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The Amsterdam Congress: Anarchism and Syndicalism

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If we talk about revolution, then, let us at least be prepared for it. Unfortunately, the fight must be brutal. He would, like to think otherwise – but how could it be? We cannot let ourselves be killed. These are a few of the things he would recommend the comrades to ponder and discuss.

everybody in the country would die of starvation. The modern possibilities of transport make it undesirable for capitalists to accumulate food. It was estimated that London was never provisioned for much over three days, in spite of all her warehouses.

In dealing with this question of the General Strike we *must* begin by considering the necessity of food. This is a more or less new basis for the conception. A peasant strike, for instance, appeared to him as the greatest absurdity. Their only tactics were immediate expropriation; and wherever we find them setting to work on those lines it is our business to go and help them against the soldiers. And then he had read somewhere that we ought to go and smash the railway bridges! He wondered whether the advocates of such foolishness ever realised that corn has to come the same way the cannons come. To adopt the policy of neither cannons nor corn is to make all revolutionists the enemies of the people. We must face the cannons if we want the corn.

Let us realise that the General Strike is only one means of fighting the capitalists, and let us find out how it works in practice, how really to use it. If the Governments have perfected the arms of repression, we must set to work to perfect those of revolution. We need more knowledge; we want new methods of fighting; we need a *technique militaire*. In his own early days when they talked about the General Strike for the first time, every man had his own rifle and revolver, his plan of the town, of the forts, arsenals, prisons, Government buildings, and so forth. Nowadays nobody thinks of these things, and yet they talk on glibly about revolution. Look at what happened in South Italy. The Government shot down peasants by the hundred, and the only soldier that was hurt fell off his horse by accident. (It was this massacre that made Bresci take extreme action. He believed a telegram which was sent him from Rome saying that the King himself had ordered the soldiers to shoot without mercy.)

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volved Parliamentarianism. This was a great mistake. What, for example, was Bresci's act? Was it economic? No; it was political. Marx was responsible for this confusion. He approached the whole question from the economic viewpoint, and sometimes almost takes it for granted that the peasant enjoys paying rent to his landlord. This is manifestly absurd. No peasant – and no other worker for that matter – *likes* paying rent; he does so simply because of the force – the political force – that is behind the landlord.

He now came to the General Strike. What he objected to was the idea, so freely propagated by some Syndicalists, that the General Strike can replace insurrection. Some people fondly cherish the idea that we are going to starve the bourgeoisie. We should starve ourselves first. Or else they go so far as to admit that the General Strike involves expropriation. But then the soldiers come. Are we to let ourselves be shot down? Of course not. We should stand up to them, and that would mean Revolution. So why not say Revolution at once instead of General Strike? This might seem only a question of words, but it goes deeper than that. The advocates of the General Strike make people think they can do things without fighting, and thus actually spoil the revolutionary spirit of the people. It was propaganda of this kind that brought about such illogical positions as that taken up by the strikers recently at Barcelona, where they did fight the soldiers, but at the same time treated with the State. This was because they were under the delusion that it was only an economic question.

He considered that some of the pamphlets published on the General Strike did nothing but harm. In the first place, it was a fallacy to base their arguments, as some of them do, on a supposed superabundance of production. Not being much of a hand at statistics himself, he once asked Kropotkin what was the real position of England in this respect, and he was told that England produces enough for three months in the year only, and that if importations were stopped for four weeks

gether with a solution of the unemployed problem, they might do it; but the fact of the matter was that as the Syndicalist organisation grew nearer and nearer to perfection, the number of unemployed grew greater and greater. Certainly, Syndicalism in this way can emancipate a part of the Workers, but not all. It is only too obvious that the Syndicates make a serious division of the workers, and often enough without doing any harm to the capitalists.

Do not let us make any mistake about what we mean by “solidarity of the workers.” It is often used as if there existed some natural economic solidarity among the exploited workers. But this class solidarity even is only an abstraction. The material fact of life under existing conditions is the personal antagonism between all workers. Solidarity is an aspiration, and in that alone lies its importance to the workers. It is an aspiration that is capable of transforming the economic conditions of a nation, for the differences of economic conditions are not due to financial causes, but to the varying spirit of the people in the different countries. Indeed we may as well confess at once that the purely economic struggle is not sufficient; it must be based on an intense moral struggle, for changes in economic conditions soon readjusted themselves where the moral conditions of the people remained unaffected.

