionary syndicalism were a revelation for the anarchist movement.

However, this does not diminish Bakunin’s extraordinary prescience.

These texts revealed to the anarchists that the phenomenon they saw unfolding before their eyes, namely the formation of revolutionary syndicalism, had been described by Bakunin and his comrades at the turn of the

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

16 See: http://monde-nouveau.net/IMG/pdf/griffuelhes_-_le_syndicalisme_revolutionnaire.pdf

17 Bruce Vandervort, *Victor Griffuelhes and French Syndicalism*, Louisiana State University Press, 1996.

18 See: <http://monde-nouveau.net/spip.php?article3>

1860s and 1870s. It was quickly concluded, as Luigi Fabbri did, that revolutionary syndicalism was “anarchist socialism in action”¹⁹ – an opinion confirmed by a rich literature of the time. Amédée Dunois, for example, stated in July 1907 that syndicalist anarchism [*this is the expression he uses*] “resembled as a son the collectivism of the International” and that it “came in direct line with Bakunin”²⁰

Under the pseudonym of Isidine, Marie Goldsmith perfectly summarizes the question in an article, “Le syndicalisme révolutionnaire et les Partis politiques en Russie” (“Revolutionary syndicalism and Political Parties in Russia”²¹). She underlines “the similarity, and even, in many respects, (...) the identity of syndicalist ideas with anarchist ideas”. And she adds: “Bakunin, in his article ‘The Politics of the International’, sets out the course he would like to see the labour movement follow in such terms that the current syndicalist seems to be the exact realization of its programme. »

It should be noted however that the authors of the time were all limited to noting the *similarities* between syndicalism and what was revealed in the documents they read. They don’t establish any direct filiation between revolutionary syndicalism and anarchism.

If the rediscovery of Bakunin’s texts aroused real enthusiasm in the anarchist movement, it must be borne in mind that at that time, a large part of the anarchist movement was *already* active in the CGT, but these militants had no “visibility” outside. Whether or not Bakunin was “rediscovered”, it didn’t change much for them in practice. So we must define who these anarchists were who were showing their “enthusiasm”. The enthusiasm provoked by the documents published by James Guillaume appeared in the anarchist press: the authors of the articles were intellectuals, mostly people who had no trade union involvement. This is why I think their enthusiasm quickly collapsed.

The gap widens

A text initially published in 1869 in *L’Égalité* of Geneva, in the form of four articles, triggered a quarrel: « La Politique de l’Internationale »²², of which large excerpts had been published in 1907 in *Les Temps Nouveaux*

19 L. Fabbri, *Il sindacalismo*, cit.

20 Anarchist Congress held in Amsterdam, August 1907, *La Publication sociale*, Paris 1908, p. 65.

21 *Les Temps Nouveaux*, 6 July 1907.

22 <http://monde-nouveau.net/spip.php?article501>

and *Il Risveglio*. Bakunin's text provided the pretext for a controversy that lasted at least until the declaration of war. This controversy was indicative of the theoretical divide that had emerged between anarchism and revolutionary syndicalism. According to the syndicalists, the preponderance of the economic point of view asserted by Bakunin would lead to the preponderance of the organization of economic struggle over political organization, justifying the theory of the trade union which is "sufficient for everything".

The implicit in this theory was that it was the practical experience of class struggle that led the workers to revolutionary consciousness. This was a very mechanical and erroneous interpretation of Bakunin's thinking. This idea, supported by the syndicalists, was first approved and then fought by the communist anarchists who came to affirm that an intervention outside the working class was necessary. Malatesta was one of the main opponents of the idea of "automatism", an opposition he expressed with great clarity in a report on the Amsterdam Congress published in *Les Temps Nouveaux* on 5 October 1907.

However, Bakunin had never affirmed the systematic preponderance of the "economic point of view": nothing of the sort can be found in his writings. He simply said that *material* determinations (and not *economic*) were essential to understand social phenomena, but once ideological determinations were operating, they became « causes producing effects »²³. And if the day to day experience of class struggle was necessary to make workers aware of the gap that separates them from the capitalists, it was also the experience of debate and confrontation of ideas within the workers' class organization that could contribute to the achievement of a revolutionary consciousness.

