Anarchosyndicalism in Inter-War France

The Vision of Pierre Besnard

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In 1926 the founding congress of a third national trade union association in France, the Confederation Generale du Travail Syndicaliste Revolutionnaire (CGTSR), presented its declaration of principles, the Charter of Lyon, as an updated version of the 1906 Charter of Amiens, the chief policy statement of the country's largest pre-war labour organization, the syndicalist Confederation Generale du Travail (CGT).'[1] The Charter of Lyon came from the pen of Pierre Besnard (1886–1947), hailed by an admirer eight years later as a 'modern, triumphant Christopher Columbus' for having mapped out a new syndicalist world.[2]

Besnard is of interest for a number of reasons. One is that his thought constituted the conceptual — and the CGTSR the institutional- link between the anarchosyndicalists of the First World War era and those who would regroup in the Confédération Nationale du Travail following the Second World War. Second, he is noteworthy for his efforts to update what he saw as the legacy of the CGT to the conditions of modem capitalism. In that regard Besnard was taking up a task that had been initiated before 1914, that of restructuring the syndicalist labour movement in view of an irreversibly changing economy — growing industrial rationalization, increasing mechanization, the initial appearance of Taylorism in France, the concentration of capital, the emergence of increasingly better organized and better financed employers' associations — without sacrificing its revolutionary character and goals.[3] Besnard was not a participant in the multifaceted pre-war debates over revitalizing the CGT. He was, however, allied in the immediate post-war years with one who had been: the veteran syndicalist Victor Griffuelhes, CGT Secretary from 1901 to 1909, the man most closely identified with the Charter of Amiens.[4] Third, Besnard wrote more extensively than anyone in the French syndicalist tradition, before or after 1914, on the nature of the coming revolution and new society.[5] He did so, moreover, not as an intellectual speculating on

[1] The following acronyms are used in the text of this article:

CGT Confédération Générale du Travail. Founded in 1895, the CGT merged with the Bourses du Travail in 1902 to become the largest and most influential syndicalist organization in pre-war Europe. In 1921–2 pro-Moscow Communists and syndicalists broke with the increasingly reformist CGT and formed the CGTU.

CGTU Confédération Générale du Travail Unitaire. Founded in 1922, the CGTU became Communist-dominated in the next two years. The CGTU and the CGT merged in 1936.

CGTSR Confédération Générale du Travail Syndicaliste Révolutionnaire. Founded in 1926, many members of the CGTSR were ex-members of the CGT and the CGTU. The Confédération Nationale du Travail, founded in 1946, emerged as the post-Second World War continuation of the CGTSR.

CNT Confederación Nacional del Trabajo. Founded in 1910 and banned in 1911, this Spanish syndicalist organization was resurrected during the First World War, and survived clandestinely during the dictatorship of Primo de Rivera (1923–30). The CNT re-emerged to become the largest syndicalist organization in inter-war Europe, until Franco's defeat of the Second Republic in 1939.

[2] Théodore Jean, in the CGTSR journal Le Combat syndicaliste (Lyon/St. Etienne/Limoges) (hereafter CS), 21 December 1934.

[3] The debate on the pre-1914 crisis in the CGT is best followed in the labour press, especially Le Mouvement socialiste (Paris), La Vie ouvrière (Paris) and La Bataille syndicaliste (Paris). Related secondary accounts include Nicholas Papayanis, Alphonse Merrheim. The Emergence of Reformism in Revolutionary Syndicalism 1871–1925 (Dordrecht 1985), Chs 4–6; Michael Sabatino DeLucia, 'The Remaking of French Syndicalism, 1911–1918: The Growth of the Reformist Philosophy', PhD thesis (Brown University 1971), Chs. 2–3; Jeremy Jennings, Syndicalism in France. A Study of Ideas (New York 1990), Ch. 5; and Bernard Georges and Denise Tmtant, Léon Jouhaux. Cinquante ans de syndicalisme, Vol. 1 (Paris 1962), esp. Ch. 3.

[4] On Griffuelhes, see Bruce Charles Vandervort, 'Voyage Révolutionnaire: The Life and Career of Victor Griffuelhes (1874–1922), French Labor's Apostle of Direct Action', PhD thesis (University of Virginia, 1989).

[5] Not since Emile Pataud's and Emile Pouget's novelistic approach in Comment nous ferons la révolution (Paris 1909) had anyone attempted to profile in such detail the syndicalist revolution and post-revolutionary society. Besnard's major works are Syndicats ouvriers et la révolution sociale (Gentilly 1930); Le Monde nouveau Son

the movement from the outside in the manner of Georges Sorel, but as a worker and activist fully engaged within it. A railwayman since 1909, in the 1920s Besnard held offices within the CGT's railway workers' federation, within the nascent and soon Communist-dominated Confederation Generale du Travail Unitaire (CGTU), within the Union Federative des Syndicats Autonomes, and finally within the CGTSR, founded in 1926 by unions that rejected the reformism of the CGT and Communist hegemony within the CGTU. Fourth, through his writings and his association with the Berlin-based International Working Men's Association, or Syndicalist International, whose chief officer he became in 1936, Besnard's influence and activities transcended the French arena, where the distinctive CGTSR for which he spoke remained the smallest of the three national labour organizations. In Spain, the Confederaci6n Nacional del Trabajo (CNT), the largest syndicalist organization in the world in the 1930s, provided a much larger audience. Besnard's work had been published in Spain — the Valencian journal Orto hailed it as 'magnificent' — and was known to many Iberian militants.[6]

A study of Spanish libertarian thought in the 1930s maintains that no one exceeded Besnard's influence 'in the ideological configuration of Spanish anarchosyndicalism during the Second Republic'.[7] By the end of the 1930s, however, the French CGTSR was in retreat and the Spanish CNT had disavowed Besnard.

This article examines the efforts of inter-war France's most important anarchosyndicalist to adapt doctrine and practice to the new economic and political conditions flowing from the First World War and the Russian Revolution. It first analyses those aspects of Besnard's thought most germane to issues of workers' organization and action in present and future. It then turns to the reception of his thought and considers a number of interrelated practical, doctrinal, strategic and personal constraints that circumscribed his success.

I

The economic and political transformations ushered in by the First World War and revolution provoked a good deal of self-examination within the European labour movement. New levels of co-operation between national governments on the one hand and socialist parties and trade unions on the other, such as the CGT's participation in the union sacree, had to be assessed anew with the return of peace. So did a workers' revolution in Russia, the cynosure of radicals beyond its borders, which temporarily united dissidents in the labour movement. Sanctioned by a new revolutionary Third International and seemingly validated by the Russian revolutionary experience, new Communist parties, severely indicting socialist reformism, won widespread support. Despite the challenge the Communists presented to the traditional autonomy of the unions enshrined in syndicalist doctrine, many European syndicalists rallied to the new, radical parties on

plan — sa constitution — son f,onctionnement 3rd edn (Paris 1934); L'Ethique du syndicalisme (Limoges 1938); and Pour assurer la p.aix Comment organiser le monde (Paris 1946). Additional titles include Syndicalisme et autorité (Paris 1928); La Responsabilité (Paris 1933); Anarcho-syndicalisme et anarchisme (Paris n.d. [1937]); Le Fédéralisme libertaire (Paris 1946); and Le Problème des salaires (n.p., n.d.[1946?]).