Of one point about Anarchists in Syndicates he was quite certain — that no Anarchist could take an official position in a Syndicate without placing himself in a false position. Indeed, he was not sure whether even the plain Anarchist member of a Syndicate would not before many years find himself in a false position, for he was only accepted until the Syndicates became really strong, and then he would be asked to go. He did not see why France should consider herself in a novel condition; English Trade Unionism began in just the same revolutionary tone, and look at it now!

He should like, in passing, to clear up a misunderstanding of terms. He often heard political action referred to as if it in-

Precursors of Syndicalism IV

In previous instalments of this series, we have discussed syndicalist ideas in the First International (*Precursors of Syndicalism I*), before turning to International Working People’s Association (*Precursors of Syndicalism II*) and communist-anarchism (*Precursors of Syndicalism III*). Here, we highlight anarchist-communist criticisms of revolutionary syndicalism.

There were three main critiques made. First, that unions are not inherently revolutionary and so anarchists had to organise as anarchists to influence them. Second, that the general strike was not sufficient to achieve a revolutionary transformation. Third, that syndicalism focused exclusively on just one aspect of life, albeit an essential one, namely production.

Before discussing this critique, it is useful to clear a misunderstanding that Errico Malatesta — the anarchist most associated with critiquing syndicalism — was opposed to applying anarchist ideas in the labour movement. This was expressed by historian James Joll when he asserted that “as far as effective action by the Anarchist movement was concerned, it was [the French syndicalist] Monatte rather than Malatesta who was right” in 1907 during their famous exchange on syndicalism at the International Anarchist Congress as “ideas of anarcho-syndicalism and of direct industrial action were to give the anarchist movement a new lease of life [...] anarchism in association with trade unionism was to show itself, for the only time in the history of the anarchist movement, an effective and formidable force in practical politics.” (*The Anarchists* [London: Methuen, 1979], 188).

Yet, looking at Malatesta’s life and ideas, Joll clearly misunderstands his critique of syndicalism, presenting him as being opposed to syndicalism and anarchist participation in the workers’ movement. As with Proudhon, whose critical comments on certain aspects of certain forms of workers’ associations have been turned by some commentators into an oppo-

sition to association *as such*, so Malatesta's critique of certain aspects of syndicalism has been turned into an opposition to syndicalism. Nothing could be further from the truth, as will be shown. Indeed, Malatesta had a long history of union organising and urging anarchists to enter the unions.

A member of the First International, he reminded those assembled at the 1907 International Anarchist Congress in Holland that he had "never stopped [...] pushing comrades to the path that syndicalists, forgetting a glorious past, call *new*, but the first anarchists had already established and followed within the international." (Maurizio Antonioli (ed.), *The International Anarchist Congress Amsterdam (1907)*, p. 122) He attended the Saint-Imier Congress in September 1872 which passed a resolution on "*Organisation of Labour Resistance*":

"attempts have already been made to organise labour to improve the conditions of the proletariat [...] the advantage of this organisation is such that [...] it cannot be abandoned. It makes the proletariat fraternise ever wider in common interests, trains it in collective living, prepares it for the supreme struggle. [...] we intend to organise and unify resistance on a vast scale. The strike is for us a precious means of struggle [...] a product of the antagonism between labour and capital, necessarily having the consequence of making workers more and more aware of the abyss which exists between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat, strengthening the workers' organisation, and preparing, as a result of ordinary economic struggles, the proletariat for the great and final revolutionary struggle which, destroying all privilege and all class distinction, will give the worker the right to enjoy the full product of his labour, and thereby the means of developing in the collectivity all his intellectual, material and moral powers."

This revolution would see "the establishment of an absolutely free economic organisation and federation, based upon the labour and equality of all" which "can only be the outcome of the spontaneous action of the proletariat itself, of trades

had restored it. He would not deny that there were serious dangers in the movement, besides that most serious one of the subsidising of the Bourses du Travail. There was the danger of centralisation, which naturally chokes individual initiative to a certain extent. Here was work for Anarchists—and in fighting against this they would find many Socialists with them. Then there was the danger of officialism. It was inevitable that the man who had been sitting in a secretary's armchair year after year should begin to take a different view of the movement to what he did when he was working in the mine or the shop. Every Anarchist in the Syndicates would naturally oppose this dangerous principle of re-electing officials. Finally, he would warn Anarchists against joining Syndicates simply to use them as fields of propaganda. Let them join as exploited workers pure and simple first, as men of noble opinions after.

