

The Birth of Revolutionary Anarchism

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The September 1872 St. Imier Congress of federalist and anti-authoritarian sections and federations of the International Workingmen's Association (the "IWMA"), otherwise known as the "First International," marks a watershed moment in the history of socialism and anarchism.

Just over a week earlier, at the Hague Congress of the International (September 2 – 7, 1872), Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels had engineered the expulsion of Michael Bakunin and James Guillaume from the International on trumped up grounds, and then had the General Council of the International transferred from London to New York, despite the General Council having been granted increased powers to ensure ideological uniformity. The Hague Congress had also passed a resolution mandating the formation of national political parties for the purpose of achieving political power.

While Marx and Engels' allies at the Hague Congress, notably the French Blanquists (followers of Auguste Blanqui, a radical French socialist who advocated revolutionary dictatorship), had supported the expulsions of Bakunin and Guillaume, they were taken by surprise when Marx and Engels succeeded in transferring the executive power of the International, the General Council, to New York, and had quit the International in disgust. The New York based "International" quickly became an irrelevant rump.

Much to the surprise and consternation of Marx and Engels, far from neutralizing the federalist and anarchist elements of the International through the expulsion of Bakunin and Guillaume and the transfer of the General Council to New York, these actions helped solidify support for a reconstituted International that embraced federalist principles and rejected centralized power.

A majority of the International's sections and federations did not support the resolutions of the Hague Congress. Barely a week after the Hague Congress, several of them held their own congress in St. Imier, Switzerland, where they reconstituted the International independent of the shell organization now controlled by Marx and Engels through the General Council.

The opponents of the Marxist controlled International were united in their opposition to the concentration of power in the General Council, regardless of whether the Council sat in London or New York. They also shared a commitment to directly democratic federalist forms of organization. Some were completely opposed to the formation of working class political parties to achieve state power, while others were opposed to making that a mandatory policy regardless of the views of the membership and local circumstances. The reconstituted anti-authoritarian wing of the International was to have anarchist, syndicalist and, for a time, reformist elements.

The St. Imier Congress began on September 15, 1872, just eight days after the Hague Congress. It was attended by delegates from Spain, France, Italy and Switzerland, including Guillaume and Adhémar Schwitzguébel from Switzerland; Carlo Cafiero, Errico Malatesta, Giuseppi Fanelli, and Andrea Costa from Italy; Rafael Farga-Pellicer and Tomás González Morago from Spain; and the French refugees, Charles Alerini, Gustave Lefrançais, and Jean-Louis Pindy. Bakunin, although living in Switzerland, attended as an Italian delegate.

A “regional” congress of the Swiss Jura Federation was held in conjunction with the “international” congress, with many of the same delegates, plus members of the Slav Section, such as Zamfir Arbore (who went under the name of Zemphiry Ralli) and other French speaking delegates, including Charles Beslay, an old friend of Proudhon’s who went into exile in Switzerland after the brutal suppression of the Paris Commune in 1871.

Virtually all of the participants were either anarchists or revolutionary socialist federalists, and many of them went on to play important roles in the development of anarchist and revolutionary socialist movements in Europe.

The assembled delegates adopted a federalist structure for a reconstituted International (or the “anti-authoritarian International”), with full autonomy for the sections, declaring that “nobody has the right to deprive autonomous federations and sections of their incontrovertible right to decide for themselves and to follow whatever line of political conduct they deem best.” For them, “the aspirations of the proletariat can have no purpose other than the establishment of an absolutely free economic organization and federation, founded upon the labour and equality of all and absolutely independent of all political government.” Consequently, turning the Hague Congress resolution regarding the formation of political parties for the purpose of achieving political power on its head, they proclaimed that “the destruction of all political power is the first duty of the proletariat.”

With respect to organized resistance to capitalism, the delegates to the St. Imier Congress affirmed their position that the organization of labour, through trade unions and other working class forms of organization, “integrates the proletariat into a community of interests, trains it in collective living and prepares it for the supreme struggle,” through which “the privilege and authority” maintained and represented by the State will be replaced by “the free and spontaneous organization of labour.”

