

Mutualism and gradualism in Proudhon

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There is a temptation in the anarchist movement to radically separate Proudhonian mutualism from anarchist doctrine, as if it were a foreign body, and in any case an approach to be rejected because it is tainted with 'reformism'. It is unlikely that the militants who adopt this attitude have really read Proudhon, whose preference for peaceful means stems from the trauma he suffered following the massacres of workers in June 1848, but who does not exclude the use of force if necessary.

Proudhon's interest in mutualism stems above all from his observation of the practices of the French labour movement, practices which he then theorised.

Mutualism can be viewed in several ways.

- Either one considers that these are bodies designed to provide a number of services on an ad hoc basis (relief funds, mutual insurance companies, etc.) without their scope of intervention going beyond this specific framework.
- Or one considers that the creation today of mutual societies within capitalist society is a prefiguration of what tomorrow's society could be like, organised in this way.

Moreover, these two points of view are not mutually exclusive.

If we want to have a rational view of the history of the labour movement, we must avoid mythologising it by presenting a caricatured image of the links between anarchism and revolutionary syndicalism, but also between anarchism and mutualism. Indeed, it cannot be denied that a significant part of the French anarchist movement was opposed to syndicalism, often vigorously. Naturally, this is an aspect of the history of the anarchist movement that some authors are careful not to address, but it is nevertheless the truth.

The link between anarchism and mutualism has suffered the same distortions. While some of Proudhon's heirs gave a distorted interpretation of his ideas on mutualism, imagining that it would be the solution to the social question, most anarchists and revolutionary syndicalists engaged in mutualism without illusions, but they did so because it was an effective and unavoidable means of improving the situation of the workers. Many revolutionary syndicalists who did not contest the Proudhonian heritage were mutualist militants *at the same time*, and they were in perfect agreement with the principles elaborated by Bakunin, who advocated that the workers practise

'direct action' in the sense in which the expression was understood by the IWA, that is to say the investment of the workers not only in the unions, but also in mutual aid organisations, libraries, workers' education, etc.

The "historic" CGT, that of the revolutionary syndicalist period, had developed alongside its protest activity, a set of mutualist structures linked to mutual aid, education and leisure, to which the activists devoted themselves and which constituted *a full aspect* of their activity. Emma Goldman gave an eloquent account of the existence of these mutualist organisations.¹ As a member of the CGT since 1972, I can testify that these mutualist structures still exist.

The motivation of revolutionary syndicalists involved in mutualism was simply the desire to improve the condition of workers by setting up bodies created and administered by the workers themselves. For Proudhon, mutualism was the way in which the proletariat exercised its autonomy in relation to the bourgeoisie.

The militants who committed themselves to mutualism did the same thing as those who were unionised – they were often the same people, moreover – they engaged in militant demands. Devoting oneself to mutualism did not mean that the capitalist system would collapse as a result, but a large mutualist sector would have provided a basis for the reorganisation of society after the revolution because the structures were in place and many men and women had concrete experience of organisation in the sectors concerned. This is what happened in Spain: the workers organised in the CNT already had experience of self-organisation.

The Proudhonian mutualists in the International were undoubtedly wrong to have misunderstood Proudhon's thinking, but above all they were the custodians of a way of thinking that is absolutely unsuitable as material for a congress debate. A congress is not a place for subtle analysis; you need to have clear and well-defined ideas. The Proudhonians of the International had arguments that at least deserved to be discussed: in the debate on land ownership, which was decided with a great swing of the axe, they were right to point out that there were no peasants in the room and that it might have been better to take their opinion before deciding. For Proudhon's positions on this issue took into account the ideological prejudices of the peasantry on property, but also envisaged progressive measures for the transition to associative forms of organisation of agricultural production. If Bakunin and his comrades had had a better knowledge of Proudhon's thinking, they might have found a form of alliance with the Proudhonians, avoiding an alliance with the Marxists.

From the double trauma he suffered during the revolution of 1848 (extreme violence of the democratic state against the proletariat, impotence of the representative regime), Proudhon learnt that electoral strategy is ineffective. He came to the conclusion that a radical change of perspective was needed, a totally

1 Emma Goldman, 'Syndicalism, The Modern Menace to Capitalism', Mother Earth Publishing Association, 55 West 28th Street, New York, 1913

different logic. From now on, it would no longer be *citizens of* the country who would appoint representatives; sovereignty would no longer be exercised in parliaments but in productive institutions where it would be the *workers themselves* who would organise themselves. This must be borne in mind in order to understand Proudhon's opposition to 'workers' candidacies' in *The Political Capacity of the Working Classes*. He opposed it because workers should organise themselves in a *different* way, and in a *different place*: in a way that can be defined, using more contemporary language, by saying that they should organise themselves on the basis of their role in the production process (associations of producers) in their own class organisations. This explains why this man, who is very caricatured as being 'opposed to strikes', was recognised as one of their own by revolutionary syndicalists.

It is indisputable that Bakunin owed a great deal to Proudhon, but Bakunin himself undoubtedly never had the opportunity to take his time to reflect calmly on a monumental, often paradoxical, extremely complex work whose internal logic was not immediately apparent. Proudhon's thinking on property was complex; after having condemned it, he gave the impression of rehabilitating it at the end of his life, but this was not the case: To understand this apparent turnaround in an author who cultivated paradoxes, one must take the trouble to 'enter' his mode of reasoning, which the Bakuninists did not have the time or perhaps the ability to do.