MALATESTA expected some comrades would be surprised to hear him speak against Syndicalism and the General Strike, against a certain conception of the General Strike, a pacifist conception that seems to be growing popular among Syndicalists. But first he desired to make it quite clear that he as much as any one regretted the isolation that is the fate of Anarchists who do not participate in the Labour movement. In the propaganda of Anarchist ideas we must, of course, support the mass movement; He was so far entirely in agreement with previous speakers. But he felt that the other side of the question had not been fairly put, so he would limit himself to bringing out what he considered the essential differences of opinion between Anarchists and Anarchist-Syndicalists. He had himself been such a strong advocate of entering the Syndicates that he had even been accused of being a Syndicatemaker. That was all very well at one time, but now we are confronted with "Syndicalism," the doctrine. He would have nothing to say against it if he could believe that Syndicalism alone could, as was claimed for it, destroy Capitalism. But who could expect to overthrow Capitalism while remaining a servant of capitalist protection? To-

shows the mistrust of the workers for Parliamentary action. Over and over again the politicians have tried to win them, and for this reason they were for a long time shunned by Anarchists. But with the political success of Millerand the atmosphere cleared. Then came the union of all revolutionists, and the Anarchists showed that they were organisers. There are still a few Syndicates outside the Confederation—the Miners, for example—but they will soon join. The Syndicalist movement is the workers' movement, and for that reason alone all Anarchists should join their Syndicates.

Direct Action is the one principle of Syndicalism, and the strike is the most important form of action in the Syndicates. Some Anarchists might say to him: We do not want strikes; we want revolution. But he would ask them: How is the revolution to come before the workers know their power? Every strike is a lesson in revolutionary action. A strike is also the best means of propaganda. Until a great strike aroused that province, Brittany was the most backward part of France. Since the strike the number of Syndicates there has grown to over a hundred. To have taken part in a serious strike brings to each man a total change of mentality. He must clear up one popular misunderstanding about the movement in France. It was often imagined that the business of the Confederation was to order strikes, and that Syndicates could not strike without referring the question first to the Confederation. This is entirely a mistake. The Syndicates and their sections are absolutely autonomous and strike when they think fit, simply advising the Confederation of the fact.

In putting the case for Syndicalism he would point out that the General Strike, to have any permanent effect, is obviously more complicated an affair than any merely political revolution. It would have to be carried out with a clear understanding of what was wanted, and with an absolute confidence in the organisations. Anarchists had begun to lose confidence in the coming revolution in France, Syndicalists

unions and autonomous communes". The similarities with the syndicalism of the 1890s is clear.

After a series of abortive insurrections in Italy in the mid-1870s and other adventures, in 1885 Malatesta emigrated to Argentina and took an active part in its emerging labour movement. He helped found the first militant workers' union in Argentina – the bakers union, *Cosmopolitan Society of Resistance and Placement of Bakery Workers (Sociedad Cosmopolita de Resistencia y Colocación de Obreros Panaderos)* – in 1886 and was asked to draft its principles. Two years after its founding, the bakers' union went on strike in Buenos Aires demanding better conditions and higher wages. During its 10 days strikers clashed with the police and not only stood up for their rights and gained a 30% wage increase but also left a permanent political mark in their craft itself: the bakers decided to give blasphemous and anti-state names to their goods.

To this day bakers in Argentina sell such items such as *bollos de fraile*, *suspiros de monja*, *vigilantes*, *cañones*, and *bombas* – monk balls, nun's sighs, vigilantes, cannons, and bombs. Monk's balls, a sweet bun often filled with *dulce de leche*, obviously mocks the church by presenting a friar's testicle in pastry form while the nun's sigh is a reference to an orgasm. The others target the State and the police: *vigilantes* are made in the shape of a police officer's baton, the *cañones* are long, hollow, and filled with a sweet filling while *bombas* are a choux puff pastry.

In short, not only was an impressive victory won which left an anarchist influence in the workers' movement for decades to come, the food and culture of the nation were affected. Joll admits in passing that Malatesta "left an anarchist stamp on the organised working-class movement [in Argentina] which was to last well into the twentieth century" (160) but sadly fills more space on his extremely marginal links to the Siege of Sidney Street than explore how this awkward fact impacts on his analysis.