Strangely, from Bakunin's theory on the relationship between action and consciousness, anarchism and revolutionary syndicalism had retained only one aspect of his dialectics. In a way, the tragedy of the history of these two currents is that they never succeeded in creating a synthesis.

The romance caused by the documents published by James Guillaume did not last. Over time, the gap between syndicalists and anarchists widened, with both sides developing campaigns of theoretical justification. In 1911, Volume V of Bakunin's Works appeared, containing "The Politics

23 Bakunin says that ideas acquire "after they have established themselves well, in the way I have just explained, in the collective consciousness of society, the power to become in turn causes producing new facts." (*L'Empire knouto-germanique*, Œuvres, Champ libre, VIII, 206.)

of the International” (which had already been published separately) and other articles which had been written for *L'Égalité* of Geneva. Revolutionary syndicalists insisted on the correlation between syndicalism and Bakunin's ideas. The main emphasis was on the correlation between Bakunin's ideas and the CGT.

Finally, the refusal to separate economic and political struggle led the CGT to bring all political activity back to trade union organisation, which naturally pulled the rug out from under the feet of the social democrats, but also the anarchists.

Communist anarchists defended the idea of the specific political group; some of them saw it as an auxiliary structure of the syndicalist movement dedicated to everything that was not part of the economic struggle: anti-militarism, anti-parliamentarianism, education, political prisoners, even the revolution itself. But the syndicalists replied that these were areas of action in which the CGT was already actively and efficiently engaged, and that it had much more means. Yet there were many examples of common struggles in which syndicalists and anarchists worked hand in hand and suffered the blows of repression. In retrospect, it is not clear why these activities could not have been carried out by both the trade union organization and the anarchist groups, in coordination.

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 what they considered to be the failure of the confederal leaders to respect the rule of "neutrality". 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 was 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 was attacked because it shocked the opinions of the nationalists.

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 delegates²⁴ – *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 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.

A careful reading of the debates at the Amiens congress shows that the enemy of the reformists were the anarchists, not the syndicalists.

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”²⁵.

Edouard Vaillant, again, declared at this socialist congress: “The members of the General Confederation of labour 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.

24 The resolution was adopted with 834 votes in favour, 8 against and 1 blank.

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

That's all we could expect and the decision of Amiens gives us complete satisfaction."²⁶ This does not fit very well with the commonly accepted idea that 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 1913²⁷. 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 mythological and ideological construction according to which syndicalism is "a variant of anarchism" is false. If revolutionary syndicalism is undoubtedly a trend in the formation of which part of the anarchist movement played a decisive role, an examination of the facts reveals that it has evolved since the beginning of the 20th century into two perceptible tendencies which openly confronted each other after the Russian revolution. We cannot reduce revolutionary syndicalism to a form that makes no explicit connection with anarchism, "due to ignorance or a tactical denial". Some revolutionary syndicalists knew very well why they were not anarchists, and it was not due to "ignorance or a tactical denial".

1907-1908: Switchover

It is essential to specify that when we speak of "anarchism", we must explain which anarchism we are referring to. In addition, it would be of

26 Minutes du congrès socialiste de Limoges, novembre 1906, pp. 94-95.

Cf. <https://bataillesocialiste.files.wordpress.com/2008/07/congres1906o.pdf>

27 See: Wayne Thorpe, *Towards a Syndicalist International: the 1913 London Congress*. *International Review of Social History*, Vol. 23, No. 1 (1978), pp. 33-78. Published by: Cambridge University Press.

great interest if a study could be done that would link the positions of anarchist individuals or groups with their class situation. A researcher working on the class character of the different anarchist groups and tendencies would greatly contribute to the understanding of the movement.

Marc Pierrot, a well-known activist, had a very dismissive position towards trade unionism in general, and his ideas were widely accepted. But Marc Pierrot was a doctor, journalist and art critic and must have had little personal interest in any increase, however small, in workers' wages, or in any reduction, however small, in working time. He considered that anarchy was above all a question of ethics and was never a man of action.