No doubt the militants who claimed to follow him in the congresses of the International and who defended the principle of private property also lacked the necessary perspective to understand the complexity of Proudhon's thinking and his strategic vision. The fact remains that their argument on the question of private property at the Brussels congress,² would have deserved to be examined. A Brazilian historian, Felipe Corrêa, seems to me to have clearly perceived these paradoxes in Proudhon's thinking, and also to have perceived the fact that while Proudhon's thinking could be associated with a doctrine, anarchism, it was not associated with an organisation, as was the case with Bakunin.³

Mutualism

There is no denying that the principle of mutualism has deeply permeated the French working class, particularly thanks to the involvement of many anarchists who were not necessarily Proudhonians, who did not think that mutualism would overthrow capitalism, but who thought (rightly) that they were helping to improve their own lot and that of their fellow workers. Mutualism is one of the aspects of Proudhon's thinking that the authors of *Black Flame* reject most vigorously: 'Proudhon's ideas, often known as mutualism, had a great influence in socialist and popular circles between the 1840s and 1880s in

2 See the debates on property at the IWA Congress in Brussels, September 1868: http://monde-nouveau.net/IMG/pdf/Congres_de_Bruxelles.pdf

3 'Anarquismo e sindicalismo revolucionario', in *Idéologia e estratégia*, editora Faisca.

Europe and America,' we read in *Black Flame*, the work of Michael Schmidt and Lucien van der Walt. Although Proudhon does not qualify as an 'anarchist', these authors admit that 'anarchists recognised Proudhon as an ancestor and mutualists as kindred spirits'.

It is surprising that Schmidt and van der Walt recognise that trade unionism can have the function of improving the condition of workers, while waiting for something better, but that they deny this function to mutualism. Yet mutual societies, i.e. organisations based on collective solidarity to which people subscribe by paying contributions and which provide a number of services, and over which the contributors exercise control through general assemblies, are found in all aspects of life. Mutual societies therefore have the same function outside the workplace as trade unions do in the workplace, the two forms being complementary.

In fact, the problem is not: can we or can we not gradually change society through specific initiatives? But: when revolution is clearly not on the agenda, should we create institutions that make people's lives more pleasant? The problem is the same for action in the workplace and in the residential area.

In the great period of revolutionary syndicalism, many anarchist militants became involved in syndicalism because it was obvious that we did not all get up every morning with the conviction that the revolution would be triggered in the evening. Similarly, other anarchists or revolutionary syndicalists became involved in mutualism, i.e. in social institutions – mutual benefit funds, health insurance, pension funds, etc. – that helped to improve the daily lot of workers and their families. It was nothing more than a way of improving the daily lot of the workers, the application of the principles that Bakunin had set out: propaganda by the deed, that is to say propaganda by example: the creation of mutual aid societies, schools, libraries, cooperatives, etc.⁴

The question was more along the lines of: 'Since there is no immediate revolutionary perspective, should we do nothing and wait? Or should we try to improve our condition?' The anarchist militants and revolutionary syndicalists who were involved in mutualism did the same thing as those who were involved in syndicalism – moreover, they were often the same people. I don't think that anyone imagined that devoting themselves to mutualism would contribute to the

4 'The militants of the Spanish section of the IWA will interpret the call for propaganda by the deed in a perfectly orthodox way, that is to say in the exact sense in which the term had been defined by the IWA. In accordance with their congress of 1873, they called for support for strikes, the creation of resistance funds, demonstrations, meetings, networks of consumer cooperatives, and the creation of schools, libraries, educational centres, mutual insurance companies and employment agencies. The fact is that the Spanish section was the only one to retain the character of a mass organisation.' R. Berthier, *La fin de la Première Internationale*, Éditions du Monde libertaire, p. 285.

collapse of capitalism. On the other hand, the existence of a large mutualist movement could serve as a basis for the reorganisation of society after the revolution, assuming that this eventuality could occur: the structures would be in place and many men and women would have concrete experience of organisation in the sectors concerned. This Proudhonian scheme was realised in Spain, where anarchists had been saying for decades that organised workers should prepare to take charge of the organisation of society one day.

For Proudhon, it was not a question of adhering to mutualism because he was a reformist, but because he had understood that it was a form of autonomous workers' organisation, because the creation of mutualist associations was an essential aspect of militant action. It was only a matter of circumstance that mutualist associations and cooperatives could one day be used to reorganise the society of tomorrow.

Mutualism was of paramount importance in France because it was decisive on at least two points:

a) The establishment of workers' mutual aid organisations free from any state or bourgeois influence;

b) The recognition by the proletariat of the absolute necessity of radically cutting ties with the bourgeoisie and organising itself autonomously.

According to the authors of *Black Flame*, there are three essential distinctions between anarchism and mutualism:

◆ 'Firstly, anarchists reject private ownership of the means of production as being incapable of meeting the needs of the peasantry and the working class, while mutualists support small landowners and envisage private profits and private property in their market utopia.'