[6] Orto (Valencia), September 1932, 1. The CNT published Besnard's Syndicats ouvriers in Spanish in 1931, and Monde nouveau originally appeared as articles in Orto, September 1932 to March 1933.

[7] Xavier Paniagua Fuentes, Sociedad libertaria. Agrarismo e industrialización en el anarquismo español 1930–1939 (Barcelona 1982), 117. On Besnard, see 117–40.

the left. The radicalizing effects of the war and the threat of revolution at the same time produced in Fascism a new anti-democratic movement of mass mobilization on the Right.

The war had brought not only economic hardship, but also unprecedented state intervention, purportedly in the interests of economic efficiency, thus providing an unforgettable example of the activist state, even if most governments, as in France, sharply curtailed such engagement with the return of peace. The 1920s witnessed extensive economic rationalization, capitalist reorganization, vast technological expansion and transformation, all accompanied by efforts to rethink economic problems, processes and structures. Just as the terms 'Communism' and 'Fascism' altered the lexicon of political discourse, the vocabulary of 'rationalization', 'Taylorism', 'corporatism', 'technocracy' and 'Fordism' spread in the language of economic change in Europe, both of those who sought to modernize the economy in the interests of optimal profits and of those on the Right and Left who saw wider social transformation as the goal.

The effects of war and revolution were quickly felt in the CGT.[8] The chief bearer, prior to 1914, of revolutionary syndicalism — the most distinctive French contribution to modem European labour thought and practice — and the largest syndicalist organization in pre-war Europe, the CGT did not survive the First World War and the immediate post-war revolutionary ferment intact. Building on strong reformist impulses within the pre-war organization, encouraged by wartime co-operation with government and employers, convinced that workers were best served by a policy of economic expansion and piecemeal reform, the CGT leadership demonstrated its post-war orientation in the Programme minimum of December 1918.[9] Predicated on an extension into peacetime of the co-operative, wartime union sacree, this landmark document called for the expansion of union rights and a statutory eight-hour day, but also for partial nationalization (but not state management) as well as a vast programme of industrialization, technological advance and intensified productivity, co-ordinated by a National Economic Council composed of representatives of the producers, consumers and the state. CGT Secretary Leon Jouhaux's Programme minimum demonstrated how far CGT leaders had moved from the pre-war policies of workers' direct action, self-reliance and opposition to the state. Although purportedly embodying only its minimum demands, the Programme symbolized the CGT's retreat from revolutionary syndicalism and set it on a post-war course of advocacy of reformism and collaboration with government in a jointly restructured economy. By the mid-1920s Jouhaux was speaking of the need for the CGT to be represented in every arena in which workers' interests were discussed, of the 'politique de presence'.[10] In the 1930s the CGT would be the primary proponent in France of

[8] Major studies of the pre-1914 CGT in the last decade include Jennings, Syndicalism; Jacques Julliard, Autonomie ouvrière. Etudes sur le syndicalisme d'action directe (Paris 1988); Barbara Mitchell, The Practical Revolutionaries. A New Interpretation of the French Anarchosyndicalists (New York 1987). Although cast as a biographical study, Vandervort's 'Griffuelhes' also offers a valuable overview of the pre-war CGT.

[9] The Programme is reproduced in Georges and Tintant, op. cit., 1, 461–6. John N. Home details the process of the CGT's embrace of labour reformism during the war in Labour at War. France and Britain 1914–1918 (Oxford 1991). See also the brief overview by Patrick Fridenson, 'The Impact of the First WorldWar on French Workers', in Richard Wall and Jay Winter, eds, The Upheaval of War. Family, Work and Welfare in Europe, 1914–1918 (Cambridge 1988), 235–48. Kathryn E. Amdur extensively documents the varied response of the labour movement in Limoges and St. Etienne during the period in Syndicalist Legacy Trade Unions and Politics in Two French Cities in the Era of World War 1 (Urbana and Chicago 1986). See also her short overview of 'La Tradition révolutionnaire entre syndicalisme et communisme dans la France de l'entre-deux guerres', Le Mouvement social, 139 (April-June 1987), 27–50. On interwar reformism, see the overview provided in Daniel Blume, et al., Histoire du réformisme en France depuis 1920 (Paris 1976), Chs 3–4.

[10] Quoted in Amdur, Syndicalist Legacy, 228.

a planned economy, blending private and collective enterprise.[11] Its immediate post-war leadership, moreover, actively resisted the siren call of Moscow, carrying the CGT instead into the revived and reformist International Federation of Trade Unions, within which Jouhaux became Vice-President.

Discouraged by the CGT leadership's hesitancy in a series of post-war strikes and inspired by the Russian example, dissidents who had come to view the wartime union sacree as a violation of the revolutionary traditions of the CGT repudiated this reformist turn. But the dissenters were united more by opposition to the CGT majority and a desire to win the organization for Moscow, whose Red International of Labour Unions would soon emerge, than by agreement on any further positive programme. Once the CGT split (the founding of the Parti Communiste Frangais at the end of 1920 had already split the Socialist Party), new divisions immediately surfaced within the infant CGTU, even before its formal founding congress in the summer of 1922.

Early Communist ascendancy within the CGTU compelled those committed to the policy of political independence of the pre-war CGT to ponder strategy. After the mid-1920s three options were available to such dissidents. The oldest option was to organize in autonomous unions, unaffiliated with either the CGT or the CGTU. The journal La Rgvolution prolétarienne, which began publishing in January 1925, represented the second option. The journal's founders, pre-war revolutionary syndicalists inspired by the Russian revolutionary achievement, had been drawn into the Communist Party. They found the party's insistence upon the subordination of the unions unacceptable, however, and either resigned or were expelled from it. Pierre Monatte, Robert Louzon, and especially Maurice Chambelland, became the mainstays of the inter-war Révolution prolétarienne, whose supporters sought to recapture and reunite the CGT and the CGTU from within.[12] The CGTSR, founded in November 1926, represented the third option. Its first Secretary was Lucien Huart, but for over a decade Pierre Besnard served as the chief spokesman of the CGTSR, in whose name he interpreted the consequences of the Bolshevik experience and the war for the revolutionary trade union movement of France and beyond.

II

In Besnard's view the post-war working class would have to reorganize itself within the framework of a series of lessons derived from a rethinking of the events of the Russian Revolution. First among them was that the formal pre-war position of the CGT of neutrality vis-a-vis political parties no longer sufficed. The Revolution had demonstrated that union co-operation with such parties meant the subordination of the unions. Complete independence had to be maintained by the unions, which constituted a self-sufficient means of revolution aimed at instituting decentralized workers' control, while political parties inevitably aimed at the consolidation of centralized state power. What was implicit in the Charter of Amiens — that revolutionary unions and political parties were rivals seeking to restructure society according to incompatible visions — became

[11] On the pertinent CGT policies in the 1920s and 1930s, see Richard F. Kuisel, Capitalism and the State in Modern France. Renovation and Economic Management in the Twentieth Century (Cambridge 1981), Chs 3–4.