The case of Paraf-Javal is interesting. He wrote that a union is "a group where morons are classified by occupation, in an attempt to make relations between bosses and workers less intolerable. Either they do not succeed, then the trade union task is useless; or they succeed, then the trade union task is harmful because a group of men will have made their situation less intolerable and will, consequently, have made the current society more enduring²⁸. » The author of these lines was a navigation inspector and professor of natural sciences, which, around 1900, made him little concerned with making ends meet every month. It was common in the individualist literature to call workers "morons", especially if they were union members.

After initially agreeing that revolutionary syndicalism was anarchism in action, syndicalists and anarchists quickly diverged on this issue, the anarchists accused the CGT for competing with them, and after blaming the Confederation for being useless, they blamed it now for being too powerful. Marc Pierrot writes that the new syndicalist conception "considers trade union organisation as a new Party, in short a true imperialism"²⁹.

Many militants of specific anarchist groups came to see this new workers' doctrine as a competition to anarchism. The specific French anarchist movement never saw in the CGT a class organization in which it was vital to invest itself but as a competitor to the anarchist movement. Rather than rejoicing that the CGT declared that "the union is enough for everything" (a slogan emanating from anarchists within the CGT!) and engaging with workers in the struggle against capital, the State and reformism, they engaged in endless polemics and refused to admit that the union or the labour exchange (*bourses du travail*) could be considered as the basic unit of the

28 *Le Libertaire* n° 22, 2-9 avril 1904.

29 *Ibid.*

future organization, even though this was totally in line with the principles stated 35 years earlier by the IWA and Bakunin.

Around 1907-1908 an apparently paradoxical situation occurred in the relations between anarchism and revolutionary syndicalism.

◆ A 1908 police report³⁰ states that the sale of anarchist newspapers was falling because most anarchists had joined the trade union movement! This report links the fall in the sales of *Le Libertaire* to the fact that “all or almost all of its readers are now trade unionists and no longer find anything of interest to them in this newspaper”. This report says that “the situation of the newspaper *Le Libertaire* is absolutely desperate”; “...it no longer meets any need; the anarchist genre it represents no longer exists, so to speak. Currently, almost all anarchists are trade unionists and anti-militarists first, and newspapers representing these conceptions and methods of action are not lacking and offer more interest than the *Libertaire* who, despite all its efforts, could not put itself absolutely in unison. ».

The report continues: “Certainly, there are still non-union anarchists, but not in sufficient numbers to support a newspaper, and precisely for those too, the “*Libertaire*” is no longer of interest, having wanted to do too much unionism. In short, it is too trade unionist for pure anarchists, and not enough for others.”

The police report is pessimistic about the future of the newspaper: “Sébastien Faure will probably intervene again to delay its definitive disappearance, but this disappearance is fatal. Only *L’Anarchie*, despite the dissenting of its editors and its almost absolute lack of readers, continues to be in a good budgetary situation, *thanks to its mysterious resources.*” (*My emphasis.*) We will not insist any further on what these “mysterious resources” consist of.

Police reports, often written by “snitches”, do not generally shine with their intelligence, but this one reveals an absolutely stunning situation³¹. While around 1903 “specific” anarchism (that of dispersed anarchist groups) vigorously opposed trade unionism, around 1908 there was a near-

30 Archives nationales, Site de Pierrefitte-sur-Seine, Fonds de Moscou, versement 19940494 art. 54.

31 The French cops were not the only ones making good diagnoses: their Brazilian colleagues also seemed very competent. Edilene Toledo’s book (*Anarquismo e Sindicalismo Revolucionário: trabalhadores e militantes em São Paulo na Primeira República*. São Paulo: Perseu Abramo, 2004) contains a police report (p. 116) that also makes a remarkable observation of the situation in Brazil in 1931.

fusion of anarchists in the syndicalist movement. The same changeover will occur at the same time in Spain.

◆ Another testimony gives us indications that should not be overlooked because it comes from a well-known syndicalist, Alfred Rosmer (who didn't have much affinity with anarchism, as a matter of fact). He wrote in *L'Internationale* of 27 September 1912 that "most of them [*the anarchists*] are not in the CGT. They are outside the CGT because they are not or cannot be trade unionists³²." In other words: the anarchists are not wage earners, so they cannot be union members. Rosmer's testimony seems to categorically contradict the police report, but in fact it doesn't because they don't speak of the same anarchists...

