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The Anarchist Movement in China

H. Godwin-Grimm

1923

On developments in the Far East, the revolutionary proletariat of Europe is little or misinformed. The only news we have on the Chinese labor movement comes from Bolshevik sources. It will therefore be suitable for all compañeros to transcribe some excerpts from a letter from compañero Hun-de-bai, exponent of the “Student Union of Beijing,” written last August to a compañero in Germany and published in the Hamburg *Alarm*:

“Only in 1911 — year of the revolution — did Chinese workers awaken from their inertia. When the imperial throne of the Manchu was toppled, the proletariat enthusiastically went over to the republican field of the Guomindang, subject to the orders of the head of the party, Dr. Sun-yat-sen. All too soon, the young Chinese republic fell under the same despotic regime before, only instead of a single despot, the Emperor, there were fifty petty despots, the military governors of the various provinces. Inveighing against their reactionary maneuvers from the very start were the discontented Chinese student youth, who, since 1902, had been organized in two major associations: the “Chinese Student League” and the “Beijing

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Union of Students and Scholars.” While the first, although declaring itself neutral in politics, is on the nationalist-republican terrain, that is, bourgeois or social democratic, the second manifests purely socialist organization since its inception. On his trips to America, its founder, Cai Yuanpei, came to know and to study anarchist communism, becoming its supporter and active propagandist among students. So in 1918, at the 16th Congress of the “Beijing Union,” he declared as his principles the social theories of Proudhon, Bakunin, and Kropotkin.

This Union, which has about 22,000 members, publishes a daily paper, “New Way” (Sin-Anchar), and the “Weekly Magazine,” of a scientific character. Not only did the feeble and impotent Chinese government have to allow young anarchists to make their way, but it was even constrained by the threat of a student strike to recognize the election of Cai Yuanpei as president of Beijing University.

Only in 1914 did Cai Yuanpei begin the propaganda of anarchist ideas among the peasants. And yet, in a short time, great masses of farm workers were attracted to such an extent that today every major village has its anarchist group. In the countryside, anarchist influence has undoubtedly outstripped that of the other tendencies, whether Bolshevik or nationalist-republican.

Since 1917, the greatest focus of anarchism was in Fujian province in southern China. Here, it had acquired influence over the leader of the glorious republican insurrection of 1911, Chen Jiongming, who, advised by the known anarchist propagandist Shifu, summoned all the influential libertarians of China for the establishment of an anarchist commune in the whole province. In each center of the province, autonomous organizations of working people and workers’ councils have been introduced and are in operation, and now farmers’ cooperatives and unions of industrial workers regulate all production by agreement. According to Shifu, in a few years the whole province of Fujian will have become one great communist-anarchist federation.

This surprising result is certainly attributed largely to the tireless propaganda of compañero Shifu, who with the help of his friend, former General Chen Jiongmíng. Institutes for spreading anarchist and syndicalist ideas were founded in Zhangzhou (capital of the province). This organization includes and provides year-round the operation of a school for organizers, a school for advanced social science, and a school for propagandists, in which they participate as Chinese revolutionary forces. From this emanate three thousand comrades who later spread the idea of anarchist communism via lectures, pamphlets, newspapers and leaflets through all the vast provinces of China.

The city of Zhangzhou, center of anarchism in the Far East, was also the birthplace of the largest boycott initiative against Japan in 1920, which still gives foreign exploiters a lot of trouble, because in China the capitalists are mostly foreigners — British, American and Japanese — who treat the Chinese as servants, worthy only of contempt, and who are gradually taking possession of all the wealth of the country. Against them the aversion of all the people stir, belong to any party. To give this feeling of hostility a direction and a goal, the anarchists of Fujian placed themselves at the head of a movement to boycott all foreign industries, seeking to annihilate the entire foreign capitalist industry.

The boycott gave certain optimal results: in cities the Chinese workers took possession of the factories of their exploiters, getting to work on their own: in other places, such as in Shanghai, was reached killings Japanese, assaults on stores and street fighting between the crowd and the Chinese soldiers. In Zhangzhou great demonstrations of a good hundred thousand people carrying red and black banners, and musicians who played the “Internationale” and the “Anarchist March.” Thousands of pamphlets and leaflets written by Shifu, Cai Yuanpei and other compañeros were distributed at these demonstrations. Once again the triumphant power of the “popular socialism” Bakunin was demonstrated. Compañero Yuan-Pai-Tsen, until yesterday a henchman of the

bourgeois Guomindang party, solemnly declared, to the delight of the crowd, that he could not resist the triumphant march of anarchist ideas across the country, and soon declared his decision to fight under the black flag of Bakunin for the freedom and happiness of China. He stated that this ideal is only achievable through Bakuninian anarchism; only anti-authoritarian socialism can lead workers back to their land and make them love it, because it restores the land, the factories, and science, until now the monopoly of a few, to all of the people. Yuan-Pai-Tsen ended his speech with these words: "As the son of the people, I am for the unremitting class struggle against all exploiters, indigenous and foreign. And since the people can only become equal, just, and master of itself only with anarchist communism, I'm a Bakuninist."

Thus, even in the nationalist climates of our country, spreading our ideas opens the way, but especially among industrial workers.

In 1921 the anarchists led a strike of 20,000 miners. The strike failed; but a year later, 80,000 coolies (porters) went on strike in the coal region of Kaylan,¹ and this time, won. And we are active in the port cities: more than 40,000 people in Canton responded to our call for the demonstration on May 1 last year. The workers have realized that only in direct action, only in revolution, is their salvation to be found.

That is also why the Bolsheviks have very little following among the workers, primarily because they work in agreement with the nationalist Guomindang party of Dr. Sun-yat-sen. This makes the working masses suspicious, which more willingly follows the anarchist movement Zhangzhou than the Bolsheviks order from Moscow. We could never establish relations with the Communist Party as it cannot be found even in illegal areas.

Our greatest hope lies in the youth. Chinese 25,000 Chinese students who work with us have founded nationwide youth leagues for mutual aid, anarchist propaganda and discussion societies. Up

¹ Possibly referring to the Anyuan district?

to 100,000 students grouped in these leagues number among the young workers in the tea and rice industries. It is from these that the new China shall emerge..."

Compañero Hun-de-bai ends his letter with the invitation to a work agreement and proposes above all the urgent establishment of an anarchist youth international, not as a subsidiary of a communist or syndicalist international, but as a living and independent attestation of the development of the anarchist spirit among the youth around the world.