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The Clerks' Strike in Paris

Maximilienne Biaï

1909

The strike of the clerks of Le Bazar de l'Hôtel de Ville manifested, from the start, a character so peculiar that no-one could fail to notice it, least of all the management of this commerce establishment. One of the bosses, Mr. Ruel, venting in interviews which were widely publicised by the press, said amongst other things:

“Agitation was created and maintained by the union of shop assistants affiliated to the Confédération Générale du Travail, which has its headquarters at the Bourse du travail (...) The two members of the unions, who had showed up to impose us the CGT's conditions (...) By refusing to bow down to the CGT's orders, we are not following our own interests... In so acting, we are defending the interests of every shop-owner in general who are threatened by the revolutionaries of the rue Grange-aux-Belles.”¹

On a technical point, at least, Mr. Ruel is wrong, since to be precise there is not at this time any Paris union of clerks which would be fully confederated. But it is true, however, that the conflict between the employees and the management of the Bazar developed along the usual methods of the CGT: a sudden mobilisation of the employees, an unannounced desertion of the shops by the employees, the organisation of meetings in which everyone was called to

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exercise shared control and shared responsibility in the way the movement would go, a call to every invited union to show their take part in every effort made by the employees, demonstrations which, far from limiting themselves to closed rooms, spilled onto the streets and invade the workplace transformed into a place of strike, solidarity fund raising, communist soup kitchens, etc. and, most importantly, the good humour of people who do not feel isolated in an unfair fight as if they were fighting alone and for themselves; this is revolutionary syndicalist agitation, direct action in all its might.

How did the shop assistant corporation, until now so peaceful and grey, suddenly join such a clear notion of class struggle? This story is the story of the Paris shop assistants' union itself.

The clerks' union, under its current form, has only existed since earlier this year. But, at the time, it had just been constituted from the merging of two groups which had long been involved in industrial action: Shop assistants' union of the department of the Seine, and the rue de Saintonge fraction of the Union Chamber of the Paris region shop assistants, the So assistants' union, half-confederated by the affiliation to the Seine Unions' Union and which had its offices at the Bourse du travail, from its creation, was entirely convinced by direct action, but it was stronger in energy of its militants than in their numbers. It is considering this group that syndicalist militants used to say that shop assistants might maybe provide a few active militants, but was unable to get from its mass any serious number of union members.

And indeed the members of the Union Chamber, half-confederated by its affiliation to the National federation of shop assistant, and located rue de la Reynie, joined this organisation for about the same reasons as people join mutual aid groups. An unemployment fund, conceived in order to capitalise some reserves, allowed each member individually to accommodate best the dangers of a still precarious personal situation. The administrative board, changed by said fund into the wardens of a treasury,

notified of their dismissal, it could make public in the press⁸ its disapproval of what had happened and what was to follow?

What was the point of all this? If some militants could have felt, at the start, a bit at a loss, the needs of the starting conflict quickly put them back on the right track. Direct action, in the end, gave back energy even to these who first thought it was an inconvenient. It is not only previously non-unionised employees that the strike at the Bazar made flow in to join the clerks' union in mass. Let down by their organisation, weren't there also a significant number of Union Chamber members who simply joined the ranks of the only active organisation?

Therefore the Clerks' Union of the Paris region now presents itself to the members of this trade like their usual centre of syndicalist organisation and action. (...)

fession. While the large-scale conditions of industrial production make workers feel like they are far away from the time to “fight for the abolition of wages and bosses”⁶, this time seems to any clerk who envisions the large-scale commercial organisation like very near and, so to speak, within reach.

These are lessons of experience which were well worth a direct action strike, no doubt.

Is that to say that the Bazar strike was, in every way, a model strike and the prototype of any future syndicalist action among clerks? Looking into the detail of its daily development, we can see, to be honest, a few mistakes.