[12] On the early Révolution prolétarienne (Paris), see Colette Chamberlain, 'La naissance de la Révolution prolétarienne', Communisme. Revue d'etudes pluridisciplinaires, 5 (1984), 77–87, and Christian Gras, Alfred Rosmer (1877–1964) et la mouvement révolutionnaire international (Paris 1971), 309–49.

explicit in the Charter of Lyon.[13] The CGTSR rejected a debilitating neutrality in favour of open opposition to political parties.

A second lesson, derived from a reappraisal of the Russian institution of the soviets, reaffirmed not only the autonomy but the primacy of the trade unions. Syndicalists initially hailed the soviets as institutions combining occupational representation and workers' autonomy. Early enthusiasts sometimes saw in them a means of bridging the pre-war divisions between centralists and decentralists in the revolutionary movement. 'There is in the Soviets a posthumous triumph for Marx and Bakunin', one of them asserted in 1919, 'reconciled on the plinth of the Russian Revolution'.[14] At one time Besnard shared this view. In 1921 he wrote that the system of soviets 'is based on the producer and rests on the same plan of action and of construction as French revolutionary syndicalism'.[15] But Besnard soon concluded that the Russian Revolution had revealed the shortcomings of the soviets. The soviets, after all, were not class organizations in that they were not wholly union-based. That they admitted representatives of political parties meant they could become, as they had in Russia, organs for the institutionalization of party power. The soviets, moreover, mixed economic and administrative functions, thereby confusing and mismanaging two discrete tasks.[16] The local organization co-ordinating production must be a true producers' association, the local union, not the soviet. The slogan 'All power to the unions!', however, was alien to Besnard, as we shall see.

Third, the unions were not only sufficient means of revolution through an insurrectionary and expropriatory general strike,[17] they were sufficient to defend the revolution as well. The Russian example had confirmed that the revolution could not be defended by a separate military arm, such as the Red Army, which would inevitably become a weapon for the establishment of centralized and dictatorial state power. The need to provide for the permanent, armed defence of the revolution without establishing any kind of permanent army, whose inherent dangers the Napoleonic and Russian examples unmistakably illustrated, became a recurrent theme in Besnard's writings. The destruction of political power and internal and external defence required armed force, but the revolutionary elements in the military had to be won over and absorbed by a volunteer proletarian force under the control, like the arsenals, of the unions. In place of a permanent army Besnard advocated an armed proletariat.[18]

Fourth, the Russian example also demonstrated that the success of revolution depended upon the response of the peasants. To fail to win their support, to fail to establish a harmonious and

[13] The Charter of Lyon is reproduced in CS, December 1926, and in Besnard, Ethique du syndicalisme 129–39; see esp. 132, 136–7.

[14] Raymond Lefebvre, L'Internationale des soviets (Paris 1919), 10.

[15] Besnard wrote on this occasion on behalf of a pro-Moscow minority within the CGT, the Comités Syndicalistes Révolutionnaires, which he then headed. Comité Central des Comités Syndicalistes Révolutionnaires (CSR), Projet de programme d'action et de réalization (Courbevoie 1921), 3.

[16] Besnard, Monde n,ouveau 62.

[17] The general strike remained the ultimate and distinctively syndicalist workers' weapon for Besnard, although he recognized that it could not be legal and largely passive as some earlier syndicalists had maintained, but would necessarily be violent and insurrectionary. He discusses the varying circumstances in whichthe general strike might occur in Syndicats ouvriers, 219–47.

[18] See esp. Besnard, Syndicats ouvriers, 224–34. Besnard's initial formulation (233) called for workers prepared 'd'abandonner l'outil pour le fusil' and 'de quitter le fusil pour l'outil'. Later, having witnessed the workers' militias in the Spanish Civil War, Besnard altered this formula: 'il faut prendre le fusil, sans abandonner l'outil; qu'il faut mamer l'outil et avoir le fusil en bandoulière,' Ethique du syndicalisme, 96. Besnard returned to the original formula in Fédéralisme libertaire, 24. See also Besnard, Monde nouveau, 88.

mutually beneficial exchange between the cities and the countryside, above all to coerce the peasants by requisitioning, ensured the failure of the revolution. The need to win peasant support well in advance of the revolution also recurred in Besnard's writings.[19]

The First World War, in Besnard's opinion, had not only created in the form of the Russian Revolution a sort of political laboratory from which the workers' movement must draw lessons, it had also ushered in a new economic era in civilization. The application of scientific and technical progress, first to war industries and then' beyond them, had radically transformed conditions of production, telescoping a century's change into 15 years. Progressive elements within both the capitalist and working class recognized the need to restructure the social order, but the capitalists proved to be better informed, more insightful, and had organized themselves accordingly. They understood, as Besnard put it,

> ... that it is a matter not only of 'rationalizing' production, exchange and credit, but that it is necessary above all to 'rationalize' their interior organization, to discipline their elements, to prepare modem cadres, to establish the bases of a new social order, whose establishment has become necessary in order to ensure the perpetuation of the privileges of class: property and authority, which for capitalism are the great bases of the regime.[20]

In Besnard's view, capitalist rationalization, orchestrated mainly by the great international banks, created massive international unemployment, the chief means of depressing wages and of breaking workers' defensive strength, through such production techniques as Taylorism and varieties of scientific management.[21] One of the three chief demands of the working class, therefore, must be the six-hour day.[22]

Besnard saw a connection between capitalist rationalization and the coercively integrative institutions of Fascism, a means of nullifying labour opposition to further rationalization. 'One can say, without fear of error', he asserted, 'that rationalization, with its brutal and pseudo-scientific methods, has been the mother of fascism and of state capitalism, the last form of capitalism *tout court*'.[23] The evolution of capitalist rationalization required a similar reorganization, or rationalization, on the part of the proletariat.[24] Syndicalism offered the basis for a defensive rationalization that would become offensive as well. Besnard regarded his 1926 Charter of Lyon, the founding document of the CGTSR, to be a charter of syndicalist rationalization,[25] an updated version of the CGT's 1906 Charter of Amiens.

For Besnard, then, the proletariat needed to rationalize itself as a class, to unite, organize and discipline its forces to counteract the increasing rationalization of capitalism, but to observe

[19] See esp. Besnard, Syndicats ouvriers, 286–96; Monde nouveau, Ch. 2; Orto, October 1932, 9–14. Earlier Besnard had defended the revolutionary agrarian policy in Russia. CSR, Projet de programme, 25–6.

[20] Besnard, Syndicats ouvriers, 19.

[21] On French scientific management, see Judith A. Merkle, Management and Ideology. The Legacy of the International Scientific Movement (Berkeley 1980), Ch. 5. Yves-Claude Lequin measures the extent of rationalization in 'La rationalization du capitalisme français: A-t-elle eu lieu dans les années vingt?', Cahiers d'histoire de l'Institut Maurice Thorez, 31 (1979), 115–41.

[22] Besnard, Syndicats ouvriers, 193–8.

[23] Besnard, Ethique du syndicalisme, 16.

[24] Besnard, Syndicats ouvriers, 21–2.

