

# **What is the union?**

Émile Pouget

1905

# Contents

Essential Association . . . . .	3
Union Autonomy . . . . .	4
The Union as School for the Will . . . . .	5
The Task in Hand . . . . .	7
Building the Future . . . . .	8

Property and authority are merely differing manifestations and expressions of one and the same "principle" which boils down to the enforcement and enshrinement of the servitude of woman. Consequently, the only difference between them is one of vantage point: viewed from one angle, slavery appears as a property crime, whereas, viewed from a different angle, it constitutes an authority crime.

In life, these "principles" whereby the peoples are muzzled are erected into oppressive institutions of which only the facade had changed over the ages. At present and in spite of all the tinkering carried out on the ownership system and the adjustments made to the exercise of authority, quite superficial tinkering and adjustments, submission, constraint, forced labour, hunger, etc. are the lot of the labouring classes.

This is why the Hell of Wage-Slavery is a lightless Gehenna: the vast majority of human beings languish there, bereft of well-being and liberty. And in that Gehenna, for all its cosmetic trappings of democracy, a rich harvest of misery and grief grows.

## **Essential Association**

The union association is, in fact, the only focal point which, in its very composition, reflects the aspirations by which the wage-slave is driven: being the sole agglomeration of human beings that grows out of an absolute identity of interests, in that it derives its *raison d'être* from the form of production, upon which it models itself and of which it is merely the extension.

What in fact is the union? An association of workers bound together by corporative ties. Depending on the setting, this corporative combination may assume the form of the narrower trade connection or, in the context of the massive industrialisation of the 19th century, may embrace proletarians drawn from several trades but whose efforts contribute towards a common endeavour.

However, whatever the format preferred by its members or imposed by circumstance, whether the union combination is restricted to the "trade" or encompasses the "industry," there is still the very same objective. To wit:

1. The offering of constant resistance to the exploiter: forcing him to honour the improvements won; deterring any attempt to revert to past practice and also seeking to minimise the exploitation through pressure for partial improvements such as reduction of working hours, increased pay, improved hygiene etc., changes which, although they may reside in the details, are nonetheless effective trespasses against capitalist privileges and attenuation of them.

2. The union aims to cultivate increasing coordination of relations of solidarity, in such a way as to facilitate, within the shortest time possible, the expropriation of capital, that being the sole basis which could possibly mark the commencement of a thoroughgoing transformation of society. Only once that legitimate social restitution has been made can any possibility of parasitism be excluded. Only then, when no one is any longer obliged to work for someone else, wage-slavery having been done away with, can production become social in terms of its destination as well as of its provenance: at which time, economic life being a genuine sum of reciprocal efforts, all exploitation can be, not just abolished, but rendered impossible.

Thus, thanks to the union, the social question looms with such clarity and starkness as to force itself upon the attention of even the least clear-sighted persons; without possibility of error, the association marks out a dividing line between wage slaves and masters. Thanks to which society

stands exposed as it truly is: on one side, the workers, the robbed; on the other, the exploiters, the robbers.

## **Union Autonomy**

However superior the union may be to every other form of association, it does not follow that it has any intrinsic existence, independent of that breathed into it by its membership. Which is why the latter, if they are to conduct themselves as conscious union members, owe it to themselves to participate in the work of the union. And, for their part, they would have no conception of what constitutes the strength of this association, were they to imagine that they come to it as perfect union members, simply by doing their duty by the union financially.

Of course, it is a good thing to pay one's dues on a regular basis, but that is only the merest fragment of the duty a loyal member owes to himself, and thus to his union; indeed, he ought to be aware that the union's value resides, not so much in the sum of their monetary contributions as in multiplication of its members' coherent endeavours.

The constituent part of the union is the individual. Except that the union member is spared the depressing phenomenon manifest in democratic circles where, thanks to the veneration of universal suffrage, the trend is towards the crushing and diminution of the human personality. In a democratic setting, the elector can avail of her will only in order to perform an act of abdication: her role is to "award" her "vote" to the candidate whom she wishes to have as her "representative."