It is annoying that the individual zeal of a few militants almost introduced in the conflict some interventions of a more political than economic nature and of a more than disputable character... How could we not also regret that the movement seemed, at first, to lose its purely professional basis which rallied everyone and get complicated with a religious issue which spread even among the friendly press⁷ and was very close to dividing the staff between themselves... We must also mention the action of those who, although they came to vote the strike, didn't do it, and severely condemn this behaviour, although it is explainable from comrades who, too recently in contact with the syndicalist spirit of discipline were doubting themselves because they didn't trust others enough.

All of this is nothing else than the dead weight of former mistakes practised at the Union Chamber, And it would hardly be worthy to mention if there weren't more to say about the responsibility of this organisation, which was at most mitigated by its later course correction. Because if the Union Chamber disapproved, as normal, of a movement which which was not leading and which was using methods for which it has no sympathies, if it had the right to advise or not to advise its members, how could it believe that between the November 2nd demonstration and the declaration of strike the next day in the evening, while a hundred comrades were already

ended up considering any attempt at collective action for a general demand as a danger for the reserves, threatened to be dried up by mass unemployment which could follow such a movement. Therefore we could say, without even exaggerating the paradox, that the Union Chamber, “inactive and annuitant”², constituted for Paris commerce the best guarantee against any syndicalist contamination of the staff. However, as waterproof as the wall established by the Union Chamber between the staff and the rest of the proletariat seemed to be, syndicalist ideas had filtered and appeared under the usual form of disagreements where too superficial or too cunning minds said they could only see conflicts of personalities. A break followed, and a large contingent of the best militants emigrated from the rue de Saintonge, where, after having briefly constituted their own group, they started a process of integration with the shop assistants' union.

Nothing says better the character of this fusion than the words themselves exchanged during the first negotiation committee:

“We are here”, said one of the delegates of the Saintonge fraction, “to escape the dictatorship of a few leaders of the Union Chamber and their moderatism.”

“From what you're saying”, the union delegates replied, “it seems that you are leaving an organisation which has faded away for want of enough syndicalist forces. We have only one thing in mind. In the Seine department, there is no strength to fight the bosses: all of our union thinks we need to constitute this force...

We bring you our statutes, our situation in the Unions' Union of the Seine, our years of struggle, our habits of propaganda, join us with you numbers...

We offer you a merging without condition, a prelude to a general merging of the shop assistants' employees which will ensure the necessary unity of action to make our professional interests triumph...”³

Once the merging was effective, a short period of adaptation followed, which both sides had anticipated, in the functioning and

the perfecting of the new Shop assistants' union of the Paris region. When the needs of a common effort had not yet established the unity of method without which administrative unity is nothing, it seemed that there had to be within the union two tendencies, one more reformist, the other more revolutionary. These two tendencies opposed each other on the administrative board and neutralised to some extent the action of the administrators, all equally trying nor to put too much pressure brutally on a starting organisation. That is why the union itself, as a whole, by a decision of all its members, called to a general assembly at the date of last March 17, was invited to discuss the rules of action which they wished their board to follow. The result of the debate was a vote, almost unanimously, of the following agenda:

“The members of the Shop assistant's union in the Paris region, meeting in a general assembly;

Considering that the intervention of the government can only be in favour of the bourgeois class whose interests they serve;

Acknowledging that only DIRECT ACTION, ACTION DIRECTLY EXERCISED AGAINST THE BOSSES, that is, can be useful and efficient.”

Such a clear agenda on March 17th marked the beginning of syndicalist agitation which developed into the strike at Le Bazar de l'Hôtel de Ville. First of all, the union acted on itself by the wisest of decisions. The representatives of the rue Saintonge comrades had made the union tolerate the provisional preservation of the principle of an unemployment fund for which even its mandated defenders were hardly sympathetic: “a simple transition tactic” they told the members of the former union “which we ourselves want to soon modify in a way on which we will collaborate with you.”