[25] Ibid., 143. Besnard drew up an early version of the Charter of Lyon in 1921, at Gnffuelhes's request. Besnard, Ethique du syndicalisme, 127.

the lessons of the Russian Revolution in so doing. Besnard viewed trade unionism as a natural movement, the free association of workers to defend themselves and eventually to restructure the social order. He invoked the language of biology (the influence of Kropotkin's Mutual Aid is clear), and saw the trade unions as organic expressions of the working class.[26] Syndicalism, he argued, was not a theoretical construct imposed upon the workers' movement, but a simple reflection of economic and social life, 'the permanent interpretation of life in perpetual evolution.'[27] The rationalization of the working class could not simply be left to the unreflective development of the workers' movement, but required interpretation and direction, particularly in the face of a coercive and manipulative capitalism, with its diverse political and cultural supports. It required a plan and a strategy just as capitalist rationalization rested on a comprehensive plan and strategy. Besnard had no patience with those who believed that the spontaneous, collective, creative capacity of the workers would resolve any problems, overcome any obstacles, and who therefore regarded planning to be unnecessary to achieve revolution and to construct a syndicalist society. He insisted, to the contrary, that 'preparation is the mother of action' in all fields. 'The period of revolutionary romanticism', Besnard added, 'is finished'.[28] He feared that post-revolutionary improvisation would be an invitation to disaster, that revolutionaries 'will always improvise too much, because they have prepared too little'.[29] Within the Syndicalist International Besnard represented those who insisted on the need for planning and preparation for revolution and social reconstruction against those who thought it superfluous and dangerous.[30] History confirmed that a working class capable only of the negative, destructive phase of revolution, but ill-prepared for its positive, constructive phase, only delivered its destiny into the hands of a minority:

> If to the contrary the proletariat is informed m advance, it will freely decide what it wants to do. It will choose its objective, its means and its route. If it cannot make these choices, if it persists in ignorance, if it awaits the messiah and the miracle, it will be subjected to the dictatorship of a handful of men, a dictatorship that will be all the heavier in that the 'conductors' themselves will know neither where to go nor where to lead the others.[31]

Besnard's life work, in effect, was to help prepare the workers to choose their own objective, means and route; this he did by elaborating a doctrine, a plan and a morality for the syndicalist movement.[32]

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[26] See e.g., Besnard, Syndicats ouvriers, 113–16; Monde nouveau, 36.

[27] Besnard, Ethique du syndicalisme, 123.

[28] Besnard, Monde n,ouveau 8.

[29] Besnard, Syndicats ouvriers, 343.

[30] Besnard had in mind especially the views of the anarchist trade union movement in Argentina. He discussed 'Preparación o improvisación' in the journal ofthe Spanish CNT, Solidaridad Obrera (Barcelona), 12 July 1931. See also his comments in Orto, September 1932, written after the fourth congress of the Syndicalist International failed to resolve the differences between supporters of Besnard's plan of syndicalist rationalization and the spontaneists. Later, in 1938, despairing of the course of the Spanish revolution, Besnard argued that it provedthe need for careful preparation, without which 'too much will always be left to improvisation, this capital shortcoming of the Latin races in general', Ethique du syndicalisme, 100.

[31] Besnard, Monde nouveau, 9.

[32] These were the tasks, respectively, of Besnard's three main works, Syndicats ouvriers, Monde nouveau and Ethique du syndicalisme, 'cette trilogie inséparable'.Ethique du syndicalisme, 123.

III

Observers have sometimes depicted revolutionary syndicalism as an anachronistic expression of collective resistance to industrialization, mechanization and technological change, a backward-looking ideology that offered a nostalgic defence against the unsettling forces of modernization.[33] Whatever the merit of this general characterization, Besnard presents a striking counter-example to it. Three elements in Besnard's proposals to rationalize revolutionary syndicalism — his defence of industrial unionism, his attitude towards modern science and technology and his advocacy of the synthesis of class — demonstrate that he was no ideological Luddite.

Besnard saw the gathering of workers in free associations not only as a natural, organic development, but also as the progress of moral maturity. Similarly, the displacement of craft spirit within such associations by 'a superior mentality: industrial and truly social', he maintained, 'proves equally the progress of an indisputable moral evolution'. It constituted evidence in Besnard's mind that the trade union movement did not simply rest on a material basis, but on solidarity across exclusivist corporate jurisdictions.[34] Besnard frequently invoked, and the Charter of Lyon incorporated, the declaration of the Charter of Amiens that 'the union, today an organ of resistance will be in the future the organ of production and distribution, the basis of social reorganization'.[35] Only industrial unions, Besnard insisted, could fulfil both these immediate and future tasks. The development of modem capitalism, and therefore proletarian rationalization, required that craft unions be replaced by industrial unions.[36] Thus he argued that all local construction workers, for example, should be united in a single industrial union, rather than organized separately as carpenters, painters, masons, and so on. In the future society Besnard envisaged, the industrial union, in urban and rural production, would constitute 'the true basic cell of local production'. Local unions, representing all local occupations, would then represent the 'complete organization of production'.[37]

Moreover, Besnard displayed a receptive attitude to technological progress and scientific advances. He saw economics and production as perpetually evolving. Unlike the post-war CGT, which accepted rationalization within the existing system with certain qualifications, Besnard believed that the producers should resist capitalist rationalization as debilitating. But they should not oppose technological change on principle.[38] He by no means romanticized human labour; even in the syndicalist society every means should be employed, from technological advance to the equally important compilation of complete data on production and labour requirements, to

[33] Although they disagree on much else, the following authors agree that pre- 1914 syndicalism was in one way or another a backward-looking movement: see, e.g., Bernard H. Moss, The Origins of the French Labor Movement 1830–1914 (Berkeley 1976), 159–60; Peter N. Steams, Revolutionary Syndicalism and French Labor (New Brunswick 1971), 19, 104–5; René Garmy, Histoire du mouvment syndical en France, Vol. 1 (Paris 1933), passim.

[34] Besnard, Syndicats ouvriers, 126; see also his 'Syndicalisme', m Encyclopédie anarchiste ed., Sebastien Faure (Paris, n.d. [1934]), 4: 2702.

[35] For the Charter of Amiens, see Henri Dubief, Le Syndicalisme révolutionnaire (Paris 1969), 96; for Besnard see CSR, Projet de programme, 20; Syndicats ouvriers, 101, 145, 150.

[36] Besnard, Syndicats ouvriers, 140, 150–1.

[37] Besnard, Monde n,ouveau 15, 40.

[38] CS, 31 August 1934. On the CGT and inter-war rationalization, see, e.g. CGT, Congrès confédéral de Paris (Paris n.d. [1927], 205–6. The Communist dominated CGTU, aware of the economic rationalization under way in the USSR, opposed rationalization in a capitalist, but not in a socialist, system. See CGTU, Congrès national ordinaire (Pans, n.d. [1931]), 571–2.

enable man 'to free himself progressively from the servitude of labour'.[39] If Besnard did not share the productivist premise of man as ceaselessly working to produce and to transform the physical environment, he also did not disregard the pride and dignity in work that capitalist rationalization made impossible by suppressing 'all human thought in order to utilize only the reflexes to the maximum'. Workers possessed a professional conscience which, in his view, consisted of the desire to produce work of the highest possible quality, in which the worker invests 'all of his attention, all of his knowledge and ... a little of his soul'. Nor was professional pride to be lamented as extinct or the preserve of a vanishing artisanate; the industrial worker could generate products of beauty and contemplation:

> Contrary to what is thought in certain circles, professional conscience has not disappeared since the Middle Ages. It has simply changed and, like everything else, evolved. It is different, but it has survived m its entirety. It is other, but it is not inferior. In our century of ever greater speed and ceaselessly more complicated technical adaptation, the modern worker no doubt no longer has the time to' put the finishing touches' m the manner of his ancestor, but he takes no less interest m his task.
>
> His attention is applied more to the whole than to the detail, to precision than to embellishment. But he produces no less often a work of art. Is the airplane engine not as beautiful to contemplate, even for the uninitiated, as the wood carving of the Middle Ages?