◆ According to *Black Flame*, anarchists insist on the need for revolutionary change, while mutualists deny it. The anarchists 'rejected the mutualist notion that a non-capitalist sector could gradually and peacefully overthrow the existing order'. Proudhon, we learn, 'did not really like or understand big industry, and was hostile to strikes, which isolated him from the nascent labour movement' (p. 84). In addition, he favoured a gradualist solution to the social question: 'Proudhon's strategy for change was gradualist: he favoured the development of a non-capitalist sector, based on small individual owners as well as on cooperatives that would undermine and then overwhelm capitalism'. (p. 37)

◆ The third and main difference between anarchism and mutualism, which, let us remember, would disqualify Proudhon as an anarchist, would lie in the

fact that ‘the mutualist tradition was oriented towards the needs of small farmers and independent artisans.’ (p. 85)

In reality, Proudhon never said that socialism could be achieved gradually by mutualist societies:

‘...it is not enough for even a few practitioners, moving from the apostolate to action, to call a few hundred enthusiasts around them, in mutual aid or cooperation associations. The reforming work could drag on forever without producing any result other than occasionally entertaining the conservatives [...]

‘Would the workers’ democracy, with its small and poor associations, with its subscriptions of five centimes a week, with its ordinary means of persuasion and propaganda, imagine that it could accomplish one of those vast movements that regenerate societies and change the face of the globe in a few years? It would only fail to organise a general insurance system and to replace the fixed premium with mutuality. What would happen if it had to seriously compete with the Bank of France, Crédit Mobilier, the Discount Counter, all those financial conglomerates whose capital, in cash, is counted in billions? (...)

‘An unfortunate idea, in my opinion, of the phalansterian school, was to have believed that it would take the world with it, if it were only allowed to pitch its tent and build a first model phalanstery. It was assumed that a first, more or less successful attempt would lead to a second, and then that, gradually, as the populations snowballed, the thirty-seven thousand communes of France would find themselves, one morning, transformed into harmony groups and phalansteries. In politics and social economics, epigenesis, as physiologists say, is a radically false principle. To change the constitution of a people, it is necessary to act both on the whole and on each part of the body politic, we cannot overstate this.’⁵

There is no better way of saying that it is not possible to transform society as a whole through gradual measures and the proliferation of associative or cooperative initiatives: it is necessary to mobilise the whole ‘body politic’. It is from Proudhon that Bakunin takes his criticism of the illusion that society can be transformed by the extension of cooperatives. Gaetano Manfredonia, who has read Proudhon, unlike the authors of *Black Flame*, writes in *Anarchism and Social Change*:

5 Proudhon, *De la Capacité politique des classes ouvrières*, Dentu, 1865, pp. 272-275

‘Proudhon does not believe that social change can be brought about by the force of example, by simple imitation, based on a model experiment which would gradually gain the upper hand. The idea that salvation will come from the proliferation of such initiatives is alien to him.’⁶

Proudhon and Bakunin have exactly the same point of view on the question⁷. It is clear how incomplete and caricatural Michael Schmidt and Lucien van der Walt's view of Proudhon is. They bring together all the clichés of Marxist criticism.

To say that private ownership of the means of production does not meet the needs of the peasantry and the working class can in no way summarise Proudhon's point of view. Indeed, while he encourages workers to access credit to buy their tools, he also explains that small-scale production characterised by a

6 Gaetano Manfredoia, *Anarchisme et changement social*, Éditions Atelier de création libertaire, p. 164.

7 See Bakunin:

‘The economists worthy of the name from the two opposing schools: that of the liberals and that of the scientific communists, who diverge on all other points and agree on only one, have for a long time expressed the same conviction, based on real science, that is to say the rigorous study of the evolution of economic factors, conviction that given the current organisation of the public economy and market production, as well as the growth, domination and concentration of capital that necessarily follows, workers' associations, no matter how hard they try, are not in a position to free labour from the oppression of the latter; the conviction, I say, that workers' banks, solely fed by the meagre savings of the working masses, which are mostly impossible, will never be able to compete with the powerful universal banks of the bourgeois oligarchy; and that due to the incessant increase in the labour force and hungry stomachs, an increase accelerated more and more by the concentration of capital in an increasingly restricted number of hands and by the transformation that fatally results from the petty bourgeoisie, even the middle class into proletariat, the workers, if they do not want to die of hunger, are obliged to compete more and more with each other, competition pushed to the extreme, that is to say, to the very limit of what it costs to maintain and feed the individual; and that, therefore, all workers' consumer associations, by lowering the prices of basic necessities, inevitably lead to a reduction in wages, in other words a worsening of the workers' conditions.