The general assembly of July 15 deemed that membership recruitment should be made on a different basis than some possible feeble financial help. The unemployment fund disappeared. The principle of indemnities to union members was maintained, and ensured in other, less dangerous ways. The financial idea of the

with the continuous perfecting of their methods. You are stuck in a rut and lagging behind your competitors. You have made some disproportionate buys, you have cumbered yourself with an awkward assortment, some categories of commodities, not put on sale on time, have become unsaleable, here is a list of objects which sell for a good price and easily and which can be found everywhere but in your store. Whereas, for everyone else, business is business, you procure your goods, for personal reasons, from this or that person, who, sure to be able to move their wares, whatever they are, doesn't bother to perfect them... And this does not exist uniformly throughout your store, but only where the inability of the top managerial staff runs free... As a boss, you do not know your job, customers leave you, you can't see any other remedy than opening later, an unfair competition process actually vis a vis similar stores and by which your commercial ineptitude is publicised. We do not like, as employees, to bear the brunt of your mistake, and our interests, in this case, is also your customers' interest and, therefore, your own interest. Leave the technical management of the Bazar to those who are able and keep to your job as a shareholder which is not at stake for the moment.”

This is what concluded the employees of Le Bazar, and whoever read the special issue of The Clerks' Tribune is forced, by the evidence of accumulated facts, to draw the same conclusion. So Mr. Ruel's business practices are now discredited, and he is forced, for the greatest profit of his store, to change his ways. What industrial workers' strike would have offered such a spectacle?

Indubitably, it happens that CGT militants, used, by their function, to the notion of general realities, take back from a visit to comrades on strike some substantial analyses of a particular industry. But, there, it is the comrades on strike themselves who were immediately able to uncover the whole functioning of a large department store.

We can immediately see the consequences of such an example and what new state of mind it will create among the clerk pro-

tomers, who might be quite indifferent to the fate of the employees who serve them, but who wish to avoid the demonstration. There are also customers hostile by definition to the bosses' class: those who agglomerate in the union groups and who would naturally follow an indication to boycott this or that store. Fears from part of the customer-base and the hostility of another, two risks which are both contradictory and complementary; Le Bazar de l'Hôtel de Ville will have learnt the hard way what it costs to provoke them.

And that's not all. Because workers, how brilliant as they might be, hardly gets a chance to understand the complexity of the inner workings of factory production. Some parts of technical organisation are beyond them and the "proletarians" of a special order who, with their titles as engineers, deal with them, do not feel the purely theoretical solidarity that their situation as wage workers establishes with other workers. Also, the conditions on the buyers' market for raw materials and the market for distribution of factory products are factors that capitalist production prefer to keep a mystery to the workers.

There's nothing like this in commerce. There, nothings separates both operations, sales and procurement are actually so intertwined that by doing one, the clerk gets some experience in the other, and by the sole effect of progressive experience, the smallest seller could normally become aisle manager, whose main function is as a buyer.

Nothing is more telling about this issue than the special issue of The Clerks' Tribune, which the union printed especially during the strike and which was entirely written by the strikers themselves.

"You are claiming," they tell Mr. Ruel, "that your profits have slumped because your store did not saty open after a certain hour. These are the proofs to the contrary. Your sales were going down even before for general reasons linked to the creation of provincial department stores. "novelty" articles are especially hit with the fashion of flat dresses renovated of the Empire style, which use little fabric. Others are also hit by the commercial setback; they parry

union was that although it can be useful and even necessary sometimes to constitute some reserve in ordinary times, this reserve has no other aim than to be spent during a struggle.

The first outside action of the union took place at La Samaritaine, where the concerted refusal of all the beef steaks served for lunch and the unanimous demand for soft-boiled eggs had the food regime immediately changed. Soon afterwards, at the Bank, the employees obtained the Saturday afternoon off during the holiday period, and the managers of large financial establishments, trying to get ahead of demands, invited their employees to fill a notebook with their desiderata. And new members kept flowing in. In less than six months, the Union of Clerks had doubled its membership: a sure proof that this profession had already largely gone beyond mutualism in which the influence from the Union Chamber would have tried to keep it. This is how the vitality of this new Union and its past success pushed the employees of Le Bazar de l'Hôtel de Ville to ask it to take a new campaign in hand, which was going to be imposed on them by the boss's ill will.