While the anti-authoritarian Internationalists entertained no illusions regarding the efficacy of strikes in ameliorating the condition of the workers, they regarded “the strike as a precious weapon in the struggle.” They embraced strikes “as a product of the antagonism between labour and capital, the necessary consequence of which is to make workers more and more alive to the gulf that exists between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat,” bolstering their organizations and preparing them “for the great and final revolutionary contest which, destroying all privilege and all class difference, will bestow upon the worker a right to the enjoyment of the gross product of his labours.”

Here we have the subsequent program of anarcho-syndicalism: the organization of workers into trade unions and similar bodies, based on class struggle, through which the workers will become conscious of their class power, ultimately resulting in the destruction of capitalism and the state, to be replaced by the free federation of the workers based on the organizations they created themselves during their struggle for liberation.

The resolutions from the St. Imier Congress received statements of support from the Italian, Spanish, Jura, Belgian and some of the English speaking American federations of the Interna-

tional, with most of the French sections also approving them. In Holland, three out of the four Dutch branches sided with the Jura Federation and the St. Imier Congress. The English Federation, resentful of Marx's attempts to keep it under his control, rejected "the decisions of the Hague Congress and the so-called General Council of New York." While the longtime English member of the International, John Hales, did not support revolution, he advised the Jura Federation that he agreed with them on "the principle of Federalism." At a congress of the Belgian Federation in December 1872, the delegates there also repudiated the Hague Congress and the General Council, supporting instead the "defenders of pure revolutionary ideas, Anarchists, enemies of all authoritarian centralisation and indomitable partisans of autonomy."

However, there was a tension in the resolutions adopted at the St. Imier Congress. On the one hand, one resolution asserted the "incontrovertible right" of the International's autonomous federations and sections "to decide for themselves and to follow whatever line of political conduct they deem best." On the other hand, another resolution asserted that "the destruction of all political power is the first duty of the proletariat."

The resolution regarding the autonomy of the federations and sections in all matters, including political action, was meant to maintain the International as a pluralist federation where each member group was free to follow their own political approach, so that both advocates of participation in electoral activity and proponents of revolutionary change could co-exist.

However, the call for the destruction of all political power expressed an anarchist position. The two resolutions could only be reconciled if the destruction of political power was not necessarily the "first duty of the proletariat," but could also be regarded as a more distant goal to be achieved gradually, along with "the free and spontaneous organization of labour."

The tension between these two resolutions continued to exist within the reconstituted International for several years. James Guillaume supported political pluralism within the International and sought to convince some of the sections and federations that had gone along with Marx, such as the Social Democrats in Germany, to rejoin the anti-authoritarian International, and to keep the English Internationalists who had rejected Marx's centralist approach, such as Hales, within the reconstituted International.

Although the German Social Democrats never officially joined the reconstituted International, two German delegates attended the 1874 Brussels Congress. English delegates attended both the September 1873 Geneva Congress and the September 1874 Brussels Congress, where there was an important debate regarding political strategy, including whether there was any positive role for the state.

The Geneva Congress in September 1873 was the first full congress of the reconstituted International. It was attended by delegates from England, France, Spain, Italy, Holland, Belgium and Switzerland. The English delegates, John Hales and Johann Georg Eccarius (Marx's former lieutenant), had been members of the original International. They were interested in reviving the International as an association of workers' organizations, and in disavowing the Marxist controlled General Council and International that had been transferred by Marx and Engels to New York. They had not become anarchists, as Hales made clear by declaring anarchism "tantamount to individualism... the foundation of the extant form of society, the form we desire to overthrow." Accordingly, from his perspective, anarchism was "incompatible with collectivism" (a term which at the time was synonymous with socialism).

The Spanish delegate, José Garcia Viñas, responded that anarchy did not mean disorder, as the bourgeois claimed, but the negation of political authority and the organization of a new economic

order. Paul Brousse, a French refugee who had recently joined the Jura Federation in Switzerland, agreed, arguing that anarchy meant the abolition of the governmental regime and its replacement by a collectivist economic organization based on contracts between the communes, the workers and the collective organizations of the workers, a position that can be traced back to Proudhon.