◆ There is a third testimony: the statements made at the 1913 anarchist congress. About sixty French anarchist groups finally decided to try to create an organization at the national level. This congress, which was held at the same time as the trial of the "Bonnot Gang", very vigorously distanced himself from individualism and terrorism.

Les Temps Nouveaux of August 23, 1913 reviewed the congress and recognized the need to "join the unions in order to sow revolutionary sentiments and the idea of the expropriating general strike"³³. But the question is whether anarchists had done what it takes to establish themselves in the trade union movement: "On the other hand, as it is clear that, in recent times, the influence exerted by our comrades on the trade union movement has significantly diminished, it had also become necessary to ask ourselves whether we have always done in the union what we always should have done." This somewhat disillusioned testimony shows how disengaged these anarchists were from the trade union movement.

So the one hand, we have a police report which states, schematically, that anarchists have turned en masse into trade unionism. But on the other hand, there are two statements that suggest the opposite. So who should we believe? The rapporteur of the 1913 anarchist congress, who probably has little to do with the trade union movement? The police report? The Rosmer

32 A. Rosmer, *Il sindacalismo francese e le menzogne di Cesare Alessandri*, in « L'Internationale », 27 septembre 1912. Quoted par Maurizio Antonioli, *op. cit.*

33 « Notre Congrès », in *Les Temps Nouveaux*, 23 août 1913.
See: <http://monde-nouveau.net/spip.php?article514>

Rosmer, who has little sympathy for anarchists? In fact, all three are right, provided that we consider that the first one is placed from an arithmetical point of view while Rosmer and *Le Liberaire* are placed in a “sociological” perspective. They are not actually talking about the same thing. When the policeman says that sales of the anarchist press have declined, there is every reason to believe that he is right.

When Rosmer said in 1912 that most anarchists were not at the CGT, he was talking about anarchists who at that time were identifiable as such, those who were in specific groups and most of whom could not join a union because they were not wage-earners – on this point he was probably right. But he forgets the mass of anarchists who had joined the CGT, often for a long time, and who were no longer identifiable as anarchists but as syndicalists.

And when *Le Liberaire* wondered at the 1913 congress about the decline of anarchists’ influence in the trade union movement, it sounded almost like a *mea culpa*. However, the anarchists were still there: the material proof of their presence can be found in the vote on the antimilitarist resolutions. Despite the Amiens Congress, which officially overshadowed anti-militarism, the anti-militarist resolutions proposed at the initiative of the anarchist delegates still received a considerable number of votes at the congresses until 1914..

The report of the congress made by *Les Temps Nouveaux* on August 23, 1913, and the comments that follow relate at length to the union issue. It states “that it is important for anarchists to mingle with trade unions [*which they had not done until now?*] in order to sow revolutionary sentiments and the idea of an expropriatory general strike”. There is often talk among anarchists of “sowing revolutionary sentiments” in the trade union movement; there is much less talk of struggle side by side with workers. The specific movement³⁴ had abandoned the trade union field to the rising reformist current, entrenching itself behind the maximalist attitude advocating “revolution or nothing” and leaving the trade union anarchists to cope with the daily struggle on the ground.

Following this congress, which finally saw the establishment of a certain cohesion between French anarchists, many regional conferences were held. It should be noted, however, that the South-East Federation, which held its congress in Lyon, admitted all tendencies – including individualistic ones –

34 In the jargon of the movement, “specific” refers to what is related to the “specifically anarchist organization”, or “specific organization” as opposed to any structure that is not composed only of anarchist militants.

but opposed trade union action. The question was therefore far from being resolved in the anarchist movement a few months before the war broke out.

How many anarchists and syndicalists?

However, the total number of anarchist militants was supposed to be very limited: according to Jean Maitron³⁵, about 4000 members, all tendencies combined. The total number of anarchist militants invested in the CGT was even more limited – which makes us all the more admiring when we consider the influence they have exercised. This influence can only be understood by their extreme investment in action, but also most certainly because libertarian militants in the trade union movement had around them an important “sphere of influence” made up of concentric circles of sympathizers. It is perhaps the very importance of this “sphere of influence” that led libertarian militants to believe that it was not necessary to organize themselves as a tendency within the CGT. Such an option probably did not seem necessary in an ascending period but in a period of backflow, would have made it possible to limit the loss of adherents, to preserve positions and later to fight against the penetration of the communist fractions in the CGT.