‘Finally, production associations are only possible in those industrial sectors that are not monopolised by big capital, as no workers' association is in a position to compete with it in terms of market production. And as big capital, driven by an immanent necessity, necessarily tends to get its hands on all industrial branches without exception, workers' associations are destined to suffer the same fate as the petty and middle bourgeoisie: general, inescapable misery, servile submission to oligarchic capital and the absorption of all small and medium-sized property into the large property of a few hundred wealthy people throughout Europe (Bakunin, ‘L'Alliance Universelle de la Démocratie Sociale. Section russe. To the Russian Youth. March 1870) (SEE: Bakunin, ‘Texts on Cooperatives’, http://monde-nouveau.net/IMG/pdf/Bakounine_-_textes_sur_les_cooperatives.pdf

weak division of labour is subject to market fluctuations, that it survives in precarious conditions and is doomed to disappear in the long term. On the other hand, he explains that large-scale industry, where the division of labour is important, must be taken over by what he calls 'workers' companies' [*compagnies ouvrières*]. As for the peasantry, fiercely attached to the land, Proudhon understood, better than the Russian communists after 1917, that you don't make a revolution against the peasants and that you have to consider a strategy for a gradual transition from private property to collective forms of work: a point of view perfectly understood by Bakunin, and taken up by the Spanish anarchists during the civil war.

To say that Proudhon 'did not like' big industry is a rather simplistic view of his thinking; to say that he did not 'understand' big industry reveals great ignorance. Even though France in his time was 85% rural, as Proudhon himself explains, his *System of Economic Contradictions* reveals a great knowledge of the mechanisms of capitalism and develops concepts that would be taken up twenty years later in *Capital*. Furthermore, his *Manuel du spéculateur à la bourse* [Manual of the Stock Exchange Speculator] is a masterful exposition of the workings of financial capitalism. It seems obvious that the authors of *Black Flame* have no knowledge of it.

As for hostility to strikes, it is a much more complex issue than that: Proudhon simply says that strikes will not fundamentally change the condition of the working class – which is what Marx also said. When Proudhon wrote that the Rives-de-Giers miners were wrong to go on strike, he said that they were wrong '*dans leur for extérieur*', i.e. from the point of view of the law in force, he did not say that they were wrong in absolute terms: on the contrary, he says that they had good reasons to do so '*dans leur for intérieur*' [in their innermost being], that is, from their own point of view. Naturally, this subtlety is deliberately ignored by biased or ignorant readers. [It is true that even for a modern French reader, Proudhon's writing is sometimes a little convoluted.]

For a period of his life, he deplored strikes because he thought it would be possible to achieve an alliance between the proletariat and the petty bourgeoisie, but he eventually realised that this was impossible. To offer a point of view on Proudhon's position on strikes, it is therefore necessary to determine which period of his life we are talking about.

Contrary to what the authors of *Black Flame* say, his opinions on strikes never isolated Proudhon from the labour movement: he enjoyed considerable celebrity among the workers of his time. The workers wrote to him, formed clubs to buy his books and discuss them. Revolutionary syndicalists did not hesitate to claim him as their own. This is another example of the ignorance of the authors of *Black Flame*.

Gradualism

To say that Proudhon advocated a ‘peaceful overthrow’ of the existing order through mutualism is a rather simplistic way of expressing his thinking. Above all, Schmidt and van der Walt make an analysis based on their presuppositions (ideological approach), without considering how Proudhonian mutualism constituted, at the time, a break with the socialism of his era (historical approach). For Proudhon, mutualism is an alternative to the impasse of state socialism (from above) and cooperative socialism (from below), which he declares to be unrealistic.

Proudhon refused to propose a system that workers would only have to apply passively: ‘Only the people, acting on their own without intermediaries, can complete the economic revolution founded in February. Only the people can save civilisation and advance humanity,’ he wrote in 1848 in his *Toast to the Revolution*.

Equally false is the assertion of *Black Flame* that Proudhon's thinking does not incorporate the principle of class struggle: it is difficult to imagine that the author of a work entitled *System of Economic Contradictions or Philosophy of Misery* does not take the point of view of the opposition between the classes.

‘The struggle of the classes against one another, the antagonism of their interests, the way in which these interests form coalitions determine the political regime, and consequently the choice of government, its innumerable varieties, and its even more innumerable variations.’⁸

Two years before the publication of Marx's *Communist Manifesto*, Proudhon had published his *System of Economic Contradictions*, the title of which is self-explanatory. By the concept of ‘economic society’, he refers to the relations of production and the division of society into antagonistic classes – he speaks of ‘war of labour and capital’ – but also refers to the political and ideological phenomena which, together with economic determinations, form an inseparable whole.

Two events had a profound impact on Proudhon during the revolution of 1848.

a) The appalling repression meted out by the ‘democratic’ government against the workers during the June insurrection. This repression traumatised Proudhon and greatly contributed to defining his point of view on revolutionary violence.

8 Proudhon, *Du principe fédératif*, E. Dentu, 1863, p. 50.

b) The total impotence of the representative regime to change the condition of the working class. In fact, democracy brought the bourgeoisie to power and it used the government against the people, against the working class.

Proudhon was therefore led to consider a strategy which, without excluding the possibility of a violent revolution, attempted to limit its most disastrous effects. In fact, Proudhon's perspective is a kind of radical reformism. He wants to bring about significant changes, but not through a general upheaval, overnight. He does not want to make 'a Saint-Barthélemy of the owners'⁹, he wrote to Marx on 17 May 1846. In fact, Proudhon's point of view is not very different from that proposed by Marx in the *Manifesto*, which also does not envisage a 'Saint Barthélemy' of the owners, but intends to resort to 'despotic encroachments' on property rights after the conquest of power through elections. Communist activists who hasten to criticise Proudhon for his 'reformism' should think twice.