Unsurprisingly, on his return to Europe in 1889 Malatesta continued to advocate anarchist participation in the labour movement along with systematic organisation of anarchist groups and federations to facilitate this. Joll, however, spends far more time on Georges Sorel who played no role in the rise of syndicalism and who simply commented upon a movement already well-established before he put pen to paper. Unlike Malatesta, for Fernand Pelloutier, the anarchist most associated with the birth of revolutionary syndicalism in France, indicated his debt to him:

“Finally, alongside the Germanist party and the trade unions, freed now from the Marxist yoke, there is the libertarian communist element, whose ambition today (and, by the way, should have always been) to pursue the work of Bakunin and to devote itself to the education of the unions.

“The Revolution,” wrote Merlino two years ago, ‘demands the cooperation of the entire working masses. Let the masses organise themselves swiftly, and let the different groupings get to work right away.’ This year, the idea expressed by Merlino has taken shape. Malatesta has just published in *Solidarity*, New York, a proposal for an international federation of revolutionaries, whose aim is ‘to encourage the workers’ movement and to urge the workers to join forces to conquer the highest earnings and the greatest possible freedom; ... to participate in a general strike ...’

[...]

“So there are now only two very distinct parties: the parliamentary party, which is made up of chiefs and soldiers [...] the revolutionary party, convinced that, as the social question is entirely economic, emancipation will come by resistance to economic oppression, in the form of a necessarily violent gigantic strike. (“La Situation Actuelle du Socialisme”, *Les Temps nouveaux*, 6 July 1895)

Four years later, Pelloutier wrote that Malatesta was “a perfect illustration” of a propagandist who knows “so well how to

tween communist-anarchism and syndicalism far outweigh the disagreements.

We end by reprinting *Freedom’s* summary of Monatte’s and Malatesta’s famous speeches at the 1907 International Anarchist Congress (*Freedom’s* report was subsequently issued as a pamphlet). As a summary, there are differences with the longer accounts printed in *Congrès anarchiste international d’Amsterdam: Compte-rendu analytique des séances et résumé des rapports sur l’état du mouvement dans le monde entier* (Paris, La Publication Sociale, 1908), translated as *The International Anarchist Congress Amsterdam (1907)* (Alberta: Black Cat Press, 2009). These have never, as far as we are aware, been reprinted.

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MONATTE – Before dealing with the general question of the relations between Anarchism and Syndicalism, let us see what is meant by the latter in France. The revolutionary Syndicates are composed of men who, while they are by no means all Anarchists, are all anti-Parliamentarians. The basis of Syndicalist organisation is one Union for each trade in each locality. These Unions, or Syndicates, are grouped together locally by the Bourses du Travail, which are unfortunately subsidised by the municipality. The Syndicates are also federated nationally by trades, these federations at present numbering sixty-four, with headquarters usually in Paris. Out of these and the Bourses du Travail is formed the Confederation—that is, one delegate from each Bourse and each national Syndicate. This dual organisation has been found most effective, and it now remains only to strengthen it by supplementing the Bourses du Travail by about seventy regional organisations, thus linking up the whole country. The whole history of the movement

But the Congress considers it the duty of Anarchists to constitute the revolutionary element in these organisations, and to advocate and support only those forms of direct action which have in themselves a revolutionary character, and tend in that manner to alter the conditions of society.

The Anarchists consider the Syndicalist movement as a powerful means of revolution, but not as a substitute for revolution.

They recommend the comrades to take part in a General Strike even if proclaimed with the aim of capturing the political power, and to do all they possibly can to make their Syndicates put forward questions of economic rights.

The Anarchists further think that the destruction of capitalist and authoritarian society can only be realised through armed insurrection and expropriation by force, and that the use of the General Strike and Syndicalist tactics ought not to make us forget other means of direct action against the military power of governments. (*Freedom: A Journal of Anarchist Communism*, December 1907)

Communist-anarchism shares much with syndicalism and its critique does not question its core aspect – the necessity of libertarians to work within and refashion the labour movement to practice direct action and be self-managed by its members. This explains why *Freedom* published Malatesta’s critique of syndicalism in one issue and began serialising Pouget’s *The Basis of Trade Unionism* in the next (and later issued it as a pamphlet).