Besnard defined dignity in work as the combination of the professional conscience and the moral value of the producer.[40]

Besnard's future syndicalist society would employ large-scale industry that benefited everyone and would apply sophisticated techniques to reduce the cost and effort of production. Its federally-organized trade union structure would incorporate technical tasks from top to bottom. At the lowest levels of shop committees and factory councils, sub-organs of industrial unions, each shop would be endowed with a research bureau and laboratory dedicated to increasing production and decreasing work time and effort. Industrial federations at the regional, national and international levels would be given exclusively to technical undertakings, and at each of these levels an Office of Inventions would co-ordinate and disseminate research in each industry. Agricultural unions would have similar appendages devoted to scientific and applied agronomy. Besnard insisted upon the need to expand irrigation in the countryside, and to extend electrification and urban comforts into rural areas.[41]

Besnard also signalled his desire to update syndicalism by his efforts to bring into the proletarian camp the technicians and scientists who possessed the expertise required by the present and future tasks of the movement.[42] In addition to industrial unionism, working-class rationalization required the establishment of a synthesis of class, 'the fusion of the three great factors

[39] Besnard, Syndicats ouvriers, 316.

[40] Besnard, Ethique du syndicalisme, 12, 11.

[41] Besnard, Monde nouveau, 12, 17, 19–22, 29–30.

[42] Saint-Simon had much earlier urged the unification of scientists, technicians and workers (and industrialists as well) as 'les industriels', but not in a social order of collective ownership and management. Besnard's more immediate influence was probably Griffuelhes, who had been arguing in 1919–20 that only the union of manual and mental workers would enable the labour movement to vie with capitalists and the state for the control of production. Vandervort,'Griffuelhes', 570–2.

of life: manual labour, technique and science'.[43] The attitude summed up in an old but popular workers' slogan, 'pas de mains blanches, seulement les mains calleuses' was foreign to Besnard, who had no sympathy for those — 'tres ouvrieristes' – who wanted to limit the movement to manual workers, skilled and unskilled. Those with expertise, the technicians in particular, must educate the workers in the current struggle and for the most challenging task of the revolution, the restructuring of production. Any revolution in which workers found themselves in opposition to technicians (here again the Russian Revolution provided the object lesson) could only stagnate and fall into retreat.[44] In his view all excessively ouvriériste impulses had to be eliminated from the revolutionary movement and a new synthesis of class realized. For Besnard, a second fundamental demand of the working class, joining that for the six-hour day, should be that for a single wage, regardless of region or occupation or the gender or age of the worker. A single wage would help to establish industrial unionism and class integration by breaking down barriers not only of craft, but between manual and intellectual workers.[45]

IV

For all his emphasis on technological advances in production, Besnard's goal was not to optimize production, but to minimize labour, to provide leisure for individual and communal development within a framework that permitted each individual full voice in the decisions affecting her or him. Thus there is nothing of modem technocratic thought in Besnard's views.[46] The mobilization of technical expertise by no means meant the submission to management by technicians. The synthesis of class that Besnard envisaged involved no dilution of workers' control, but integrated technicians on a basis of complete equality with other producers. 'It is the worker', Besnard wrote,

> ... in the atelier, in the factory, in the office, m the field, at the port, in the shop, at the station, who is the basis of the organization; the latter exists only through him and for him. He is simultaneously its motor and its conductor. Nothing can be done without his consent; everything is done with him and by him, outside of all interior and exterior authority. Those whom he designates to exercise technical and administrative functions ... exercise no authority whatsoever. They can and ought to be only the executors of his decisions. He monitors them constantly and revokes them at will.
>
> Technicians, administrators are, for him, only equals, chosen for a time among the best endowed. Nothing more; but, it must be understood, nothing less.[47]

[43] Besnard, Syndicats ouvriers, 144; also 13, 258. See also the 1921 Projet de programme, 13, 15,21.

[44] Besnard, Syndicats ouvriers, 263, 266–7.

[45] Ibid., 198–201. A third fundamental demand (201–6) was for union control of production, a defensive-offensive demand, unlike the reduction of the work day and a single wage, which were complementary but defensive or at most 'defensive-active' demands (194).

[46] The European dimension is adroitly discussed in Charles S. Maier, 'Between Taylorism and Technocracy: European Ideologies and the Vision of Industrial Productivity in the 1920s', Journal of Contemporary History, 5 (1970), 27–61. For an overview of technocracy in France, see Jean-Philippe Parrot, La Représentation des intérêts dans le mouvement des idées politiques (Paris 1974), Ch. 3. Richard F. Kuisel discusses the best-known inter-war example in Ernest Mercier. French Technocrat (Berkeley 1967); see also his Capitalism and the State, esp. Ch. 3.

[47] Besnard, Monde n,ouveau 37.

While technocrats wished to consolidate expertise and centralize planning over the execution of production, Besnard wished to fuse planning and execution. Control over work must always remain in the workers' hands and never be delivered into the hands of a separate caste, even a potential caste of expertise with its origins within the working class itself. The syndicalists aimed at radical workers' control and their federalism sought to ensure it. Besnard's insistence on workers' control and his federalism effectively precluded technocratic consequences. His federalism, linking the individual worker with the highest national (or international) bodies and vice versa, via ascending currents of discussion and decision-making and descending currents for the execution of action at varying levels, safeguarded the workers' management of their own affairs. This ensured the freedom of every individual to express views on any issue, so long as the unionist respected the decisions taken by the whole after free discussion. The minority in such instances remained entirely free to propagate its ideas. Unions and groups of unions were, *mutatus mutandis*, free within all labour associations with which they were affiliated, so long as they respected and enacted the decisions collectively endorsed. As Besnard put it:

> The unionists are therefore consulted at every level, before deciding and acting. They truly and constantly have the direction of their various organizations of struggle in their hands. They are absolute masters within them.
>
> The same principles applied to the social organization born of the revolution will assure its rational functioning.
>
> These principles will permit the workers to control and direct the revolution, to push it to its logical limits, to stabilize it at its highest degree, to give to the new social organization maximum force and adaptability.[48]

As this passage suggests, Besnard envisaged a second administrative structure, paralleling the economic, productive and syndical one based upon industrial unions and local cross-industry unions. This second, social administrative structure would rest upon communes. The administrative tasks assigned to the communes — Besnard discusses them in some detai1[49] – include those dealing with education and leisure; social assistance and public health; statistics; public works; housing; transportation and communication; individual and collective security; and arts and science. Communes were to be federated, leading up to a National (or International) Confederation of Communes, but would rest upon the individual inhabitant at the base, just as unions were federated into a National (or International) Confederation of Labour, but would rest upon the individual worker or producer at the base. These parallel networks were to be linked horizontally at each level. At the national apex a Grand Council of Workers would administer public life, economic and social. The Grand Council of Workers, in short, would replace the centralized state, but would possess absolutely no authority.[50] That would reside solely with the united congress of representatives of the unions and the communes, with the Confederation of Labour responsible to the unions, the Confederation of Communes to the communes, and each union and commune responsible to its members. 'The worker, on the economic terrain, the individual, on the admin-

[48] Besnard, Syndicats ouvriers, 124.