During an exchange of correspondence, on October 12, 2015, with the webmaster of the site *lapresseanarchiste.com* (dedicated to the archiving of the anarchist press), he informed me that an inventory by “département” (roughly, the equivalent of the British counties) drawn up by the police at the beginning of 1894 indicated 3005 anarchists (France and North African departments, we will admire the precision of the figure). This figure is probably incomplete, but it provides an estimate. Through the same exchange of correspondence, I learned that a police report indicated that *Le Libertaire* had a circulation of about 9,000 copies per week in 1898 for 320/340 subscribers – suggesting that militant sales on the streets, market places etc., must have been significant. In 1898, the paper had not yet turned pro-union.

On the syndicalist side, *La Vie ouvrière*, founded by Monatte in 1909 and which represented the quintessence of syndicalism at the time, produced 2000 copies. *La Voix du Peuple*, the CGT weekly newspaper founded in December 1900 and run by Émile Pouget until 1908, showed a deficit of 8,000 francs in September 1901; we will measure the extent of

35 Jean Maitron, *Le mouvement anarchiste en France*, Gallimard.

this deficit knowing that the confederal budget at the time was about 4,000 francs. The circulation, initially planned at 12,000 copies, fell to 8,000 in 1901 and then to 5,000 in 1902 with an average circulation of 4,780 copies, according to Pouget³⁶, and the fall in circulation was stopped only because the Montpellier Congress of 1902 forced the Confederate unions to subscribe to the newspaper. *La Voix du Peuple* had a strong anarchist tone, which enraged the reformist current in the Confederation.

If we only consider the circulation of newspapers, and if we admit that this circulation remained constant for ten years, and knowing that *Le Libertaire* was not the only anarchist newspaper in circulation, we can see that the anarchist current and the syndicalist current had a roughly similar circulation. Even if we admit that a copy of *La Vie ouvrière* was read by several persons, this gives an idea of the numerical ratio of syndicalist militants to the 600,000 members of the CGT.

When looking at the facts (the real facts, not the “alternative” facts), we see a shifting reality, which does not fit very well with preconceived ideas and peremptory statements. Moreover, we often have the impression that it is anarchism that was a strategy of revolutionary trade unionism, not the other way around. Indeed, the history of the early French trade union movement shows several attempts by trade unionists to convince anarchists (often reluctant) to join the trade union movement – which again does not match with the idea of syndicalism as a “strategy” of anarchism.

- An Appeal mentioned in a police report dated 6 November 1892. This report refers to a text inviting activists to get involved in the trade union movement and to establish a kind of division of labour between specific anarchist groups and trade unions³⁷. The fact that this document anticipates Pelloutier’s 1895 article, and that it dates from November 1892, nine months after the foundation of the Federation of labour Exchanges, which Pelloutier was to lead, cannot be due to chance: the hypothesis that Pelloutier himself wrote this appeal is not extravagant.

- An Appeal published in *Les Temps nouveaux* in 1895³⁸.

36 *Compte rendu du XIII^e congrès national corporatif*, Montpellier, 22-27 sept. 1902, Imprimerie Debord-Martin et Martial, Montpellier, 1902.

37 Cf. Jean Maitron, *Le mouvement anarchiste en France*, tome I, pp. 268-269.

38 Fernand Pelloutier, « L’Anarchisme et les syndicats ouvriers », *Les Temps nouveaux*, 2-8 novembre 1895. Voir: <http://monde-nouveau.net/spip.php?article17>

- Pelloutier's famous "Letter to Anarchists", 1899³⁹.
- A text published in 1907, shortly before the International Anarchist Congress in Amsterdam, in which Amédée Dunois called on anarchists to join the trade union movement⁴⁰.

It is easy to conclude that between 1892 and 1907 many anarchists were not involved in the trade union movement, that it was the trade union movement that called on anarchists to join the struggle, while from 1908 onward other police reports show, as we have seen, that the trade union movement had in a way "filled up" with anarchists...

