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Syndicalism and Authority

Pierre Besnard

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Is syndicalism authoritarian or libertarian? This is the question that Louvet¹ asks me to treat.

Without a doubt, it is first necessary to define what is meant by syndicalism; and to declare that here it refers only to federalist syndicalism, the principles of which constitute the basis of the CGT-SR.

From my point of view, syndicalism is a movement that groups workers, through the way of *associations* (local, regional, federal, national and international), from the same locality, the same region, the same profession or industry, of the same country, of all of the countries, with a view to the common defence of their immediate and future interests, material and moral, professional and social.

Of syndicalism, a standard form and really concrete kind of *free association*, it may be said that it has, in truth, always existed in primitive and diverse forms since, at all periods of history, men – like animals, minerals and plants – have gathered by “family”, by affinity, by species, in order to defend, *collectively*, against the natural perils; first against the animals who

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¹ Likely Louis Louvet (1899–1971), French anarchist militant.

dispute their right to life; later against other men, when force, then trickery, create power and property, making of men slaves and masters, lords and serfs, the poor and the rich, capitalists and workers.

It can therefore be affirmed without fear of error, that *federalist syndicalism* is a movement of natural order, that groups of men are as natural as herds of free animals, forests of oaks and pines, deposits of coal.

It is the great law of universal attraction that allows the unity of the molecules of a body, then two bodies of the same stature, to create a life proper to all the bodies of the same family: animals, plants, minerals, only influenced by the climates and the seasons.

It is the same for man. Like other living beings, he also undergoes the *law of integration*; he is called to be part of a whole that is called here: society. He is an integral part of everything. He fulfils the function to which his aptitudes and his knowledge dispose him, render him the most apt. Just as the heart, the kidneys, the brain, all the organs, ensure the life of the human body *in complete natural association, in total independence*, men assure the life of the society, in the exact sense of the word, at the same time as they assure their own lives.

It is not audacious to declare that *there can be no society without men, no men without society*.

Wanting to separate the man of the society by pretending that he can perfectly live alone – always in the exact sense of the word – would be equivalent to wanting to live alone: a brain, a heart, et cetera, separating them from the body that unites them, and without which they have no role and their existence impossible. It is the same for the society. Of course, to make it disappear, depriving it of the contribution of a single man would not be sufficient, but it is evident that the absence of a category of men, playing within it the role of the heart, the brain, et cetera, would put it in danger and would likely provoke its *momentary dispersion*.

I know all the objections that can be made against the application of such a law. I will not go into them; furthermore, there's no point in holding on to them. Currently, and for a long time, still – perhaps forever – it is not possible to escape this law...

This is only possible if it can be shown that the individual can live alone, that he is capable for providing for all his needs, that he could do so completely and in all circumstances aid his fellows.

This demonstration remains to be made. It is not certain that it will one day be made.

Until it is made, federalist and revolutionary syndicalism seems to me to be the best form of grouping the workers for their defence, at this moment, and, later, for the organisation of social life with the maximum freedom.

Constant and vigilant interpreter of all the manifestations of life, containing inside the heart of the associations, all the forces that contribute to the perpetuation of life in all fields, forces that are uniquely: *manpower, technique and science*, syndicalism appears as the true doctrine of emancipation and well-being of all men accepting life in society.

Rejecting the conception of the general interest in the bourgeois regime that characterises exclusively reformist syndicalism, the federalist syndicalists do not accept the doctrine of statist syndicalism making the revolutionary syndicalist movement the appendage of a party. They reject likewise the idea of syndicalism, the class party, assuring in the name of this class, *the collective dictatorship of the proletariat and the functioning of the proletarian state*.

They accept only the syndicalism where individuals and groups are free, according to the terms of the contracts to which they subscribe and commit to respect.

This syndicalism excludes *coercion and authority*. At its base is *freedom and consensual discipline*. Only it is capable of realising the phrase: *wellbeing and freedom*.

Federalist syndicalism, the fullest expression of association, can therefore have *only solidarity and mutual aid* as its moral basis, which excludes the idea of authority and imposes those of *equality and freedom*, at the same time.