[49] Especially in Monde n,ouveau Chs 4–5, which gives a fuller account than that originally published in Orto, January, February 1933.

[50] See Besnard in CS, 7 September 1934, and Monde nouveau, 97–9.

istrative and social terrain, that is to say Man under his two aspects', Besnard explained, 'are therefore completely masters of their acts'.[51]

The role of the communes in this scheme makes it clear that to synthesize Besnard's thought in the slogan 'All power to the unions' is to misrepresent him.[52] Besnard in fact explicitly rejected this slogan, both for its undue emphasis upon power and its single-minded focus upon the union organization. He summed up his own position in the phrase 'All economy to the unions! All social administration to the commune!'.[53] It is also clear that there is no place in this conception for an exclusive administrative or governing role by those with technical expertise. The technician remains, in this vision, only one of many workers operating democratically within her or his own union, one of many inhabitants operating democratically within his or her own commune. Besnard's vision was not the centralist vision of the productivist technocrat, but the vision of a decentralized association of self-managed producers. In his view it was simply the syndicalist vision.[54]

If Besnard's vision was by no means technocratic, was it compatible with the corporatism much discussed in Europe in the 1920s and 1930s? Any correspondences are incidental. Only in the narrowest sense of proposing some sort of occupationally based alternative to parliaments is there anything of contemporary corporatism in Besnard's work. The replacement of parliament by workers' organizations was a long-standing syndicalist goal, embodied implicitly in the Charter of Amiens. The Charter of Lyon is more explicit, noting that 'the citizen, a fleeting, unstable and artificial entity', will give way to 'the worker, a living reality, the logical support and natural motor of human societies'.[55] The occupationally-defined groupings that corporatists saw as the natural units of economic life, by contrast, incorporated all those engaged in any given profession, employers and workers alike, who were to recognize the regulatory decisions of the corporation. The corporatist vision made no allowance for syndical autonomy. Corporate decision-making, moreover, by no means implied the collective ownership that Besnard presupposed; private property would survive, though yielding to corporate management. Equally antithetical to Besnard's views was the central corporatist goal of social solidarity. 'The very kernel of corporatism', Matthew H. Elbow has written of the French example, 'was the doctrine of social peace, of solidarity between classes'.[56] Contemporary corporatism held that class antagonism could be resolved, differences harmonized, within a new institutional form that would eliminate

[51] Besnard, Monde n,ouveau 98–9.

[52] This is Jean Maitron's error in Le Mouvement anarchiste en France, 2 (Paris 1975), 59. Maitron's later biographical entry on Besnard (Dictionnaire biographique du mouvement ouvrier, ed., Maitron, 19 [Paris 1983], 111) drops this claim.

[53] CS, 9 March 1934. This phrase often appears on the masthead of CS from this date.

[54] Besnard's rivals of La Révolution p,rolétarienne who took the pre-1914 syndicalist motto 'le syndicat suffit á tout' literally and who embraced without qualification the slogan 'power to the unions', dissented. Whereas Besnard believed it essential, in short, that the interests of man as producer and as consumer of public services be separately represented, Révolution prolétarienne insisted (10 July 1936) that both be represented only by producers' organizations, and detected in the postulation of communes alongside the unions 'a residue of belief in the necessity of the state'. Besnard saw the undiluted concentration of authority in the slogan 'all power to the unions' as 'totalitarian and dictatorial'. CS, 24 July 1936. Georges Valois's syndicalist Nouvel âge (Paris) (15–16, 17, 19–20 July, 2–16 August 1936) joined in the debate.

[55] CS, December 1926.

[56] Elbow, French Corporative Theory, 1789–1948 (New York 1966), 102. See also on corporatism in France, Kuisel, Capitalism and the State, esp. Ch. 4; Parrot, La Représentation des i,ntérêts esp. Ch. 1; and Martin Fine, 'Toward Corporatism: The Movement for Capital-Labor Collaboration in France, 1914–1936', PhD thesis (University of Wisconsin

conflict, but not classes themselves, for the greater benefit of all. Such a class transcending and mediating yet class-preserving corporatism was wholly alien to Besnard's thought. He remained faithful to the syndicalist premise that class interests are antagonistic and irreconcilable, that in his words their opposition is 'constant, permanent and systematic.'[57] And despite the general antiétatiste proclivities of French corporatists, however much regulative functions devolved upon professional organizations in corporative thought, the state did not disappear, but remained to administer social legislation and enforce decisions. As Besnard noted, corporatism required the integrative presence of the state.[58] But he remained implacably opposed to the state in every form, whether it be the mediating corporatist state, the liberal parliamentary state, or the purportedly proletarian dictatorship.

Besnard's thought, in short, remained poles apart from the inherently conservative corporatism of his day: he rejected class uniting corporations as the fundamental productive organs of society, just as he rejected those other institutions that corporatism sometimes also advanced as natural social fundaments, the family and the regional body. Besnard urged that in contemporary society working-class parents must assume a greater role in the education of the young, outside of capitalist institutions, as must the unions. Union-sponsored education should be professional, but also explicitly social and sexual and should extend to both genders, not as males and females, but as 'perfectly equal beings destined to join together, to struggle and to work together at common tasks'. In Besnard's future society marriage would be replaced by free unions, parental authority would fade, leaving only bonds of natural affection, and the first responsibility for the free and competent development of children would rest with the collectivity.[59] As for regionalism, while Besnard believed that France's outmoded historical departments would yield to new regions based on natural geo-economic factors, he also argued that they would be represented not by corporate bodies but by regional workers' organizations.[60]

V

But Besnard's vision, filtered through the CGTSR, won relatively few converts in the new circumstances of inter-war France. Constraints of a practical, doctrinal and strategic, and personal nature combined to minimize the appeal of the CGTSR and Besnard's updated syndicalism. Practical, because the formation of the CGTSR in 1926 came late, several years after most unions had chosen either for the reformist CGT or the Communist oriented CGTU or for autonomy, outside of both. Despite the long animosity between the CGT and the CGTU, the two were closer to one another than to the CGTSR, as their merger in March 1936 showed. And although the CGTSR drew its initial support from autonomous unions, many more such unions had adopted autonomy to avoid the CGT-CGTU rivalry and saw no benefit in joining a third national organization, even

1971). Charles S. Maier, Recasting Bourgeois Europe (Princeton 1975), discusses the conditions in inter-war Europe that undermined faith in parliamentary government and made the corporatist alternative attractive.

[57] Besnard, Syndicats ouvriers, 32. Besnard insisted that there was no 'general interest' in a capitalist society, a 'fiction' that encouraged class collaboration. Orto, June 1932, 3. See also Syndicats ouvriers, 31–48.