Most of the delegates to the Congress were anti-authoritarian federalists, and the majority of them were clearly anarchist in orientation, including “Farga-Pellicer from Spain, Pindy and Brousse from France, Costa from Italy, and Guillaume and Schwitzguebel from Switzerland.” Also within the anarchist camp were Garcia Viñas from Spain, who was close to Brousse, Charles Alerini, a French refugee now based in Barcelona associated with Bakunin, Nicholas Zhukovsky, the Russian expatriate who remained close to Bakunin, François Dumartheray (1842-1931), another French refugee who had joined the Jura Federation, Jules Montels (1843-1916), a former provincial delegate of the Commune who was responsible for distributing propaganda in France on behalf of the exiled group, the Section of Revolutionary Socialist Propaganda and Action, and two of the Belgian delegates, Laurent Verrycken and Victor Dave.

The American Federal Council sent a report to the Congress, in which it indicated its support for the anti-authoritarian International. The Americans were in favour of freedom of initiative for the members, sections, branches and federations of the International, and agreed with limiting any general council to purely administrative functions. They felt that it should be up to each group to determine their own tactics and strategies for revolutionary transformation. They concluded their address with “Long live the social revolution! Long live the International.”

At the 1873 Geneva Congress, it was ultimately agreed to adopt a form of organization based on that followed by the Jura Federation, with a federal bureau to be established that “would be concerned only with collecting statistics and maintaining international correspondence.” As a further safeguard against the federal bureau coming to exercise authority over the various sections and branches, it was to “be shifted each year to the country where the next International Congress would be held.”

The delegates continued the practice of voting in accordance with the mandates that had been given to them by their respective federations. Because the International was now a federation of autonomous groups, each national federation was given one vote and the statutes were amended to explicitly provide that questions of principle could not be decided by a vote. It was up to each federation to determine its own policies and to implement those decisions of the congress that it accepted.

Eccarius also attended the next Congress in Brussels in September 1874 as the English delegate. He and the two German delegates remained in favour of a workers’ state and participation in conventional politics, such as parliamentary elections.

The most significant debate at the Brussels Congress was the one over public services. César De Paepe, on behalf of the Belgians, argued that if public services were turned over to the workers’ associations, or “companies,” the people would simply “have the grim pleasure of substituting a worker aristocracy for a bourgeois aristocracy” since the worker companies, “enjoying a natural or artificial monopoly... would dominate the whole economy.” Neither could all public services be undertaken by local communes, since “the most important of them,” such as railways, highways, river and water management, and communications, “are by their very nature fated to operate over a territory larger than that of the Commune.” Such intercommunal public services would therefore have to be run by delegates appointed by the federated communes. De Paepe claimed

that the “regional or national Federation of communes” would constitute a “non-authoritarian State... charged with educating the young and centralizing the great joint undertakings.”

However, De Paepe took his argument one step further, suggesting that “the reconstitution of society upon the foundation of the industrial group, the organization of the state from below upwards, instead of being the starting point and the signal of the revolution, might not prove to be its more or less remote result... We are led to enquire whether, before the groupings of the workers by industry is sufficiently advanced, circumstances may not compel the proletariat of the large towns to establish a collective dictatorship over the rest of the population, and this for a sufficiently long period to sweep away whatever obstacles there may be to the emancipation of the working class. Should this happen, it seems obvious that one of the first things which such a collective dictatorship would have to do would be to lay hands on all the public services.”

De Paepe’s position was opposed by several delegates, including at least one of the Belgians, Laurent Verrycken. He spoke against any workers’ state, arguing that public services should be organized by “the free Commune and the free Federation of communes,” with the execution of the services being undertaken by the workers who provided them under the supervision of the general association of workers within the Commune, and by the Communes in a regional federation of Communes. Farga Pellicer (“Gomez”), on behalf of the Spanish Federation, said that “for a long time they had generally pronounced themselves in favour of anarchy, such that they would be opposed to any reorganization of public services that would lead to the reconstitution of the state.” For him, a “federation of communes” should not be referred to as a “state,” because the latter word represented “the political idea, authoritarian and governmental,” as De Paepe’s comments regarding the need for a “collective dictatorship” revealed.