The syndicalist groups: *syndicates, local unions, federations, regional unions, CGT, international federations of industry, internationals*, all operate according to the contract of association drawn up by the members (individuals and collectives) that they are made of. This, in syndicalists terms, is called the statutes.

These statutes are drawn up, at the formation of the association, by the whole of the participants. They must receive the *agreement of all*, whether they accept them at first sight, or whether they only agree after careful consideration.

It is evident that after its adoption, the contract, *freely accepted by all*, becomes the charter of the association, that *all must respect and uphold*.

The contract includes, of course, *obligations and rights*. Its purpose is to fix, under specific conditions, what the *associate* must give to the *group* and, in return, what the *group* must guarantee to the *associate*.

It is quite *normal* that the group *requires* the individual to fulfil his obligations; it is no less normal that the associate *also requires* the group to fulfil their own.

This *contractual reciprocity*, a practical form of solidarity and mutual aid, cannot cease without placing in peril the very existence of the association, the grouping.

An associate who purports to *receive without giving anything* would no longer have a place in the association. Logically, he should leave on his own. If his conscience does not impose this decision upon him, then the association must compensate for his conscience's moral deficiency. This is what we call today, with a certain horror, *exclusion*. Nothing is more normal, however, on the condition that that the *defensive measure* of the association is *fully justified*.

And, by getting to the bottom of the question, we realise that *exclusion*, on these grounds, is an *anti-authoritarian* act in the first place.

What would happen, indeed, if, *contrary to the articles of the contract* that were accepted – let’s not forget – by the concerned party himself, it was permitted that an associate could *take* without *giving*? This: he would immediately come across imitators, a clique would be formed: this clique would have at their disposal a force that gives them the potential to impose *their authority, their dictatorship*, over the association; dictatorship and authority that, one day, could be easily *concentrated* in the hands of one man.

Respect for the contract of association must, therefore, be absolute. It must be kept in mind that this contract creates “rights” and “duties” that, for the individual who associates with his peers, entails a *certain abandonment* of his rights. That’s right. We can even say, without fear, that this *abandonment is certain*, that his “personality” blends with “the environment”, that his liberty is “conditional”. All this is obvious.

I take notice, first of all:

1. That his consent to this is given freely.
2. That the other associates, making the same sacrifices as him, return service for service and give more to him than he can leave to them.

These principles, which are those of *federalist syndicalism*, are only found today in a still limited application, in the internal solidarity and defensive action of the syndicates.

But there is no doubt that they have the potential, *thanks to a true social revolution*, to spread to a whole community, to society.

I even add that practically, they are the only ones humanly capable of giving birth to a social system in which man would

not be crushed by society, and where the latter would possibilities of life, of normal and rational evolution, natural development.

In fact, it is in nobody’s mind, at the beginning of an association, to “legislate” for eternity, to forge a “straitjacket” for future generations.

The contract, inviolable for the duration of its application, is not unchangeable, in its letter or in its spirit.

Wishing to refuse to modify it according to the necessities, the teachings of life, the progress of science made, would be silliness of the worst sort.

On the contrary, it is important that the associates be constantly concerned with the improvement of the contract, *to diminish the obligations, to augment the rights, in all domains*.

As the modifications impose themselves on the associates, they should carry them out.

Will unanimity be required for the *modification* of the original contract? Admittedly, it will always be preferable for the changes to be made by *way of general and mutual consent*. But, if there is a minority of “retardants”², the association will have the duty to break through. It will be the same if, under the pretext of moving forward, a minority, well inspired but little concerned with the balance necessary, wanted to go further than *the intellectual development of the associates and their capacity for economic achievement* would logically allow.

A minority of “retardants” will be absorbed by the bulk of the association; an advanced minority will attract to it – if there is a real reason – the association as a whole, until the moment when this, in turn, gives birth to minorities of the same nature as before. It is the *inflexible* law of evolution.

The contract therefore may be modified according to the principles of the law of number [majority rule].

² French: “retardaires”, as in the English “flame retardants”.