Earlier this year already, the union had organised, at the Bourse du travail, a few meetings aimed at getting the closing times of Le Bazar lowered. But the young organisation, which hadn't yet been clarified by the March 17 direct action agenda, had concentrated on favouring this movement without leading it and had thought it had to accept, in a spirit of concord, that its members send a petition to the management who declared not wanting to hear anything about the union. That was how a result had been had, but, as management noted, "for a trial period". The event seemed altogether like a nice gesture from the management.

In January, it pleased the Bazar's management to lower the closing time in January. In November, it pleased them to move them back to the old hours. It was normal, as it was a favour granted by superiors to their subordinates and not a convention agreed between equals, one side strong of their position as capitalists, the other strong of the union duly qualified to represent them. We

know what happened next: the decision of the Bazar's bosses was disclosed to their employees, with an announcement that it would be effective on November 2nd; some delegates from the Union went to meet with Mr. Ruel, who claimed that his commercial situation no longer allowed him to maintain the concession made in January; a call by the Unions' Union of the Seine to the whole Parisian working-class to invite them to support the demonstrations against the Bazar's management by its employees; the attempt at intimidation by Mr. Ruel who threatened to sack on the spot anyone who would leave their aisle before the prescribed time; and suddenly the mass of demonstrators flowing into the department stores, the employees leaving their aisles to go to the Bourse du travail and deliberate, the Bazar precipitously closing before the prescribed time; the next day, revocation notices were given to the best part of the staff, and in response there was an immediate declaration of strike.

What a tone of anticipated triumph Mr. Ruel first used to announce the press that the strike was in all only effective for a tenth of his employees. He already thought he was master of the situation, refused the proposal of arbitration by the 4th district Justice of the Peace, under the pretence that the insufficient proportion of strikers did not allow him to consider that there was between him and his employees "a disagreement of a collective nature"⁴, and soon after he hinted at some indeterminate date when a few measures of clemency towards some leaders could be discussed...⁵And that was all they could hope to achieve from their movement if the strikers had only used the conciliatory measures cherished by the weakest among them.

But the strikers trusted their union forces, they relied on the union not only to strengthen the resistance, but to push for an offensive, and from this fact alone, Le Bazar was forced to close every evening long before the time desired by the management and even long before the time demanded by the employees, and this will have lasted for as long as the strikers wished.

The most important result from this strike and the most unexpected result for the employees themselves was this demonstration by the deed that the direct action method offers shop assistants not only the usual advantages we already knew about, but specific advantages unknown to industrial workers.

Industry managers, when circumstances do not allow him to remedy the strikers' defection by hiring random people, can generally, without much damages, stop production. They own stocks which can be used immediately to answer urgent orders. Agreements with similar factories will allow them to keep their procurement related to the predicted needs of ordinary sales. From part of their clients, bulk buyers who are just as hostile as they are to workers' demands and up for anything to see them fail, they will be granted delays to fill their orders. Not to mention the cases when, not knowing what to do with an excess of production, the strike seems like a good occasion not to have to take the responsibility of a lock-out.

For commerce establishments, especially in retail, suddenly to replace a high proportion of employees by newcomers would create such problems that closing down a shop would not sound worse. Closing the shop, stopping sales, even for a short time is the most impossible thing. At least, as long as province remained dependent on Paris and ensured an important part of the sales, there was some possibility to delay expeditions. But nowadays, department stores are being built everywhere, Paris mostly sells to Paris, and not being able to reach everyday customers, isn't it sending these customers somewhere else, to the department store on the other side of the street? Will they come back? Suppose they do. They would find goods from before the crisis, withered, old, outdated, and leave hastily, for good this time.

And let's note that without going to the extreme measure of a strike, the simple project of a hostile demonstration in a department store, if enough publicity is made about its preparation, will have the effect of driving away, on that day at least, a mass of cus-