The Brazilian historian Edilene Toledo reveals that in Brazil too there were calls for anarchists to join the struggles of the proletariat⁴¹: she cites an article published in *A Vós do Trabalhador* dated June 1913 in which it is stated: "If they do not want to remain isolated and powerless, anarchists must take a direct part in workers' struggles, organizing resistance societies and guiding workers in their conflicts against Capital and the State. Otherwise, others will come to use the proletarians' need to improve their sad situation to keep them away from the real struggle."⁴².

For a generation – from 1880 to 1907 – the Spanish communist anarchists, vigorously anti-unionist, had endeavoured to destroy the mass organizations inherited from the International. It was not until 1907 that the Spanish anarchist movement decided to change its strategy and became involved *en masse*, by a perfectly voluntary decision, in the trade union movement.

"While before 1907 anarchist groups repelled trade unionism and vegetated in small numbers, without an audience, without influence on the masses, from 1919-1920 onward it was the trade unions that gave

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- In English: "Anarchism and the Workers' Unions", <https://libcom.org/library/anarchism-workers-unions-fernand-pelloutier>
- 39 Fernand Pelloutier, « Lettre aux anarchistes », 3-8 décembre 1899. See: <http://kropot.free.fr/Pelloutier-Lettre.htm>
- 40 Amédée Dunois, *Un congresso anarchico*, in « Il Pensiero », 16 février 1907. Cité par Maurizio Antonioli, *Bakounine entre syndicalisme révolutionnaire et anarchisme*, éditions Noir et Rouge, 2014.
- 41 Edilene Toledo, *Anarquismo e Sindicalismo Revolucionário: trabalhadores e militantes em São Paulo na Primeira República*. São Paulo: Perseu Abramo, 2004.
- 42 « Atitude dos anarquistas ante o movimento operário », *A voz do Trabalhador*, 1^{er} juin 1913, cité par Toledo, p. 52.

birth to anarchist groups, better adapted to resist repression; they provided a continuous flow of workers who, having discovered libertarian ideology, transformed themselves into revolutionary syndicalists. From then on, almost all anarchists were syndicalists; *anarchism and anarcho-syndicalism became synonyms*⁴³.” (*My emphasis*)

It is true that once the Spanish anarchists made this decision, the result was spectacular.

1909-1914

The anarchists remained very present in the CGT but, through the elections, they were gradually removed from the main mandates by the reformists. In addition, new federations controlled by reformists joined the CGT. 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 shortly after, in 1908.

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.

The five years preceding the war were marked by intense class struggle and numerous strikes. But the period was also marked by many failures, which reveal that long and hard strikes that fail cause catastrophic effects. Railway workers saw a series of strikes fail in 1898, 1910. The same was true for the miners in 1902, the dockworkers of Nantes in 1907, and those of Brest, the metal workers.

On June 2, 1908 in Draveil, during the strike of the Draveil and Villeneuve-Saint-Georges earthmovers, the gendarmes killed 2 strikers and wounded 9. On July 30, a demonstration in Villeneuve-Saint-Georges resul-

43 C.M. Lorenzo, *Le mouvement anarchiste en Espagne*, Les Éditions libertaires, p. 67.

ted in 4 deaths and 200 injuries. The repression came down hard. This strike led to the arrest of practically the whole Confederal bureau, literally decapitating it and leaving the reformists to rush into the void thus created. The revolutionaries, however, managed to restore the situation but for a short time.

The strikes of 1907-1908 were a turning point in the history of the CGT because the syndicalists, already in a fragile position after the Amiens Congress of 1906, lost the majority: when the 10th Confederal Congress opened on 5 October 1908 in Marseille, Griffuelhes, the general secretary, was still in prison, the syndicalist leaders were neutralized and the reformists rushed into the breach. Griffuelhes was replaced by the reformist Niel.

Then came the failure of the postal strike, a creeping strike that had been going on since 1906. A major conflict broke out in early 1909. The general strike was voted on March 15. The CGT published a manifesto supporting postal workers. The movement was spreading to the provinces. But following Clemenceau's false promises, work resumed on March 23. On March 26, Clemenceau took advantage of a poster printed after the strike to sue the postal workers. In this poster, the postal workers thanked the Parisian population for their support. On May 17 a new strike was voted by 10,000 postal workers, but work resumed the next day. The CGT attempted a general strike, which was not widely followed. It was a failure.

