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Our Anti-Syndicalism

Victor Serge

February 24, 1910

Today, in light of the upcoming anti-parliamentary campaign, the anarchists are divided into two apparently irreconcilable groups: the syndicalists and the anti-syndicalists.

The comrades on the other side, in a brief declaration that it is only right to recognize has the dual merits of clarity and honesty, have said what they want and who they are. Their anti-parliamentary campaign will serve as the basis for syndicalist-revolutionary agitation.

It is thus on this plane that we meet up with them. After Lorulot spelled out our anti-parliamentarism, I think it is right to spell out what our anti-syndicalism should be.

This theme has already been discussed and re-discussed thousands of times among us, and we must recognize that the arguments of both sides have often been of a disconcerting puerility. No later than last week did I not hear friends reproach unions for establishing fixed dues and compare these to taxes? And others defend them by saying that in such and such a professional association they had educational discussions? Ordinarily it is with such futilities that the union movement is attacked and defended. Or else hairs on split about side issues like the functionary-ism of the

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CGT, the *arrivisme* of the leaders, the authoritarianism of the revolutionary method...

These are details that are without a doubt interesting to know and useful to criticize. But our anti-syndicalism is based, I believe, on more serious, more profound arguments, and it is important that in the upcoming anti-parliamentary battle that we have something other than these clichés to oppose to the theoreticians of working class action.

We shouldn't be declaiming against the demagogues of the rue de la Grange-aux-Belles, nor should we be involved in endless discussions over whether it's advantageous or not to participate in a corporate association; nor should we be elucidating the question of knowing whether we can make anarchist propaganda there. Yes, there is perhaps an interest in taking part in a trade grouping; yes we can sometimes carry out good anarchist work. In the same way there is an interest in being a good soldier and a good worker. In the same way it is sometimes possible to spread ideas in a barracks. It's the very principle of syndicalism that should be attacked in order to demonstrate its inanity and dangerous consequences.

Let us first look at what syndicalist theory is and what it rests on. We can sum it up thusly:

Two adverse social classes exist and confront each other: idle owners and working non-owners, the latter being far more numerous. All social evil comes from the fact that the ownership of the means of production permits the minority, called "bourgeois," to pressure and exploit the minority, called "proletarian." There is only one remedy for this state of affairs: that the proletarians group together in corporate associations, in a vast confederation – class associations – and that they battle to every day rip from the enemy caste a few small advantages until such time as, having become numerous and daring enough, they profit from a war or an economic crisis to decree the insurrectionary general strike and take control of the means of production. Once this is accomplished, the unions will organize work. It will be the Social Republic. The fundamen-

we know them to be. The same thing happened to many German unions, and is now happening to the Belgian worker's movement, which is losing all energy as it grows. In certain places in the United States, in Australia, in New Zealand, in England, where the unions have reached their heights, they have only managed to create a caste of privileged, conservative workers, lined up under the protective shield of the state, and are hardly worth more than the more official bourgeois.

Having seen the evolution of the French unions and observed the incoherence of the CGT, I don't think it's possible to foresee a different destiny for it.

We will thus not lack for arguments during the upcoming discussions, for each of these criticisms lends itself to interesting developments and must be backed with proofs drawn from union activity itself – proofs it is not difficult to find cartloads of.

Our critical work thus understood, it remains to define the positive, affirmative part of our propaganda. It is clear and has no need of long developments: the making of anarchists.

In parallel with the tissue of illogic that is syndicalism, and the monument of incoherence that is the union, let us show how, by the transformation of men, society is transformed; how as men become more healthy, more noble, more intelligent, more educated, the air becomes breathable and life appears admirable...

"Salvation lies within us!" Let us show that the salvation of men is within them and that the route to enlightenment has been laid out for them, if they want to make the effort to free themselves from the old lies... Let us show – as it is in its fertile intransigence – anarchist action!

And I can't end any better than did Lorulot the other week:

"And now... to work!"

tal "causes" of human suffering having disappeared, humanity will progress in peace, joy, happiness... Here the field remains open to everyone's imagination, permitting the composition at leisure of the tableaux of universal happiness that, of course, can only ever be way below the reality! This is, with more or less variations, the sales spiels that the syndicalists of all shapes and forms prepare to serve (with, incidentally, much conviction and sincerity) to the good voters. We have to refute this entirely, point by point, omitting nothing. And I say this is quite feasible.