It is certain that Proudhon, who witnessed the massacres of the 1848 revolution, would have preferred an amicable settlement of the social question, but he also adds that if the bourgeoisie are not reasonable, they will have to face violence. Thus he writes in *Idée générale de la révolution*: 'We are still in a position to proceed with all the prudence and moderation that may be deemed useful; later, our destiny may no longer depend on our free will'.¹⁰ This clearly means that it is possible to negotiate now, but that later it may no longer be possible. 'Between repayment in annual instalments and confiscation, there may be many middle ways,' says Proudhon, who is not naive, however: if no solution is found, "Then it will no longer be the Right to work, nor the Right to surplus value that peasants and workers will invoke: *it will be the Right to war and reprisals.*"⁸

The threat is clear: violence is not desired, but it will be used if necessary.

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9 A reference to the massacre of Protestants in Paris on St. Bartholomew's Day, 24 August 1572, which lasted several days in the capital and then spread to more than twenty provincial towns in the following weeks and even months.

10 *Idée générale de la Révolution*, Garnier, 1851, pp. 258-259.

EMMA GOLDMAN ABOUT MUTUALISM

Syndicalism, The Modern Menace to Capitalism¹¹

IN view of the fact that the ideas embodied in Syndicalism have been practiced by the workers for the last half century, even if without the background of social consciousness; that in this country five men had to pay with their lives because they advocated Syndicalist methods as the most effective, in the struggle of labor against capital; and that, furthermore, Syndicalism has been consciously practiced by the workers of France, Italy and Spain since 1895, it is rather amusing to witness some people in America and England now swooping down upon Syndicalism as a perfectly new and never before heard-of proposition.

It is astonishing how very naive Americans are, how crude and immature in matters of international importance. For all his boasted practical aptitude, the average American is the very last to learn of the modern means and tactics employed in the great struggles of his day. Always he lags behind in ideas and methods that the European workers have for years past been applying with great success.

It may be contended, of course, that this is merely a sign of youth on the part of the American. And it is indeed beautiful to possess a young mind, fresh to receive and perceive. But unfortunately the American mind seems never to grow, to mature and crystallize its views.

Perhaps that is why an American revolutionist can at the same time be a politician. That is also the reason why leaders of the Industrial Workers of the World continue in the Socialist party, which is antagonistic to the principles as well as to the activities of the I. W. W. Also why a rigid Marxian may propose that the Anarchists work together with the faction that began its career by a most bitter and malicious persecution of one of the pioneers of Anarchism, Michael Bakunin. In short, to the indefinite, uncertain mind of the American radical the most contradictory ideas and methods are possible. The result is a sad chaos in the radical movement, a sort of intellectual hash, which has neither taste nor character.

Just at present Syndicalism is the pastime of a great many Americans, so-called intellectuals. Not that they know anything about it, except that some great authorities – Sorel, Lagardelle, Berth and others – stand for it: because the American needs the seal of authority, or he would not accept an idea, no matter how true and valuable it might be.

Our bourgeois magazines are full of dissertations on Syndicalism. One of our most conservative colleges has even gone to the extent of publishing a work of one of its students on the subject, which has the approval of a professor. And all this, not because Syndicalism is a force and is being successfully practiced by the workers of Europe, but because – as I said before – it has official authoritative sanction.

11 Mother Earth Publishing Association, 55 West 28th street, New York, 1913

As if Syndicalism had been discovered by the philosophy of Bergson or the theoretic discourses of Sorel and Berth, and had not existed and lived among the workers long before these men wrote about it. The feature which distinguishes Syndicalism from most philosophies is that it represents the revolutionary philosophy of labor conceived and born in the actual struggle and experience of the workers themselves – not in universities, colleges, libraries, or in the brain of some scientists. *The revolutionary philosophy of labor*, that is the true and vital meaning of Syndicalism.

Already as far back as 1848 a large section of the workers realized the utter futility of political activity as a means of helping them in their economic struggle. At that time already the demand went forth for direct economic measures, as against the useless waste of energy along political lines. This was the case not only in France, but even prior to that in England, where Robert Owen, the true revolutionary Socialist, propagated similar ideas.

After years of agitation and experiment the idea was incorporated by the first convention of the *Internationale*, in 1867, in the resolution that the economic emancipation of the workers must be the principal aim of all revolutionists, to which everything else is to be subordinated.

In fact, it was this determined radical stand which eventually brought about the split in the revolutionary movement of that day, and its division into two factions: the one, under Marx and Engels, aiming at political conquest; the other, under Bakunin and the Latin workers, forging ahead along industrial and Syndicalist lines. The further development of those two wings is familiar to every thinking man and woman: the one has gradually centralized into a huge machine, with the sole purpose of conquering political power within the existing capitalist State; the other is becoming an ever more vital revolutionary factor, dreaded by the enemy as the greatest menace to its rule.

It was in the year 1900 while a delegate to the Anarchist Congress in Paris, that I first came in contact with Syndicalism in operation. The Anarchist press had been discussing the subject for years prior to that; therefore we Anarchists knew something about Syndicalism. But those of us who lived in America had to content themselves with the theoretic side of it.