To conclude: Joll, like many other commentators, seems to have overlooked where Malatesta stressed he was “only [going to] deal with here with those areas in which [he was] in disagreement with the previous speakers” and confidently – but clearly too optimistically! – discounted the possibility that his criticism could be construed as he being “an enemy of the organisation and workers’ action”! (*The International Anarchist Congress Amsterdam (1907)*, 121) The points of agreement be-

unite an indomitable revolutionary passion with the methodical organisation of the proletariat.” (*Lettre aux anarchistes*) The same year saw Malatesta arguing that unions “help to educate, to morally uplift the working classes and to prepare and train them for the struggle” and “to achieve this, it is necessary that the most advanced, most conscious elements contribute their ideas, their initiative, their combativeness.” The “first task” of anarchists was to get the membership active in the union for the “big disadvantage of workers’ societies is that the vast majority of members do not take any part in their social life, beyond the appointment of leaders.” Anarchists who join unions and “then take no active part in their lives, do a lot of harm” for “[o]rganising, and then not caring about the organisation, is the same as doing nothing. Others will act on behalf of the inactive, and will use their union dues to impose their own ideas, often their own interests, just as if people were not organised.” (“The Anarchists and Workers’ Societies,” *Complete Works of Malatesta* [Edinburgh: AK Press, 2019], IV: 106–7)

In short, the communist-anarchist critique of syndicalism cannot be mistaken as being anti-syndicalist – anarchist participation in the labour movement was something both Kropotkin and Malatesta had argued for since their days together in the First International (Kropotkin had joined it in 1872 and re-joined once he had escaped from Tsarist imprisonment). Anyone familiar with Malatesta’s or Kropotkin’s ideas and activism know that they were *not* against anarchists working in unions: their position is best summarised as not being *anti-syndicalism* but rather *syndicalism-plus*.

With that clarified, we can return to the anarchist-communist critique.

As regards the first criticism, Kropotkin summarised it well in a letter to an Italian comrade in 1914:

“My opinion is absolutely that which was expressed by Malatesta [...] The syndicate is absolutely necessary. It is the only form of worker’s association which allows the direct

struggle against capital to be carried on without a plunge into parliamentarianism. But, evidently, it does not achieve this goal automatically, since in Germany, in France and in England, we have the example of syndicates linked to the parliamentary struggle, while in Germany the Catholic syndicates are very powerful, and so on. There is need of the other element which Malatesta speaks of *and which Bakunin always professed.*" (quoted in Max Nettlau, *A Short History of Anarchism* [London: Freedom Press, 1995], 280–1)

In other words, Kropotkin is referring to the need for anarchists to organise as anarchists to influence the class struggle and workers' unions towards libertarian tactics and structures. The first example of this was the *Alliance of Social-Democracy*, an anarchist organisation Bakunin helped create in 1868 and which played a key role in the development of the First International in Switzerland, Italy and above all Spain.

Malatesta explained why anarchists had to organise as anarchists to a British audience in 1907. Noting that while syndicalism, as it aimed to "organise the workers independently of all bourgeois and political influence, to win their emancipation by the direct action of the wage-slaves against the masters," was "a great step in advance," anarchists should not commit the "error of confounding the Anarchist movement with Trade Unionism." Rather than committing the "error of having abandoned the Labour movement," anarchists "ought to abstain from identifying themselves with the Syndicalist movement, and to consider as an aim that which is but one of the means of propaganda and of action that they can utilise. They should remain in the Syndicates as elements giving an onward impulse, and strive to make of them as much as possible instruments of combat in view of the Social Revolution." ("Anarchism and Syndicalism", *Freedom: A Journal of Anarchist Communism*, November 1907)

This meant that syndicalism could not and should not replace the anarchist movement – one had to be open to all work-

will make their own decisions and seek to contact others to help realise them, whether these links are fleeting or permanent, whether they are by means of one-off agreements or by forming federations – and all the possibilities in between. As such, suggestions that syndicalism would see a "Labour Parliament" replace the current State misunderstood the both the history of the State structure and the needs of society. While such a perspective was articulated most by Marxist-syndicalists, it did sometimes appear in mainstream syndicalist writings and, as such, Kropotkin was right to stress the danger.

However, all these criticisms should not obscure the fact that syndicalist ideas – the need for economic struggle and organisation, the general strike, unions becoming the means to run industry – were advocated within the First International by the first of the revolutionary anarchists (as Monatte himself noted in 1907 [*The International Anarchist Congress Amsterdam (1907)*, 110]). This was the theory and practice of anarchism when Malatesta joined the International in 1871 and the legacy he helped shape in the congresses of the Federalist International – and which he eloquently defended in 1907. This can be seen the resolution he co-authored for the International Anarchist Congress which summarises the issues well (even if the translation appears to use the term "Syndicalism" rather than the "Trade unionism" which the context calls for):

SYNDICALISM AND THE GENERAL STRIKE

The International Anarchist Congress considers the Syndicates as organisations fighting in the class war for the amelioration of the conditions of labour, and as unions of productive workers which can help in the transformation of capitalist society into Anarchist Communist society.