The problem to be solved is this: transforming the revolting milieu in order to finally establish a social milieu assuring every individual the maximum of happiness. This, in summary, is our objective as reformers, and also that of the syndicalists. Let us then pose the question this way: Given this goal, is it logical to count on the working class for this labor of destruction and construction?

Can we reasonably believe it capable of leading such an enterprise to a successful conclusion?

"Yes," say the *ouvrieristes* (without ever explaining why). "No," we answer them, and we will prove it: The working class has behind it a whole atavism of servitude and exploitation. It is the weakest of the two classes from every point of view. It is above all the less intelligent, and this is the sole cause for its state of subjection. It is within the logic of nature for the stronger to dominate the weaker. By virtue of this law the unaware and cowardly plebe, the imbecilic masses, credulous and fearful, have always been despoiled by more intelligent, healthier, more daring minorities. At present, after nineteen centuries of oppression, the difference between the two classes has been considerably accentuated. Let us repeat it again: *in all areas* impartial science demonstrates to us the inferiority of the working class. Well then, it is foolish to believe it capable of organizing a rational society. The degenerates, the hereditary slaves, the pitiful mass of working stiffes that we know *de visu* are physiologically incapable of living in harmony.

Consequently: organizing the working class in view of a social transformation means wasting time and energy.

Consequently: all the theoretical affirmations flowing from the principle that the working class can and must modify the social regime are false.

Consequently: there is only one urgent, useful, indispensable task; that which, in creating individuals finally worthy of the title of men, little by little improves the milieu, the task of education and anarchist combat.

This being established with the assistance of arguments strictly scientific and of an impeccable logic, the very principle of syndicalism having been demonstrated false, let us now pass to a critical examination of the union movement and see if it confirms our deductions. It fully confirms them.

To begin with, let us note a salient contradiction. With the goal of organizing one class against another, the workers are invited to group together in professional associations. Yet the interests of various corporations are often opposed, which renders class cohesion economically impossible, on this basis at least. And which causes a veritable waste...

Now let's look at the unions. Examined with a bit of attention they appear, reproducing at various degrees, the defects and the wounds of the bourgeois society they claim to have a mission to destroy. A union is a miniature of the old society. Foolish and complicated administrative gears galore, regulations restrictive of individual initiative, oppression of minorities by feeble majorities, the triumph of the mediocre on condition that they have the gifts of gab and swindling, everything can be found there, up to and including parasites.

Let us look at the tactics. Far from combating the established social order, it seems that the unions have as a goal their sanctioning.

Supposedly anti-statists, they never cease battling for this or that law, to demand another one, thus recognizing the entity Law and, as a corollary, the entity State. These anti-parliamentarians sign duly legalized contracts and call for this to be voted for and that to be rejected...

In their organization they are a perfect copy of the parliamentary farce. Even the clowns aren't missing. Delegation of power, votes, decisions having force of law, as well as half hidden combinations, personal competition, kitchen squabbles: we can find in the CGT the exact, though reduced, transposition of parliamentary hideousness.

As for the unmistakable incoherence in their blather, they pass from a tragic to a comic character by a series of gradations amusing to observe. It's the smashing – is it not, Clemenceau – victory of the postal workers transformed a few days later into... well, you find the diplomatic word. It's the valiant corporation of construction workers who a few months ago naively allowed themselves to be muzzled by a collective contract that was extremely...clever. It's the CGT today building itself up as defenders of bank employees, as if the valets of the financier were not as repugnant as the financier himself. We could write columns on this theme.

Let us look at the results. Today the CGT is combative: in words more than in acts, but combative all the same. Taking off from this point, comrades promise us that in the future its combative force will grow and will end by assuring it the complete triumph of its demands. We saw above what the reasons were that authorize us – let us be modest – to have some doubts on this subject. A glance at our neighboring countries will be instructive in this regard.

At their beginning all parties, all groups (even all individuals) are combative. Age comes, and with it a potbelly and wisdom. This is the story of many men who we are today permitted to admire raised to the top of the social machine, the history of the trade union socialist parties. Very revolutionary during the blessed period of their youth, the English trade unions have become what