[58] CS, 25 May 1934.

[59] Besnard, Syndicats ouvriers, 327. Besnard clearly supported equal pay for equal work in his single wage proposal, but he rarely discussed gender relations at length except in the context of education. See ibid., 316 and 320–8 (where he depends heavily on the work of James Guillaume); Ethique du syndicalisme, Ch. 2.

[60] On regionalism, see Besnard, Syndicats ouvriers, 158–65.

if they endorsed its doctrine.[61] Many autonomist unions would return to a reunified CGT in the Popular Front era. Certainly Besnard's audience was greater than the membership of the CGTSR, and included sympathizers in the autonomous unions and dissenters in the CGT and the CGTU. But the CGTSR never achieved significant success in drawing disaffected unions from the CGT or the CGTU. *Combat syndicaliste* remained mute on the specifics of CGTSR membership, variously estimated at between 4000 and 20,000. A former member much later gave a figure of 5000–6000 at its birth in 1926.[62] The membership of the CGTSR, like that of the other confederations, declined with the massive unemployment after 1930. Early in 1936 the CGTSR Executive declared that the impending reunification of the CGT and the CGTU would 'morally and materially' benefit the CGTSR, which opposed its programme to that of the Popular Front.[63] It is more likely that CGT-CGTU reunification meant a decline in CGTSR membership. Some members, like its first Secretary, Lucien Huart, reflecting on years of organizational isolation, left the CGTSR in 1936 (or earlier) to support trade union unification.[64] The most reliable figures for the late pre-war period put membership in July 1939 at 4000 and the press run of the weekly *Combat syndicaliste* at 5300.[65]

Doctrinal impediments reinforced the practical obstacles confronting the CGTSR. There were real limitations to Besnard's rationalization of syndicalism. His defence of industrial unionism, for example, had only limited appeal for most advocates of such organization during the period. In Besnard's scheme the local industrial union constituted the basic unit of production by industry, while the cross-industry local unions constituted the 'complete' basic unit of all production. Regional and national industrial unions were to act essentially as technical advisors, not to coordinate and reinforce action on the widest possible industrial basis. But proponents of industrial unionism, whether reformist or revolutionary, saw the most effective agency of workers' action precisely in this orchestrated mass unionism. For all of his programmatic and moral advocacy of industrial unionism, the practical efficacy of such organization implied a degree of central coordination and authority that challenged Besnard's federalism. Confronted with this dilemma, he always opted for federalism, but that seriously impaired his case for industrial unionism.[66]

If Besnard's advocacy of industrial organization proved too anaemic for most industrial unionists, his vision in some ways outstripped his own constituency in the CGTSR. It is noteworthy that support for the CGTSR came typically from small, local craft unions in construction, leather, clothing, hairdressing and metalworking.[67] Such unions sometimes had little opportunity to pur-

[61] CS, November 1928.

[62] The 4000–20,000 estimate appears in Jean Rabaut, Tout est possible! Les 'gauchistes' français 1929–1944 (Paris 1974), 224; the 5000–6000 figure is offered by Claire Auzias, 'Mémoires libertaires: Lyon 1919–1939', doctoral thesis (Université Lyon 1980), 158.

[63] CS, 24 January 1936.

[64] On Lyon, see Auzias, 'Mémoires libertaires', 159–60.

[65] The figures are those of Jean Maitron, Dictionnaire b,iographique 19: 111. It is even more difficult to assess the influence of the CGTSR's rival, Révolution prolétarienne as a propaganda journal, but some measure is provided by its regularly published subscription figures, which peaked at 1411 in 1933.

[66] Differences over industrial unionism had already surfaced in the pre-war CGT. Perhaps the best example is to be found in La Bataille syndicaliste (23 January-26 February 1914), wherein Victor Griffuelhes called for greater union coordination by strengthening intersyndical ties between craft unions and Alphonse Merrheim for greater centralization through industrial unionism.

[67] See Claire Auzias, 'La CGTSR, 1926–1928: un épisode de decentralization syndicale', Le Mouvement sociale, supplement to 144, October-November 1988, 58–60; Auzias, 'Mémoires libertaires', 126–39, 147; Amdur, Syndicalist Legacy, 239–40, 242, 246, 260; and Samuel Jospin, 'La Confédération Générale du Travail Syndicaliste Révolution-

sue industrial unionism, operated with varying degrees of success without mass action by depending on their local monopolization of skill, and found activist rhetoric compatible with and useful in their situation.[68] Despite Besnard's defence of industrial unionism, the CGTSR remained a markedly artisanally-based association, more so, ironically, than the wider syndicalist movement in inter-war France, taken as the syndicalist minorities in the CGT and CGTU, the syndicalist autonomists and the CGTSR.[69] In the small workplaces of the typical CGTSR member, moreover, workers themselves tended to monopolize expertise; a separate technician or engineer was all but unknown. Nor is it likely that the skilled artisan would welcome the translation of Besnard's single wage from theory to practice, despite Besnard's advocacy of the need 'to ally the ideal with interest, to see to it that the first inspires human action for the defence of the second'.[70] It is not surprising that although the CGTSR formally endorsed a single wage, the demand appeared with decreasing frequency in the ongoing propaganda of its journal, *Combat syndicaliste*.[71] Finally, for all of Besnard's praise of technological advance, the workers affiliated with the CGTSR included some of those least challenged by technological change during this period.[72] In short, Besnard's vision and the constituency of the CGTSR formed a rather imperfect match. They converged above all on two issues: local orientation and action and hostility to political activity, understood as the electioneering and parliamentarism of political parties. But important elements of Besnard's rationalized syndicalism found little resonance among some members of the CGTSR. Besnard argued that syndicalism was only the interpretation of life, but his own interpretation derived more from the contemplation of a wider workers' experience — however selectively and idiosyncratically Besnard may have read it — than from that of his immediate constituency. In May 1922, the journal *Vie ouvriére*, then in a Communist-syndicalist phase, observed that syndicalism was 'a practice in search of its theory'.[73] In many respects Besnard's vision constituted a theory in search of its practice.

But the biggest barrier to the expansion of the CGTSR was the decision to update its creed by abandoning the pre-war neutrality of the CGT in favour of an explicitly anti-political stance. This position may have been more consistent than the political neutrality that the Charter of Amiens uneasily combined with the professed goal of a revolutionary society ushered in by, and structured on, the trade unions, without reliance upon state authority, but it sacrificed the procedural protections that the Charter had instituted against ideological divisions. The Amiens Charter sought to keep party politics out of the unions while at the same time denying to no unionist the right to engage in political action personally, outside the union. It won wide support not because it repudiated political action, but because it provided a programmatic safeguard against the threat ideological dissonance posed to organizational unity. Besnard insisted that the CGTSR represented the continuation of the pre-war CGT. But the CGTSR's anarchosyndicalism

naire. A travers son journal "Le Combat Syndicaliste" (1926–1937)', Mémoire de maitrise, 1974, Centre de recherches d'histoire des mouvements sociaux et du syndicalisme, Paris, 117–19.