The Congress also, while admitting the eventual necessity of the formation of special revolutionary Syndicalist groups, recommends the comrades to support the general Syndicalist movement.

needless to say, few if any syndicalists these days would disagree.

This vision of an interwoven associational life points to a related concern, namely that the syndicalist vision accidentally reproduces certain aspects of the regime just overthrown. Thus the notion of replacing assemblies of politicians elected on the basis of locality with ones elected by workplace runs the danger of focusing all decision-making into a new all-embracing body. As Kropotkin suggested, “Pataud and Pouget still pay too heavy a tribute to the past. That is inevitable in works of this kind. Their Trade Union Congress which discusses if the children, the sick, and the aged are to be made a charge on the community, concerns itself, in our opinion, with questions that will be settled on the spot, and when they decide that no Union, no social service, shall be able ‘to separate itself from the community’ they decide a question that the local life, alone, is in a position to solve.” (*Direct Struggle Against Capital*, 560)

While under the State we are used to all issues being discussed in Parliament or by the Government, regardless of their (lack of) competency on the matter, Kropotkin had long argued that a new society would see multitude of federations and connections between community, workplace and other groups. Decision-making would have to be decentralised *and* decentred, placed into the hands of those affected by the decisions who would then federate with other groupings as needed. Suggesting that all the manifold affairs and interests of society would be funnelled into one body, albeit one created by a federation of self-managed unions, raises the danger of a recreation of a bureaucracy around it to handle the information required to make and implement such decisions.

While there would be a need for all-embracing congresses (whether one-offs or regularly called) on specific issues, at specific times or in response to specific events, the needs of a complex society means that these would be just one of many federations and gatherings. Individuals, communities, workplaces

ers and seek improvements within capitalism, the other was required to work systematically within it to ensure it did not adapt to that reality. History shows the validity of this critique – there is nothing inherent within unions that ensure that they become or remain revolutionary or even radical. The forces of bureaucracy and adjustment (the need to keep agreements with bosses) have turned almost all unions reformist and moderate – the exceptions are those with militants who work at the base to keep it radical.

So even if a revived *Industrial Workers of the World*, say, was successful in organising hundreds of thousands of workers again, there would still be the need for anarchist groups and federations to work within and outwith it. Without this militant minority, even the best union will adjust to the wider capitalist environment. Thus Malatesta was simply arguing against those libertarians who “take this means [unions] as an end” and allowed themselves “to be absorbed” by the labour movement just as he had done so against “comrades [who] isolated themselves from the workers’ movement.” Syndicalists, then, were “going to the opposite extreme”. (*The International Anarchist Congress (1907)*, 122, 126)

The second criticism focuses on the nature of the revolution, specifically the role of the General Strike. This had a long history in libertarian circles, dating back at least to the First International. As such, historian Paul Avrich was wrong to suggest in his discussion of the “Chicago Idea” of the International Working People’s Association and its links with syndicalism that “the general strike” was not “theoretically developed until the turn of the century.” (*The Haymarket Tragedy* [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984], 73) Yet Bakunin was discussing the revolutionary possibilities of a general strike in the pages of *L’Égalité* in April 1869 while the previous September had seen Belgium Internationalists successfully moving a resolution in favour of a general strike at the outbreak of war at the IWMA Congress in Brussels –

with Marx dismissing the latter as “Belgian nonsense that it was necessary TO STRIKE AGAINST WAR.” (*Marx-Engels Collected Works* 43: 101). The Federalist International discussed and approved the idea as a means to start a revolution at its September 1873 Geneva congress – with Engels distorting and then mocking the idea in his *Bakuninists at Work* (a work which gave the right and the bureaucrats of Social Democracy many weapons against the left seeking to get the movement to embrace the tactic once syndicalism had popularised the idea). Thus we find Adhemar Schwitzgubel arguing in 1874 as follows:

“The idea of a general strike by the workers which would put an end to the miseries they suffer is beginning to be seriously discussed... It would certainly be a revolutionary act capable of bringing about the liquidation of the existing social order and a reorganisation in accordance with the socialist aspirations of the workers.” (quoted by Joll, 180)

After his release from prison and exile in Britain in 1886, Kropotkin again raised the General Strike as a powerful means to create a revolution after the example of the 1889 London Dockers Strike (see “The London Dock Strike of 1889,” *Anarcho-Syndicalist Review* No. 63 [Winter 2015]). The following year saw an anonymous article entitled “General Strike” in *Le Révolté* end with the words: “We want free agreement of labour, without masters, without laws, but simply grouped by affinities. Since the general strike is the cornerstone of our liberation, cry out long live the general strike.” (“Grève Générale,” *Le Révolté*, 8 March 1890) The same year, Louise Michel during an exile in London – and as reported by newspaper published half-way around the world in one long paragraph – lectured on the subject:

MDLLE. LOUISE MICHEL ON THE GENERAL STRIKE.