Affiliation to the union has no such implications and even the greatest stickler could not discover the slightest trespass against the human personality in it: after, as well as before, the union member is what she used to be. Autonomous she was and autonomous she remains.

In joining the union, the worker merely enters into a contract " which she may at any time abjure " with comrades who are her equals in will and potential, and at no time will any of the views she may be induced to utter or actions in which she may happen to participate, imply any of the suspension or abdication of personality which is the distinguishing characteristic and badge of the ballot paper.

In the union, say, should it come to the appointment of a union council to take charge of administrative matters, such "selection" is not to be compared with "election": the form of voting customarily employed in such circumstances is merely a means whereby the labour can be divided and is not accompanied by any delegation of authority. The strictly prescribed duties of the union council are merely administrative. The council performs the task entrusted to it, without ever overruling its principals, without supplanting them or acting in their place.

The same might be said of all decisions reached in the union – all are restricted to a definite and specific act, whereas in democracy, election implies that the elected candidate has been issued by her elector with a *carte blanche* empowering her to decide and do as she pleases, in and on everything, without even the hindrance of the quite possibly contrary wishes of her principals whose opposition, in any case, no matter how pronounced, is of no consequence until such time as the elected candidate's mandate has run its course.

So there cannot be any possible parallels, let alone confusion, between union activity and participation in the disappointing chores of politics.

## The Union as School for the Will

Socrates's dictum "Know thyself!" is, in the union context, complemented by the maxim: "Act for yourself!"

Thus, the union offers itself as a school for the will: its preponderant role is the result of its members' wishes, and, if it is the highest form of association, the reason is that it is the condensation of workers' strengths made effective through their direct action, the sublime form of the deliberate enactment of the wishes of the proletarian class.

The bourgeoisie has contrived to preach resignation and patience to the people by holding out the hope that progress might be achieved miraculously and without effort on their part, through the State's intervention from without. This is nothing more than an extension, in less inane form, of millenarian and crude religious beliefs. Now, while the leaders were trying to substitute this disappointing illusion for the no less disappointing religious mirage, the workers, toiling in the shadows, with indomitable and unflinching tenacity, were if, building the organ of liberation to which the union amounts.

That organ, a veritable school for the will, was formed and developed over the 19th century. It is thanks to it, thanks to its economic character that the workers have been able to survive inoculation with the virus of politics and defy every attempt to divide them.

It was in the first half of the 19th century that such associations were established, in spite of the interdicts placed upon them. The persecution of those who had the effrontery to unionise was ruthless, so it took ingenuity to give repression the slip. So, in order to band together without undue danger, the workers disguised their resistance associations behind anodyne exteriors, such as mutual societies.

The bourgeoisie has never taken umbrage with charitable bodies, knowing very well that, being mere palliatives, they cannot ever offer a remedy for the curse of poverty. The placing of hope in charity is a soporific good only for preventing the exploited from reflecting upon their dismal lot and searching for a solution to it. This is why mutual associations have always been tolerated, if not, encouraged, by those in charge.

Workers were able to profit from the tolerance shown these groups: under the pretext of helping one another in the event of illness, of setting up retirement homes, etc., they were able to get together, but in pursuit of a more manly objective: they were preoccupied with bettering their living conditions and aimed to resist the employers' demands. Their tactics were not always successful in escaping the attentions of the authorities which, having been alerted by complaints from employers, often kept these dubious mutual aid societies under surveillance.

Later, by which time the workers, by dint of experience and acting for themselves, felt strong enough to defy the law, they discarded the mutualist disguise and boldly called their associations resistance societies.

A splendid name! Expressive and plain. A program of action in itself. It is proof of the extent to which workers, even though their associations were still in the very early stages, sensed that had no need to trot along behind the politicians nor amalgamate their interests with the interests of the bourgeoisie, but instead should be taking a stand against and in opposition to the bourgeoisie.