In 1900, however, I saw its effect upon labor in France: the strength, the enthusiasm and hope with which Syndicalism inspired the workers. It was also my good fortune to learn of the man who more than anyone else had directed Syndicalism into definite working channels, Fernand Pelloutier. Unfortunately, I could not meet this remarkable young man, as he was at that time already very ill with cancer. But wherever I went, with whomever I spoke, the love and devotion for Pelloutier was wonderful, all agreeing that it was he who had gathered the discontented forces in the French labor movement and imbued them with new life and a new purpose, that of Syndicalism.

On my return to America I immediately began to propagate Syndicalist ideas, especially Direct Action and the General Strike. But it was like talking to the Rocky Mountains – no understanding, even among the more radical elements, and complete indifference in labor ranks.

In 1907 I went as a delegate to the Anarchist Congress at Amsterdam and, while in Paris, met the most active Syndicalists in the *Confédération Générale du Travail*: Pouget, Delesalle, Monatte, and many others. More than that, I had the opportunity to see Syndicalism in daily operation, in its most constructive and inspiring forms.

I allude to this, to indicate that my knowledge of Syndicalism does not come from Sorel, Lagardelle, or Berth, but from actual contact with and observation of the tremendous work carried on by the workers of Paris within the ranks of the *Confédération*. It would require a volume to explain in detail what Syndicalism is doing for the French workers. In the American press you read only of its resistive methods, of strikes and sabotage, of the conflicts of labor with capital. These are no doubt very important matters, and yet the chief value of Syndicalism lies much deeper. It lies in the constructive and educational effect upon the life and thought of the masses.

The fundamental difference between Syndicalism and the old trade union methods is this: while the old trade unions, without exception, move within the wage system and capitalism, recognizing the latter as inevitable, Syndicalism repudiates and condemns present industrial arrangements as unjust and criminal, and holds out no hope to the worker for lasting results from this system.

Of course Syndicalism, like the old trade unions, fights for immediate gains, but it is not stupid enough to pretend that labor can expect humane conditions from inhuman economic arrangements in society. Thus it merely wrests from the enemy what it can force him to yield; on the whole, however, Syndicalism aims at, and concentrates its energies upon, the complete overthrow of the wage system. Indeed, Syndicalism goes further: it aims to liberate labor from every institution that has not for its object the free development of production for the benefit of all humanity. In short, the ultimate purpose of Syndicalism is to reconstruct society from its present centralized, authoritative and brutal state to one based upon the free, federated grouping of the workers along lines of economic and social liberty.

With this object in view, Syndicalism works in two directions: first, by undermining the existing institutions; secondly, by developing and educating the workers and cultivating their spirit of solidarity, to prepare them for a full, free life, when capitalism shall have been abolished.

Syndicalism is, in essence, the economic expression of Anarchism. That circumstance accounts for the presence of so many Anarchists in the Syndicalist movement. Like Anarchism, Syndicalism prepares the workers along direct economic lines, as conscious factors in the great struggles of to-day, as well as conscious factors in the task of reconstructing society along autonomous industrial lines, as against the paralyzing spirit of centralization with its bureaucratic machinery of corruption, inherent in all political parties.

Realizing that the diametrically opposed interests of capital and labor can never be reconciled, Syndicalism must needs repudiate the old rusticated, worn-out methods of trade unionism, and declare for an open war against the capitalist regime, as well as against every institution which to-day supports and protects capitalism.

As a logical sequence Syndicalism, in its daily warfare against capitalism, rejects the contract system, because it does not consider labor and capital equals, hence cannot consent to an agreement which the one has the power to break, while the other must submit to without redress.

For similar reasons Syndicalism rejects negotiations in labor disputes, because such a procedure serves only to give the enemy time to prepare his end of the fight, thus defeating the very object the workers set out to accomplish. Also, Syndicalism stands for spontaneity, both as a preserver of the fighting

strength of labor and also because it takes the enemy unawares, hence compels him to a speedy settlement or causes him great loss.

Syndicalism objects to a large union treasury, because money is as corrupting an element in the ranks of labor as it is in those of capitalism. We in America know this to be only too true. If the labor movement in this country were not backed by such large funds, it would not be as conservative as it is, nor would the leaders be so readily corrupted. However, the main reason for the opposition of Syndicalism to large treasuries consists in the fact that they create class distinctions and jealousies within the ranks of labor, so detrimental to the spirit of solidarity. The worker whose organization has a large purse considers himself superior to his poorer brother, just as he regards himself better than the man who earns fifty cents less per day.

The chief ethical value of Syndicalism consists in the stress it lays upon the necessity of labor getting rid of the element of dissension, parasitism and corruption in its ranks. It seeks to cultivate devotion, solidarity and enthusiasm, which are far more essential and vital in the economic struggle than money.

As I have already stated, Syndicalism has grown out of the disappointment of the workers with politics and parliamentary methods. In the course of its development Syndicalism has learned to see in the State – with its mouthpiece, the representative system – one of the strongest supports of capitalism; just as it has learned that the army and the church are the chief pillars of the State. It is therefore that Syndicalism has turned its back upon parliamentarism and political machines, and has set its face toward the economic arena wherein alone gladiator Labor can meet his foe successfully.