A Meeting was held in the Athenaeum, Tottenham Court Road, on September 4, when Mdlle. Louise Michel spoke upon the “General Strikes and the Social Revolution.” Mdlle. Michel

groups and the free federation of communes and of groups of independent communes.” (“The Anarchist Idea from the Point of View of its Practical Realisation,” *Direct Struggle Against Capital*, 500–1)

Which brings us to the third part of the critique, namely the syndicalist focus on the economic realm.

As Kropotkin summarised, communist-anarchism was based on the “idea of independent Communes for the *territorial* groupings, and vast federations of trade unions for groupings *by social functions* – the two interwoven and providing support to each to meet the needs of society – allowed the anarchists to conceptualise in a real, concrete, way the possible organisation of a liberated society” to which were added “groupings *by personal affinities* – groupings without number, infinitely varied, long-lasting or fleeting, emerging according to the needs of the moment for all possible purposes.” So while agreeing that “the social revolution within the Commune” meant “trade unions for production,” there was also the need for “the Federation of Communes” as well. (*Modern Science and Anarchy* [AK Press, 2018], 164–5, 161)

Syndicalism, then, appeared to concentration on just one aspect of the social institutions of a free society, namely the economic. However, we are not just workers and so revolutionary ideas must be wider than that. As Malatesta stressed in 1907: “what is proposed is the complete liberation of humanity, which is currently in a state of servitude, from an economic, political and mental point of view.” (*The International Anarchist Congress Amsterdam (1907)*, 126) The struggle cannot be limited to just exploitation within the workplace – oppression also needs to be tackled, regardless of where it is. This wider perspective does not mean ignoring or dismissing the class struggle – as Marxist critics of, say, Emma Goldman falsely assert – just that oppression and exploitation needs to be fought on all fronts (sex, race, sexual orientation, and so on) and in all locations (workplace, community, home, and so on). Perhaps

benefit.” In short, the general strike must become a general expropriation and “turn into insurrection.” (*The International Anarchist Congress (1907)*, 124–6)

Thus the idea of a General Strike as simply a mass folding of arms was misleading and doomed to failure. Many syndicalists were aware – or became aware – of this. Most obviously, Émile Pataud and Émile Pouget in *How We Shall Bring About the Revolution (Comment nous ferons la Révolution, 1909)* turn their general strike into an insurrection – Parliament is not ignored, it is stormed. Likewise, they recognise the need to defend the revolution and its expropriations and show the armed people organising themselves to resist attempts at counter-revolution. In this, they repeat the ideas of Malatesta, Kropotkin and Bakunin and perhaps unsurprisingly, Kropotkin recommended the work on numerous occasions including his 1919 postface to the Russian edition of *Words of a Rebel*, although he thought it “considerably attenuated the resistance that the Social Revolution will probably meet with on its way.” (*Direct Struggle Against Capital*, 583, 561). Pierre Besnard, a leading French syndicalist in the 1930s, likewise argued for “an insurrectional and expropriating general strike” (*Les Syndicats Ouvriers at la Révolution Sociale* [Paris, 1930]). As such, Kropotkin’s vision of social revolution from 1879 was embraced by both anarchist-communists and syndicalists:

“expropriation pure and simple of the present holders of the large landed estates, of the instruments of labour, and of capital of every kind, and by the seizure of all such capital by the cultivators, the workers’ organisations, and the agricultural and municipal communes. The task of expropriation must be carried out by the workers themselves in the towns and the countryside. [...] Once the deed of expropriation is accomplished, and the strength of capitalist resistance broken, there will inevitably arise after a certain period of fumbling a new form of organisation of production and exchange [...] the bases of this new organisation will be [...] the free federation of producer