The most vocal opponent of De Paepe’s proposal was Schwitzguébel from the Jura Federation. He argued that the social revolution would be accomplished by the workers themselves “assuming direct control of the instruments of labor;” thus, “right from the first acts of the Revolution, the practical assertion of the principle of autonomy and federation... becomes the basis of all social combination,” with “all State institutions,” the means by “which the bourgeoisie sustains its privileges,” foundering in the “revolutionary storm.” With “the various trades bodies” being “masters of the situation,” having “banded together freely for revolutionary action, the workers will stick to such free association when it comes to organization of production, exchange, commerce, training and education, health, and security.”

On the issue of political action, the Belgian delegates to the Brussels Congress continued to advocate working outside of the existing political system, albeit partly because they did not yet have universal suffrage in Belgium. Nevertheless, they claimed they did not expect anything from the suffrage or from parliament, and that they would continue to organize the workers into the trades bodies and federations through which the working class would bring about the social revolution, revealing that, as a group, the Belgian Federation did not yet share De Paepe’s doubts that the free federation of the producers would not be the means, but only the result, of a revolution.

The French delegate indicated that the French Internationalists remained anti-political, seeking to unite the workers “through incessant propaganda,” not to conquer power, but “to achieve the negation of all political government,” organizing themselves for “the true social revolution.”

The Congress ultimately declared that it was up to each federation and each democratic socialist party to determine for themselves what kind of political approach they should follow. Nevertheless, it is fair to say that as of September 1874, the majority of the anti-authoritarian In-

ternational continued to embrace an anarchist or revolutionary syndicalist position. At the end of the 1874 Brussels Congress, the delegates issued a manifesto confirming their commitment to collectivism, workers' autonomy, federalism and social revolution; in a word, nothing less than the original goal of the International itself: "the emancipation of the workers by the workers themselves."

By the time of the October 1876 Bern Congress, the English had ceased participating in the anti-authoritarian International. The debate over the "public service" state continued, with De Paepe now openly advocating that the workers "seize and use the powers of the State" in order to create a socialist society. Most of the delegates rejected De Paepe's position, including Guillaume and Malatesta.

Malatesta argued for "the complete abolition of the state in all its possible manifestations." While Guillaume and some of the other veteran anti-authoritarians liked to avoid the "anarchist" label, Malatesta declared that "Anarchy, the struggle against all authority ... always remains the banner around which the whole of revolutionary Italy rallies." Both Malatesta and Guillaume made clear that in rejecting the state, even in a "transitional" role, they were not advocating the abolition of public services, as De Paepe implied, but their reorganization by the workers themselves.

In September 1877, the anti-authoritarian International held a congress in Verviers, Belgium, which was to be its last. Guillaume and Peter Kropotkin, now a member of the Jura Federation, attended from Switzerland. The French refugees, Paul Brousse and Jules Montels, also attended. In addition, there were Garcia Viñas and Morago from Spain. Otto Rinke and Emil Werner, both anarchists, "represented sections in both Switzerland and Germany, while there was a strong delegation from the Verviers region, the last stronghold of anarchism in Belgium." Costa represented Greek and Egyptian socialists who were unable to attend, as well as the Italian Federation.

De Paepe did not attend the Congress, as he was preparing for his rapprochement with social democracy and parliamentary politics at the World Socialist Congress that was about to begin in Ghent. In anticipation of the Ghent Congress, the delegates to the Verviers Congress passed several resolutions emphasizing the limited bases for cooperation between the now predominantly anarchist oriented anti-authoritarian International and the social democrats. For the Verviers delegates, collective property, which they defined as "the taking of possession of social capital by the workers' groups" rather than by the State, was an immediate necessity, not a "far-off ideal."

