

The Charter of Lyon

Adopted by conferences of the CGT-SR, Lyon, 1–2 November 1926

Confédération Générale du Travail-Syndicaliste Révolutionnaire

November 1926

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[This text is a founding document, it situates the thinking of Pierre Besnard and the French Revolutionary-Syndicalists (Confédération Générale du Travail Syndicaliste Révolutionnaire or CGT-SR). The CGT-SR organised several thousand workers, especially in building trades in their period up to the outbreak of the Second World War. Other libertarians preferred to work in other workplace organisations closer to the Socialist and Communist parties or in autonomous local syndicates.

The CGT-SR affiliated to the 'Berlin' International Workers' Association and published *Combat Syndicaliste*, a journal is available on the website ArchivesAutonomies.org

Readers might compare this text with *The Organisational Platform of the General Union of Anarchists*, written by Nestor Makhno, Ida Mett, Peter Arshinov, Valevsky and Linsky,¹ and published at about the same time, in October 1926 in Paris.²]

In view of the financial and political instability of the French state and the possibility that at any moment the regime will go into crisis, posing the question of a new social order through a revolutionary road, Congress declares that syndicalism must draw from this catastrophe those outcomes that are best suited to workers' liberation, simultaneously refusing to offer capital the means to regain equilibrium.

Consequently, it affirms that the proletariat should not only direct its energies towards the overthrow of the existing regime but also act to obstruct political parties and their all too eager struggles to possess power. Thus, syndicalism must know how to take advantage of every attempt by parties to take power, syndicalism should itself become the playmaker, syndicalism should make the decisions, destroy power, substitute for that power a social order that depends on organisation – the organisation of production, exchange and distribution organisation. The interaction between every cog and wheel in the union will assure all this activity.

As it proclaims the profoundly economic significance of the coming revolution Congress is careful to insist on its essence: the revolution must embrace those indispensable features of radical social transformation that both capitalism and the proletariat regard as being inevitable. In this class-centred workers' planning, these features can be set in place only by the proletariat organised in unions, devoid of direction from beyond its midst, free from direction that can only be harmful. Only if these features are respected can the leaps and surges of the popular revolution, that have hitherto been used and directed by political parties, accomplish finally and successfully those decisive changes in economic and social order that are made necessary by modern social development.

Congress observes the profound novelty of events that are developing, events that render useless and impossible partial political transformations. It also notes that fascism, the new government doctrine of the rich and powerful, reordering everything in the capitalist system is also

¹ Appendices 2 and 3 were written by Platform co-thinkers.

² Translation by Nestor McNab, 2006. www.nestormakhno.info; anarchistplatform.wordpress.com – other translations are also quoted.

placing on the agenda the social problem from the same economic angle, and intends to use syndicalism by manipulating it to fit in its own particular desires, and to achieve its own designs.

Considering all the above, Congress declares that future events, as they unfold in the economic sphere will open new parameters for the life of the people and for genuine characteristics of social life, and these will take root and grow with surprising force. This vitality will arise out of the growth of productive and creative forces harmoniously bringing together the energy of unskilled manual workers, technicians, and intellectuals, directed constantly towards progress.

The logic of transformation that we need is defined so. Reiterating the words of that part of the [Charter of] Amiens resolution, which declared: 'Syndicates, which today are structures of resistance will become, in the future, the structure of social reorganisation, production and distribution', congress affirms that syndicalism, as the natural and concrete expression of movement of worker-producers, contains within itself, in latent and organic form, all those essential activities – in both policy-making and getting things done – that are needed for a new way of life.

From this day on then, syndicalism should bring together, in just one organisational plan, all those energies of manual labour, technology and science which being dispersed have worked separately in both industry and agriculture. From the moment it can bring together in just one body all the various energies that contribute and assure life in society, syndicalism will be ready, from the beginning of a revolution, to take in hand the direction of production and administration of social life through its various organs.

While understanding the magnitude and great difficulties of these responsibilities, congress is bound to affirm that syndicalism must begin to repair its organisation, spread its organs, adapting them to circumstances, just as capitalism itself does, so as prepare to act tomorrow as an administrator and enlightened manager of production, distribution and exchange. It is not unaware of the extreme complexity of problems that will emerge when capitalism disappears. And it does not hesitate to declare that the labour movement, which so far has not yet brought together all the forces needed for tomorrow's social life, needs to prove its intelligence and flexibility by summoning to its side everyone who through their activity, whose work, know-how or knowledge will have a natural place among them and who will be needed to assure a new way of life at every level of production. Congress does not overlook the profound changes that have occurred in the field of science and technology, in both industry and agriculture and does not hesitate to appeal to scientists and technicians as it focusses on indispensable transformation. Likewise, it calls on peasants to ensure jointly with their brother [urban] workers, the life and defence of the revolution which cannot be completed without their conscious, constant and complete cooperation. Thus, Congress believes that through concord, and through harmonious and fruitful effort, all will be united together for the task of human liberation, a unity of hand and brain workers in agriculture and in industry.