Historic experience sustains the Syndicalists in their uncompromising opposition to parliamentarism. Many had entered political life and, unwilling to be corrupted by the atmosphere, withdrew from office, to devote themselves to the economic struggle – Proudhon, the Dutch revolutionist Nieuwenhuis, John Most and numerous others. While those who remained in the parliamentary quagmire ended by betraying their trust, without having gained anything for labor. But it is unnecessary to discuss here political history. Suffice to say that Syndicalists are anti-parliamentarians as a result of bitter experience

Equally so has experience determined their anti-military attitude. Time and again has the army been used to shoot down strikers and to inculcate the sickening idea of patriotism, for the purpose of dividing the workers against themselves and helping the masters to the spoils. The inroads that Syndicalist agitation has made into the superstition of patriotism are evident from the dread of the ruling class for the loyalty of the army, and the rigid persecution of the anti-militarists. Naturally – for the ruling class realizes much better than the workers that when the soldiers will refuse to obey their superiors, the whole system of capitalism will be doomed.

Indeed, why should the workers sacrifice their children that the latter may be used to shoot their own parents? Therefore Syndicalism is not merely logical in its anti-military agitation; it is most practical and far-reaching, inasmuch as it robs the enemy of his strongest weapon against labor.

Now, as to the methods employed by Syndicalism – Direct Action, Sabotage, and the General Strike.

DIRECT ACTION.–Conscious individual or collective effort to protest against, or remedy social conditions through the systematic assertion of the economic power of the workers.

Sabotage has been decried as criminal, even by so-called revolutionary Socialists. Of course, if you believe that property, which excludes the producer from its use, is justifiable, then sabotage is indeed a crime. But unless a Socialist continues to be under the influence of our bourgeois morality – a morality which enables the few to monopolize the earth at the expense of the many – he cannot consistently maintain that capitalist property is inviolate. Sabotage undermines this form of private possession. Can it therefore be considered criminal? On the contrary, it is ethical in the best sense, since it helps society to get rid of its worst foe, the most detrimental factor of social life.

Sabotage is mainly concerned with obstructing, by every possible method, the regular process of production, thereby demonstrating the determination of the workers to give according to what they receive, and no more. For instance, at the time of the French railroad strike of 1910 perishable goods were sent in slow trains, or in an opposite direction from the one intended. Who but the most ordinary philistine will call that a crime? If the railway men themselves go hungry, and the "innocent" public has not enough feeling of solidarity to insist that these men should get enough to live on, the public has forfeited the sympathy of the strikers and must take the consequences.

Another form of sabotage consisted, during this strike, in placing heavy boxes on goods marked "Handle with care," cut glass and china and precious wines. From the standpoint of the law this may have been a crime but from the standpoint of common humanity it was a very sensible thing. The same is true of disarranging a loom in a weaving mill, or living up to the letter of the law with all its red tape, as the Italian railway men did, thereby causing confusion in the railway service. In other words, sabotage is merely a weapon of defense in the industrial warfare, which is the more effective because it touches capitalism in its most vital spot, the pocket.

By the General Strike, Syndicalism means a stoppage of work, the cessation of labor. Nor need such a strike be postponed until all the workers of a particular place or country are ready for it. As has been pointed out by Pelloutier, Pouget, as well as others, and particularly by recent events in England, the General Strike may be started by one industry and exert a tremendous force. It is as if one man suddenly raised the cry "Stop the thief!" Immediately others will take up the cry, till the air rings with it. The General Strike, initiated by one determined organization, by one industry or by a small, conscious minority among the workers, is the industrial cry of "Stop the thief," which is soon taken up by many other industries, spreading like wildfire in a very, short time.

One of the objections of politicians to the General Strike is that the workers also would suffer for the necessities of life. In the first place, the workers are past masters in going hungry; secondly, it is certain that a General Strike is surer of prompt settlement than an ordinary strike. Witness the transport and miner strikes in England: how quickly the lords of State and capital were forced to make peace! Besides, Syndicalism recognizes the right of the producers to the things which they have created; namely, the right of the workers to help themselves if the strike does not meet with speedy settlement.

When Sorel maintains that the General Strike is an inspiration necessary for the people to give their life meaning, he is expressing a thought which the Anarchists have never tired of emphasizing. Yet I do not hold with Sorel that the General Strike is a "social myth," that may never be realized. I think that the General Strike will become a fact the moment labor understands its full value –

its destructive as well as constructive value, as indeed many workers all over the world are beginning to realize.

These ideas and methods of Syndicalism some may consider entirely negative, though they are far from it in their effect upon society to-day. But Syndicalism has also a directly positive aspect. In fact, much more time and effort is being devoted to that phase than to the others. Various forms of Syndicalist activity are designed to prepare the workers, even within present social and industrial conditions, for the life of a new and better society. To that end the masses are trained in the spirit of mutual aid and brotherhood, their initiative and self-reliance developed, and an *esprit de corps* maintained whose very soul is solidarity of purpose and the community of interests of the international proletariat.

Chief among these activities are the *mutualités*, or mutual aid societies, established by the French Syndicalists. Their object is, foremost, to secure work for unemployed members, and to further that spirit of mutual assistance which rests upon the consciousness of labor's identity of interests throughout the world.