On the issue of political action, the delegates indicated that class antagonism could not be resolved by government or some other political power, but only "by the unified efforts of all the exploited against their exploiters." They vowed to combat all political parties, regardless of "whether or not they call themselves socialists," because they did not see electoral activity as leading to the abolition of capitalism and the state. While the majority of the delegates therefore supported anti-parliamentary socialism, none of the policies endorsed at the congresses of the reconstituted International were binding on the International's member groups, who remained free to adopt or reject them.

With respect to trade union organization, the delegates confirmed their view that unions that limit their demands to improving working conditions, reducing the working day and increasing wages, "will never bring about the emancipation of the proletariat." Trade unions, to be revolutionary, must adopt, "as their principal goal, the abolition of the wage system" and "the taking of possession of the instruments of labour by expropriating them" from the capitalists.

Unsurprisingly, despite Guillaume's hopes for reconciliation between the social democratic and revolutionary anarchist wings of the socialist movement, no such reconciliation was reached at the Ghent Congress, or at any subsequent international socialist congresses, with the so-called "Second International" finally barring anarchist membership altogether at its 1896 international congress in London.

Despite the formal position taken at the St. Imier Congress regarding the freedom of each member group of the reconstituted International to determine its own political path, reaffirmed at the 1873 Geneva Congress, because the majority of the delegates to the anti-authoritarian International's congresses, and its most active members, were either anarchists or revolutionary socialists opposed to participation in electoral politics, it was not surprising that eventually those in favour of parliamentary activity would find other forums in which to participate, rather than continuing to debate the issue with people who were not committed to an electoral strategy.

Only a minority of member groups in the reconstituted International ever supported or came to support a strategy oriented toward achieving political power – the English delegates, a few of the German delegates who did not officially represent any group, and then a group of Belgians, with the Belgian Federation being split on the issue. Other than the debate on the "public service state," which again only a minority of delegates supported, most of the discussions at the reconstituted International's congresses focused on tactics and strategies for abolishing the state and capitalism through various forms of direct action, in order to achieve "the free and spontaneous organization of labour" that the St. Imier Congress had reaffirmed as the International's ultimate goal.

For example, there were ongoing debates within the reconstituted International regarding the role and efficacy of strikes and the use of the general strike as a means for overthrowing the existing order. Any kind of strike activity had the potential to harm the electoral prospects of socialist political parties, an issue that had arisen in the Swiss Romande Federation prior to the split in the original International. Once the focus becomes trying to elect as many socialist or workers' candidates as possible to political office in order to eventually form a government, the trade unions and other workers' organizations are then pressured to tailor their tactics to enhance the prospects of the political parties' electoral success. Both the immediate and long term interests of the workers become subordinate to the interests of the political parties.

After socialist parties were established in western Europe in the 1880s, and workers began to see how their interests were being given short shrift, there was a resurgence in autonomous revolutionary trade union activity, leading to the creation of revolutionary syndicalist movements in the 1890s. Some of the syndicalist organizations, such as the French Confédération Générale du Travail (CGT), adopted an "apolitical" stance, similar to the official stance of the reconstituted International. The CGT was independent of the political parties but members were free to support political parties and to participate in electoral activities, just not in the name of the CGT. Independence from the political parties was an essential tenet of the original CGT, so that it could pursue its strategy of revolutionary trade union organization and direct action unimpeded by the demands and interests of the political parties.

It is not fair to hold the anarchists and anti-parliamentary revolutionary socialists in the reconstituted International responsible for the exit of the groups that had decided to focus on electoral activity. The majority of the Belgian Internationalists would have changed their strategy from supporting an international federation of autonomous workers' organizations to supporting

the Belgian Socialist party regardless of the refusal of the anarchist and revolutionary socialist members of the reconstituted International to agree with such an approach.

The majority of those who chose to remain active in the reconstituted International based on the resolutions adopted at the St. Imier Congress believed above all that the International should not only remain independent of the socialist political parties, but that the International should continue to pursue its goal of achieving “the free and spontaneous organization of labour” through the workers’ own autonomous organizations, free of political interference and control. For those who chose instead to throw their lot in with the political parties, there really wasn’t much reason for them to remain involved in such an organization, even though there was no formal bar to their continued membership and participation. It was simply time for them to part ways.

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