Syndicalists, being ambitious only to be the bold pioneers, working as agents building and directing social transformation within a syndicalist framework, wish that their movement – the living reflection of the aspirations and material and moral needs of the individual – should become the genuine synthesis of the social mechanism that already now is coming together. Everyone will find the human, ideal and organic conditions of the future revolution desired by all workers in that development. Tomorrow must belong to the worker-producers, associated or organised through their economic practice. Social and political organisations will rise up among them; everything needed to complete, organise, coordinate, unify, expand and act, is to be found

among them. In this way the worker will arise, a living reality, an essential prop, a natural motor of human society, confronting that fleeting, unstable, artificial entity, the citizen.

Syndicalism and the nation – its general activities

Since it was formed, the Revolutionary Syndicalist CGT has affirmed, that it intended to be an exclusively class formation, one of workers. Therefore, and in complete agreement on this point with the Charter of Amiens, it must itself lead social and economic struggles. As a genuine organ of class defence and of class struggle it opposes parties and stands above them; it is the active force that helps all workers defend their interests, be they immediate or future, material or moral. Having reflected on current circumstances it affirms its desire to prepare without delay a comprehensive outline of tomorrow's social and economic life and wishes to examine potential features and general workings immediately.

Congress intends to substitute syndicalism, the natural expression of social life of individuals marching onwards towards free communism, in place of capitalism, the outcome and result of past life, on its the last lap of historical evolution – something suited to and fashioned by the ruling classes with no doctrine or theory. Rejecting the principle of shared privilege, so dear to the defenders of the general interests and class hierarchy, syndicalism must pursue its own mission destroying privilege and establishing social equality. It will achieve its aims by making management disappear, abolishing individual and collective wage earning, and abolishing the state. As regards this it recommends the general strike, expropriation of capitalism, taking possession of the means of production and exchange, as well as the immediate destruction of all state power.

Its means of action.

Congress, to define its conception of a general strike, wishes to affirm that in its view this means of action preserves all its importance, in every circumstance, (corporately, locally, regionally, nationally or internationally). The partial or general strike rests and remains the only true weapon of the proletariat to ensure the triumph of its demands – be they partial or general; federal or national; defensive or offensive. As for the expropriating general strike, the first revolutionary act in a capitalist system, this strike will be marked by an immediate, concerted and simultaneous ending of work, and congress affirms that it can only be violent. It will have as its objectives:

- To deprive the state of any ability to act, by taking over the means of production and exchange; removing whoever is then in power.
- Defending proletarian conquests, which must serve to assure the existence of the new order.
- Restarting the system of production and exchange after, and through taking ownership, reducing to a minimum any break in rural or urban production and exchange.
- Replacing the state power that has been destroyed with a rational, federalist organisation of production, exchange and distribution.

Confident in the power of these means of struggle, congress declares that the proletariat will have the ability, not only to take possession of all the productive forces, destroying the current forms of state power, but will also be able to use its force in the interest of the liberated collective commonwealth defending it, arms in hand against every counter-revolutionary attack. The proletariat will avail itself of whatever form may be needed for social organisation in line with the stage of development achieved by people living at that moment.

It declares that the yardstick for revolutionary achievement will be determined only by workers' mental faculties and by their potential to build up their economic organism and it is to that end that their maximum efforts should be directed. The stability of the revolution from one moment to the next must be maintained, congress indicates, irrespective of any preconceived system, abstract theory or dogma, which may be in contradiction with the new social and economic reality.

Proclaiming its indefectible loyalty to revolutionary struggle, and to provide a better definition of its thinking, congress declares its beliefs that revolution is a social fact structured by the permanent contradiction of class conflict; and that this antagonism erupts brutally and suddenly, as precipitation takes effect, breaks its normal banks. Consequently, it declares that syndicalism – like all other movements – has the right to use it [revolutionary antagonism] in line with its own intentions to achieve as much as it can those goals that it has set itself; and in so doing it acts without confusing its activity with those of parties that also pretend to transform the social and political order, parties who propose for these ends the dictatorship of the proletariat, and the creation of a so-called provisional state.

In addition to this essential action, congress declares that through the action of its everyday demands, syndicalism pursues the coordination of workers' struggles, the greater well-being of labour, working through winning immediate improvements such as: the reduction of working hours, salary increases, etc. Day by day, it prepares for the liberation of workers that can be achieved only through the expropriation of the capitalist system.

While it condemns 'class collaboration' and general-interest-unionism, congress declares that the inevitable discussions between management and labour do not constitute class collaboration. While it sees in these discussions – which result from the current situation – an aspect of ongoing class struggle, congress defines class collaboration as being characterised by the fact of participating in bodies which bring together labour, management or the state for a common approach to economic problems, for solutions that will only prolong and reinforce the current regime.³

³ Further paragraphs discuss syndicalism in a pre-revolutionary period, relations with other revolutionary forces, international issues and youth.

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Le Combat Syndicaliste, December 1926.
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