In his "The Labor Movement in France," Mr. L. Levine states that during the year 1902 over 74,000 workers, out of a total of 99,000 applicants, were provided with work by these societies, without being compelled to submit to the extortion of the employment bureau sharks.

These latter are a source of the deepest degradation, as well as of most shameless exploitation, of the worker. Especially does it hold true of America, where the employment agencies are in many cases also masked detective agencies, supplying workers in need of employment to strike regions, under false promises of steady, remunerative employment.

The French *Confédération* had long realized the vicious role of employment agencies as leeches upon the jobless worker and nurseries of scabbery. By the threat of a General Strike the French Syndicalists forced the government to abolish the employment bureau sharks, and the workers' own *mutualités* have almost entirely superseded them, to the great economic and moral advantage of labor.

Besides the *mutualités*, the French Syndicalists have established other activities tending to weld labor in closer bonds of solidarity and mutual aid. Among these are the efforts to assist workingmen journeying from place to place. The practical as well as ethical value of such assistance is inestimable. It serves to instill the spirit of fellowship and gives a sense of security in the feeling of oneness with the large family of labor. This is one of the vital effects of the Syndicalist spirit in France and other Latin countries. What a tremendous need there is for just such efforts in this country! Can anyone doubt the significance of the consciousness of workingmen coming from Chicago, for instance, to New York, sure to find there among their comrades welcome lodging and food until they have secured employment? This form of activity is entirely foreign to the labor bodies of this country, and as a result the traveling workman in search of a job – the "blanket stiff" – is constantly at the mercy of the constable and policeman, a victim of the vagrancy laws, and the unfortunate material whence is recruited, through stress of necessity, the army of scabdom.

I have repeatedly witnessed, while at the headquarters of the *Confédération*, the cases of workingmen who came with their union cards from various parts of France, and even from other countries of Europe, and were supplied with meals and lodging, and encouraged by every evidence of brotherly spirit, and made to

feel at home by their fellow workers of the *Confédération*. It is due, to a great extent, to these activities of the Syndicalists that the French government is forced to employ the army for strikebreaking, because few workers are willing to lend themselves for such service, thanks to the efforts and tactics of Syndicalism.

No less in importance than the mutual aid activities of the Syndicalists is the cooperation established by them between the city, and the country, the factory worker and the peasant or farmer, the latter providing the workers with food supplies during strikes, or taking care of the strikers' children. This form of practical solidarity has for the first time been tried in this country during the Lawrence strike, with inspiring results.

And all these Syndicalist activities are permeated with the spirit of educational work, carried on systematically by evening classes on all vital subjects treated from an unbiased, libertarian standpoint – not the adulterated "knowledge" with which the minds are stuffed in our public schools. The scope of the education is truly phenomenal, including sex hygiene, the care of women during pregnancy and confinement, the care of home and children, sanitation and general hygiene; in fact, every branch of human knowledge – science, history, art – receives thorough attention, together with the practical application in the established workingmen's libraries, dispensaries, concerts and festivals, in which the greatest artists and literati of Paris consider it an honor to participate.

One of the most vital efforts of Syndicalism is to prepare the workers, *now*, for their rôle in a free society, Thus the Syndicalist organizations supply its members with textbooks on every trade and industry, of a character that is calculated to make the worker an adept in his chosen line, a master of his craft, for the purpose of familiarizing him with all the branches of his industry, so that when labor finally takes over production and distribution, the people will be fully prepared to manage successfully their own affairs.

A demonstration of the effectiveness of this educational campaign of Syndicalism is given by the railroad men of Italy, whose mastery of all the details of transportation is so great that they could offer to the Italian government to take over the railroads of the country and guarantee their operation with greater economy and fewer accidents than is at present done by the government.

Their ability to carry on production has been strikingly proved by the Syndicalists, in connection with the glass blowers' strike in Italy. There the strikers, instead of remaining idle during the progress of the strike, decided themselves to carry on the production of glass. The wonderful spirit of solidarity resulting from the Syndicalist propaganda enabled them to build a glass factory within an incredibly short time. An old building, rented for the purpose and which would have ordinarily required months to be put into proper condition, was turned into a glass factory within a few weeks, by the solidaric efforts of the strikers aided by their comrades who toiled with them after working hours. Then the strikers began operating the glass-blowing factory, and their cooperative plan of work and distribution during the strike has proved so satisfactory in every way that the experimental factory has been made permanent and a part of the glass-blowing industry in Italy is now in the hands of the cooperative organization of the workers.

This method of applied education not only trains the worker in his daily struggle but serves also to equip him for the battle royal and the future, when he is to assume his place in society as an intelligent, conscious being and useful producer, once capitalism is abolished.

Nearly all leading Syndicalists agree with the Anarchists that a free society can exist only through voluntary association, and that its ultimate success will depend upon the intellectual and moral development of the workers who will supplant the wage system with a new social arrangement, based on solidarity and economic well-being for all. That is Syndicalism, in theory and practice.

Table des matières

Mutualism and gradualism in Proudhon.....	1
Mutualism.....	1
Gradualism.....	7
Syndicalism, The Modern Menace to Capitalism.....	10