said the general strike which was imminent would in all probability be brought about by the employers themselves. The tendency in all the methods of production was towards an increased use of machinery; in fact, so perfect was machinery becoming that more and more workmen were thrown out of employment every year and left to starve. In Paris they found a refuge in the bosom of the Seine, which told no tales; in England, the workman who was unable to obtain subsistence for himself and his family was driven into the workhouse. This state of affairs could not last. Workmen were held down by soldiers and police, but when the time came when the soldiers and police saw that the balance of power inclined to the working classes, they would at once come over to their side; and when that happened the time would soon arrive when they would see the downfall of the capitalists. The unemployed in Paris, if they demonstrated, were shot down; in London they had the privilege of walking about the streets in their misery. This state of things could only end in a general strike against all laws and Governments. They could not continue to be driven like animals to the slaughterhouse. They saw great magazines of food and raiment all round them, whilst they were naked and starving. What was to prevent them from going in and helping themselves? The whole of the capital of the world was getting into the hands of great financiers, who used it to exploit the workers, and this was only a gigantic system of robbery. Religion had been suggested as a means to bring a better state of affairs, but the only valuable principle and teaching in Christianity was the precept to do unto others as they would that men should do unto them, but the system of rewards and punishments, by which the teachings of Christianity were enforced, was a fatal drawback to its value as an elevating agent. Faith in the future progress of the human race was necessary for them all. Machinery was an obstacle in that progress, and should be replaced by intelligence. It was only by raising men to the higher state of intelligence that they could satisfy the growing

needs of humanity. When labour was free the cultivation of the soil would be much more perfect. The fields were ready to supply all their needs if properly treated, but the present system of cultivation brutalised the workers, who reaped no benefit from their labours. The present system of government was a system of robbery by assassins, who shot down those who differed from them. It was the same in Republican France as in Monarchical England. She looked forward to the time when they could put an end to the struggle for existence now going on and bring about a true Republic – the Republic of Humanity, in which all would work together for the common good. (*New Zealand Herald*, 8 November 1890)

So years before the rise of syndicalism, revolutionary anarchists had raised the potential of the general strike as a means of social transformation. Interestingly, the August 1894 issue of the London-based *The Torch* had articles by both Malatesta and future leading French Syndicalist Émile Pouget “but it was Malatesta’s article that advocated the general strike as a revolutionary weapon.” (Davude Turcato, *Making Sense of Anarchism: Errico Malatesta’s Experiments with Revolution, 1889–1900* [AK Press, 2015], 135)

So anarchists had seen the power and potential of the General Strike since the late-1860s and, unsurprisingly, Kropotkin had raised what was to become the communist-anarchist critique of what become, for a time, the syndicalist version in the last article by him published before his arrest in December 1882. He pointed to the 1877 great railway strike in America for lessons and noted that public support was lost when the strike disrupted the supply of essential goods (“L’Expropriation”, *Le Révolté*, 23 December 1882). The need, then, was to turn a general strike into a general expropriation and *restart* production and distribution under workers’ control:

“So, when these days come – and it is for you to hasten their coming – in which a whole region and great cities with their suburbs will have got rid of their governments, our work is

marked out; all industrial and other plants must be returned to the community, social property held by individuals must be returned to its true master – which is all of us, so that each can have his full share of the goods available for consumption, so that production of all that is necessary and useful can continue, and that social life, far from being interrupted, can be carried on with the greatest energy. Without the gardens and fields that give us produce indispensable for life, without the granaries, the warehouses, the shops that gather together the products of work, without the factories and workshops that provide textiles and metalwork, without the means of defence, without the railways and other ways of communication that allow us to exchange our products with the neighbouring free communes and combine our efforts for resistance and attack, we are condemned in advance to perish” (*Words of a Rebel* [Montreal: Black Rose Books, 1992], 219–220)

Note well the reference to “means of defence” and “combine our efforts for resistance and attack,” so belying Marxist claims – repeating Marx and Lenin as if they were disinterested seekers after truth rather than polemicists seeking to win by any means – that anarchists do not recognise the threat of counter-revolution. Kropotkin also noted this in his analysis of the lessons of the 1905 Russian Revolution:

“We want to add that although a general strike is a good method of struggle, it does not free the people that use it from the necessity of an armed struggle against the dominating order.” (“The Russian Revolution and Anarchism,” *Direct Struggle Against Capital* [Edinburgh: AK Press, 2014], 477)

Malatesta agreed, making precisely this point at the 1907 Congress by noting that, as regards the General Strike, he had “accept[ed] the principle and promot[ed] it [...] and have done so for several years [...] as an excellent means to set off a social revolution.” However, workers would be starved back to work long before the bosses were and so, like Kropotkin in 1882, he stressed that they had “to go on working, but for their own