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Introduction to Pierre Besnard's Anarcho-Syndicalism and Anarchism

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Translated by Paul Sharkey.

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When the Russian anarchists nearly a half a century ago pioneered the hoisting of the anarcho-syndicalist colours, the word was rather coldly received by the anarchist movement. And in 1917, following the downfall of Tsarism — it was also the eve of the October Revolution — anarcho-communists were unduly guarded about and even hostile towards this new anarchist formation.

Anarcho-syndicalism is not a doctrine. It is the meeting between a given doctrine and an equally specific trade union tactic.

Revolutionary syndicalism, as we knew it in France, prior to the war, was, so to speak, created and nurtured by anarchist militants, by Pelloutier, by Griffuelhes, by Pouget. But right from the moment it arrived, its creators and propagandists, its militants made to surround the movement with a *wall of abso-*

lute neutrality as far as political or philosophical ideology went.
Remember the terms of the Charter of Amiens...

But the class struggle is of positive value only if it is constructive in its aspirations. So that struggle has to be endowed with a future program that would complement its minimum program of partial demands in the here and now.

Anarcho-syndicalism arose precisely out of that need, which anarchists have eventually come to appreciate, to add to the short-term program a social program that would embrace the whole economic and social life of a people.

The Great War swept away the Charter of trade union neutrality. And the split inside the First International between Marx and Bakunin was echoed — nearly a half-century later — in the inevitable historic split in the post-war international workers' movement.

To counter the policy of subordinating the workers' movement to the conveniences of the so-called "workers'" political parties, a new movement founded *upon mass direct action*, outside of and against all political parties, rose from the still smoking embers of the 1914–1918 war. Anarcho-syndicalism made a reality of the only confluence of forces and personnel capable of guaranteeing the worker and peasant class its complete independence and its inalienable right to revolutionary initiative in *all of the manifestations* of an unrelenting struggle against capitalism and State, and the rebuilding of a libertarian social life upon the ruins of outmoded regimes.

So anarcho-syndicalism is complementary to anarcho-communism. The latter was afflicted by a considerable shortcoming that paralyzed all its propaganda: its detachment from the labouring masses. In order to plant libertarian principles there and afford them opportunities for actual realization, what was required was the organizing of trade unions and the placement of trade unionism upon libertarian and anti-statist foundations.

Which is what anarcho-syndicalism did and continues to do.

Now that anarcho-syndicalism exists as a force organizing the social revolution *on libertarian communist lines*, anarcho-communists owe it to themselves to become anarcho-syndicalists for the sake of organizing the revolution and every anarchist eligible to become a trade unionist should be a member of the anarcho-syndicalist General Labour Confederation.

Organized, outside of their unions, into their ideological (or, to borrow the terminology employed by our Spanish comrades, “specific”) federations, anarchists remain the continually active leaven, allowing anarcho-syndicalism to build but preventing dangerous compromises.

But the ideological guidance implied by the “builders” being imbued with the ideal of the “propagandists” turns into *effective* leadership. Prior to this, and especially in the aftermath of the war, nationally and internationally, the trade union movements had always found themselves tied to the apron strings of some “workers” party or “labour” International. Anarcho-syndicalism, which today stands for the revolutionary syndicalist direct action movement and libertarian reconstruction, must not, by aping the rest of the workers’ movement, come to find that it too is tied to the apron strings of some “specific” organization — be it at the national or international level. That would be a mistake every bit as irreversibly fatal as it has proved for the reformist or dictatorship-minded brands of trade unionism.

The Anarchist Federation supports the Anarcho-Syndicalist Confederation in its class struggle and striving for revolutionary reconstruction. But it should not assume the initiative or leadership of it.

On the international scene, an Anarchist International can only mirror the national Anarchist Federations. It will be the bulwark of the IWA, but must never become its commander-in-chief.

Pierre Besnard, *Anarcho-Syndicalism and Anarchism*, 1937