The revolutionaries managed to regain control and get rid of Niel, but a page was turned and the decline of syndicalism had begun. The increasing repression faced the confederal leaders with the choice between continuing the practice of direct action and hard strikes, or reconsidering its strategy.

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 said they 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.

In a way, 1908 had marked the beginning of the end of syndicalism.

1912: the CGT and the War. — Conclusion

It is customary to say that the choice of the CGT not to call for a general

strike at the outbreak of WWI marked the bankruptcy of syndicalism. The choice made by the Confederal leadership not to oppose the war in 1914 was 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 was no longer possible to describe the CGT as a syndicalist organization. The decline of this current, which appeared in 1906, accelerated after 1909.

However, the Confederal leadership succeeded in organizing in 1912 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 against the syndicalist militants as well as against the anarchist groups which had supported the strike. 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, was not expected to be unilateral: it should have been triggered in the two countries. The many attempts of the CGT leadership to bring about joint action in the event of war had been categorically rejected by the German socialists. In the French trade union movement, everybody knew that the German working class would not move. Only the French socialists were still under any illusions.

But in any case the grip of Reformism on the CGT in 1914 was such that it was no longer possible to call it “syndicalist”⁴⁴.

On the eve of the war, the glorious days of syndicalism had been over for several years. The CGT had suffered a dramatic series of failures. The Confederation's membership had fallen from 700,000 to 300,000 between 1912 and 1914. The rising force was now the French Section of the Socialist International (SFIO) – in other words, the Socialist Party, whose membership has tripled since its creation in 1905. The unification of the socialist

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

movement created another pole of identification for the working class.

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.

Yet, the presence of anarchists in workers' struggles and in the organizational bodies of trade unionism had been decisive; anarchist militants were everywhere the main supporters of revolutionary syndicalist organizations: in Holland, Belgium, French-speaking Switzerland, Bohemia, Argentina – not to mention of course France, Spain, and Italy. But it is obvious that the anarchists who carried out this obstinate activity in the trade union movement were not the same as those who in the libertarian publications accused the CGT leadership of reformism.

Anarchists and revolutionary syndicalists clashed to claim Bakunin's legacy. When the confederal leadership of the CGT decided to create Industrial federations, it generated a wave of articles criticizing this "pure corporatism", even though industry federations were the best way to combat "corporatism".

Naturally, *La Vie ouvrière* hastened to publish a brochure by James Guillaume, *Ideas on Social Organization*⁴⁵, written in 1874, showing the compatibility between anarchism and industry federations.... And old Guillaume wrote in the preface to the fourth volume of his *Internationale, documents et souvenirs*: "And what is the General Confederation of Labour, if not the continuation of the International? »⁴⁶.

To which Jean Grave replied: "The anarchist movement – whatever Guillaume says, more than anyone else – has the right to proclaim itself the continuator of the International". Trade unionists and anarchists therefore proclaimed themselves the legitimate heirs of the International, but they only prolonged the latent conflict that had divided the "anti-authoritarian"

45 The brochure appeared in La Chaux de Fonds (Impr. Courvoisier) in 1876 and was published in Italy, translated by Andrea Costa, in Bologna (Tip. della Soc. Azzoguidi) in 1877. On the vicissitudes of this brochure, see *The International...*, Volume III, p. 240.

In English: <https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/james-guillaume-ideas-on-social-organization>

46 James. Guillaume, *L'Internationale, documents et souvenirs*, Vol. IV, p. VII.

International and led to its fall.

Therefore, it no longer matters whether revolutionary syndicalism is a “strategy” of anarchism. We only understand that revolutionary syndicalism and anarchism have an intertwined history whose vicissitudes overlap, made up of attraction and repulsion.

Revolutionary syndicalism reappeared after the war, taking advantage of the wave caused by the Russian revolution. It was – in France at least – the dominant force in the workers’ movement. But as if struck by a neurosis of failure, it fractured into two antagonistic currents, one supporting the Bolshevik regime and advocating membership in the Red International of Trade Unions, the other refusing to support a regime that repressed the working class.

It was from this confrontation that anarcho-syndicalism was born.

But this is another story.

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