Here we had an instinctive incipient class struggle which the International Working Men's Association was to provide with a clear and definitive formulation, with its announcement that "the emancipation of the workers must be carried out by the workers themselves."

That formula, a dazzling affirmation of workers' strength, purged of all remnants of democratism, was to furnish the entire proletarian movement with its key-note idea. It was, moreover, merely an open and categorical affirmation of tendencies germinating among the people. This is abundantly demonstrated by the theoretical and tactical concordance between the hitherto vague, underground "unionist" movement and the International's opening declaration.

After stating as a principle that the workers should rely upon their own unaided efforts, the International's declaration married the assertion of the necessity of the proletariat's enjoying autonomy to an indication that it is only through direct action that it can obtain tangible results: and it went on to say:

Given,

That the economic subjection of the worker to those who hold the means of labour, which is to say, the wherewithal of life, is the prime cause of political, moral and material servitude;

The economic emancipation of workers is, consequently, the great goal towards which every political movement should be striving (. . .)

Thus, the International did not confine itself to plain proclamation of workers' autonomy, but married that to the assertion that political agitations and adjustments to the form of the government ought not to make such an impression upon workers as to make them lose sight of the economic realities.

The current unionist movement is only a logical sequel to the movement of the International – there is absolute identity between them and it is on the same plane that we carry on the endeavours of our predecessors.

Except that when the International was setting out its premises the workers' will was still much too clouded and the proletariat's class consciousness too under-developed for the economic approach to prevail without the possibility of deviation.

The working class had to contend with the distracting influence of seedy politicians who, regarding the people merely as a stepping-stone, flatter it hypnotise it and betray it. Moreover, the people also let itself be carried away by loyal, disinterested men who, being imbued with democratism, placed too great a store by a redundant State.

It is thanks to the dual action of these elements that in recent times (beginning with the hecatomb of 1871) the union movement vegetated for a long time, being torn in several directions at once. On the one hand, the crooked politicians strove to bridle the unions so as to tie them to the government's apron strings: on the other, the socialists of various schools beavered away at ensuring that their faction would prevail. Thus, one and all intended to turn the unions into "interest groups" and "affinity groups."

The union movement had roots too vigorous, and too ineluctable a need for such divergent efforts to be able to stunt its development. Today, it carries on the work of the International, the work of the pioneers of "resistance societies" and of the earliest combinations. To be sure, tendencies have come to the surface and theories have been clarified, but there is an absolute concordance between the 19th century union movement and that of the 20th century: the one being an outgrowth of the other. In this there is a logical extension, a climb towards an ever more conscious will and a display of the increasingly coordinated strength of the proletariat, blossoming into a growing unity of aspirations and action.

## The Task in Hand

Union endeavour has a double aim: with tireless persistence, it must pursue betterment of the working class's current conditions. But, without letting themselves become obsessed with this passing concern, the workers should take care to make possible and imminent the essential act of comprehensive emancipation: the expropriation of capital.

At present, union action is designed to win partial and gradual improvements which, far from constituting a goal, can only be considered as a means of stepping up demands and wresting further improvements from capitalism.

The union offers employers a degree of resistance in geometric proportion with the resistance put up by its members: it is a brake upon the appetites of the exploiter: it enforces her respect for less draconian working conditions than those entailed by the individual bargaining of the wage slave operating in isolation. For one-sided bargaining between the employer with her breast-plate of capital, and the defenceless proletarian, it substitutes collective bargaining.

So, in opposition to the employer there stands the union, which mitigates the despicable "labour market" and labour supply, by relieving, to some extent, the irksome consequences of a pool of unemployed workers: exacting from the employer respect for workers and also, to a degree proportionate with its strength, the union requires of her that she desist from offering privileges as bribes.

This question of partial improvements served as the pretext for attempts to sow discord in the s associations. Politicians, who can only make a living out of a confusion of ideas and who are irritated by the unions' growing distaste for their persons and their dangerous interference, have tried to carry into economic circles the semantic squabbling with which they gull the electors. They have striven to stir up ill-feeling and to split the unions into two camps, by categorising workers as reformists and as revolutionaries. The better to discredit the latter, they have dubbed them "the advocates of all or nothing" and they have falsely represented them as supposed adversaries of improvements achievable right now.

The most that can be said about such nonsense is that it is witless. There is not a worker, whatever her mentality or her aspirations, who, on grounds of principle or for reasons of tactics, would insist upon working ten hours for an employer instead of eight hours, while earning six francs instead of seven. It is, however, by peddling such inane twaddle that politicians hope to alienate the working class from its economic movement and dissuade it from acting for itself and endeavouring to secure ever greater well-being and liberty. They are counting upon the poison in such calumnies to break up the unions by reviving inside them the pointless and divisive squabbles which have evaporated ever since politics was banished from them.

What appears to afford some credence to such chicanery is the fact that the unions, cured by the cruel lessons of experience from all hope in government intervention, are justifiably mistrustful of it. They know that the State whose function is to act as capital's gendarme, is, by its very nature, inclined to tip the scales in favour of the employer side. So, whenever a reform is brought about by legal avenues, they do not fall upon it with the relish of a frog devouring the red rag that conceals the hook, they greet it with all due caution, especially as this reform is made effective only if the workers are organised to insist forcefully upon its implementation.

The unions are even more wary of gifts from the government because they have often found these to be poison gifts. Thus, they have a very poor opinion of "gifts" like the Higher Labor Council and the labour councils agencies devised for the sole purpose of counter-balancing and

frustrating the work of the s associations. Similarly, they have not waxed enthusiastic about mandatory arbitration and regulation of strikes, the plainest consequence of which would be to exhaust the workers' capacity for resistance. Likewise the legal and commercial status granted to the workers' organisations have nothing worthwhile to offer them, for they see in these a desire to get them to desert the terrain of social struggle, in order to lure them on to the capitalist terrain where the antagonism of the social struggle would give way to wrangling over money.

But, given that the unions look askance at the government's benevolence towards them, it follows that they are loath to go after partial improvements. Wanting real improvements only. This is why, instead of waiting until the government is generous enough to bestow them, they wrest them in open battle, through direct action.

If, as sometimes is the case, the improvement they seek is subject to the law, the unions strive to obtain it through outside pressure brought to bear upon the authorities and not by trying to return specially mandated deputies to Parliament, a puerile pursuit that might drag on for centuries before there was a majority in favour of the yearned-for reform.

When the desired improvement is to be wrested directly from the capitalist, the industrial associations resort to vigorous pressure to convey their wishes. Their methods may well vary, although the direct action principle underlies them all: depending on the circumstances, they may use the strike, sabotage, the boycott, or the union label.

But, whatever the improvement won, it must always represent a reduction in capitalist privileges and be a partial expropriation. So, whenever one is not satisfied with the politician's bombast, whenever one analyses the methods and the value of union action, the fine distinction between "reformist" and "revolutionary" evaporates and one is led to the conclusion that the only really reformist workers are the revolutionary syndicalists.

## **Building the Future**

Aside from day to day defence, the task of the unions is to lay the groundwork for the future. The producer group should be the cell of the new society. Social transformation on any other basis is inconceivable. So it is essential that the producers make preparations for the task of assuming possession and of reorganisation which ought to fall to them and which they alone are equipped to carry out. It is a social revolution and not a political revolution that we aim to make. They are two distinct phenomena and the tactics leading to the one are a diversion away from the other.

*Taken from Le Syndicat 1905.*



The Anarchist Library  
Anti-Copyright



Émile Pouget  
What is the union?  
1905

<https://libcom.org/library/what-union-emile-pouget>

**[theanarchistlibrary.org](https://theanarchistlibrary.org)**