[68] Very few industrial unions were founded in the CGTSR. Besnard mentions industrial unions of building workers in Paris and Lyon. Syndicats ouvriers, 151. The Syndicat Unique du Bâtiment in Lyon slightly predated the CGTSR, whose formation it promoted and whose regional mainstay it became. Auzias, 'CGTSR', 57.

[69] See Amdur, Syndicalist Legacy, 242.

[70] Besnard, Syndicats ouvriers, 110.

[71] The demand is most evident in CS in 1928–9.

[72] Amdur notes that this was true regarding the shoemakers of Limoges and the metalworkers in the Loire. Syndicalist Legacy, 242.

[73] Quoted by Racamond, Vie o,uvrière 12 May 1922, m questioning the antistatist nature of syndicalism.

in fact sharply diverged from the political neutrality of the pre-war organization. The prewar CGT had assumed defensive and offensive functions; to discharge them it sought to ban all sectarianism in order to group all workers around their immediate interests. The inherent dilemma in pre-war syndicalist thought and strategy was that the pursuit of immediate interests required incorporating the widest possible range of workers, which threatened to dilute the influence of the minority dedicated not merely to temporary gains but to eventual revolutionary objectives. The alternative, to unite the committed revolutionaries separately, risked isolating them from the wider masses of workers whose support they themselves deemed necessary to revolutionary success. The pre-war revolutionary unionists had enjoyed a disproportionate but by no means unchallenged influence within a CGT that attempted to group all workers and insisted upon political neutrality to do so. The anarchosyndicalist CGTSR never escaped the fate of marginalization on behalf of revolutionary purity.

Although anarchosyndicalist in creed, the CGTSR was not so in name. It called itself instead a revolutionary syndicalist organization, for 'anarcho-syndicaliste' was a pejorative term introduced before 1914, and employed even more widely as such after the war.[74] In the early 1920s, supporters of Moscow, the better to distance the 'syndicalist' workers whom they hoped to win to the cause from those they regarded as obstructionist extremists, indiscriminately denounced as 'anarchosyndicalists' their varied far-left opponents in the labour movement who opposed political action and alliances. Any claim, moreover, to be the true heir of the pre-war CGT — and Besnard argued that with the formation of the CGTSR French syndicalism, like Lazarus, rose from the dead[75] — could be advanced only under the mantle of 'revolutionary syndicalism'. But if the CGTSR could speak for anyone in the pre-war CGT, it could speak only for a small minority of anarchist inspired syndicalists. Both Besnard's rivals of Révolution Prolétarienne and the CGTSR espoused a federalist, anti-statist, autonomist, revolutionary trade unionism and both did so explicitly under the rubric of 'revolutionary syndicalism'.[76] Both drew their inspiration from the pre-war CGT. But Besnard and the CGTSR concluded that neutrality could not prevent corruption by co-operation with the state or counter-revolutionary collaboration with political parties. 'The antipolitical character of the C.G.T.S.R.', *Combat syndicaliste* declared, 'is the safeguard of its revolutionary character'.[77] *Révolution Prolétarienne*, on the other hand, concluded that only neutrality could overcome the divisions, themselves inherently counter-revolutionary, within organized labour. Its supporters therefore remained within the CGT and the CGTU, working to fuse the two into 'a single apolitical C.G.T.' Consequently, they dismissed Besnard, the chief architect of a third CGT, as an 'apostle of schism'.[78] By placing neutrality and unity first, *Rev-*

[74] Daniel Colson's interesting study asserts that the term was introduced only in the polemics of 1921. Anarchosyndicalisme et communisme. Saint-Etienne 1920–1925 (Saint-Etienne 1986), 19–20. But the term occurred in pre-war polemics as well, for example in Charles Rappoport's indictment of the CGT Left in articles in the Guesdiste journal Le Socialisme (Paris) in August 1908.

[75] CS, December 1926.

[76] Révolution prolétarienne altered its subtitle in January 1930 from 'Revue syndicaliste communiste' to 'Revue bimensuelle syndicaliste révolutionnaire'.

[77] CS, 28 May 1937.

[78] Monatte in Révolution prolétarienne 15 February 1926, 17; Maurice Chambelland in ibid., August 1926, 16. To Révolution prolétarienne Besnard sought to establish an anarchist trade union movement. Besnard indeed saw anarchosyndicalism as uniting anarchist objectives of abolishing state authority with the union structure of revolutionary syndicalism. Of syndicalism and anarchism Besnard wrote that 'the first provides a vehicle for the second and the latter is the final goal of the former'. CS, September-October 1930. But just as the Charter of Amiens declared the unions

olution prolétarienne, and not the CGTSR as Besnard believed, had the greater claim to be the inter-war torchbearer of revolutionary syndicalism.

Events corroborated predictions that the CGTSR's obsession with ideological purity would condemn it to revolutionary impotence. Its embrace of anarchosyndicalism ran counter to developments within the French working class. French workers remained divided into the 1930s about the programme and purpose of political action, but the vast majority declined to reject it on principle. The great achievement of the Left in the 1930s, the formation and enormous electoral victory of the Popular Front, backed up by the massive occupation of the factories, with workers' apparent gains codified in the Matignon Agreements and subsequent social legislation, suggests as much. The spontaneous occupation of the factories — the direct action of May and June 1936 — is most judiciously read as reflecting the reigning ambivalence of French workers towards political parties and the state. The electoral victory of the Popular Front showed that it was to political action and the state that French workers looked for a means of blocking a perceived Fascist threat, of defending the Republic, and of redressing their social and economic grievances. But the mass strikes simultaneously demonstrated that workers believed a mere electoral victory to be no assurance, alone, of workers' gains. Industrial action was a stiffening agent, a message to unreliable parties and the state, but it was a reinforcement of and not a substitute for political action. Labour's gains of the early Popular Front proved temporary, were soon largely reversed in deed if not in document, and disillusioned workers began to abandon the newly reunified CGT to which they had recently flocked. But that did not mean gains for the CGTSR,[79] which could commend the workers' direct action of May-June 1936, but not their political support for the Popular Front.[80]

VI

During the Popular Front era the CGTSR kept to the solitary path on which it had embarked a decade earlier, a course compatible in the 1920s as in the 1930s with Besnard's particular disposition of mind and character. For Besnard, temperament, conviction and circumstances converged in a strategy of revolutionary purity and separateness. Those who knew him well detected in Besnard a rigid cast of mind, a doctrinaire who sought to create a movement in his own hands and to his own liking. 'His excessive rigidity', observed Théo Argence, a metalworkers' official and a confidant of Besnard in the early 1920s, 'led him into isolation. That can explain, without justifying, his need to create new groups that he wanted in his image.' Before the CGTSR emerged, Maurice Chambelland spoke of the 'secessionist will of Besnard, who … wants to have his own C.G.T.'. After the CGTSR emerged, Monatte suggested that Besnard might found yet a

independent of both parties and sects, meaning anarchist groups, Besnard insisted that while independently organized anarchists had a complementary ideological role to play outside the workers' organizations, they were simply individual members within the unions, whose direction must always remain exclusively in the hands of the workers, free of the direct or indirect influence of all outside groups. 'Anarchism assists the anarchosyndicalist movement, without substituting itself for it': Besnard, Anarcho-syndicalisme et anarchisme 10.

[79] Despite Besnard's hopes in this regard. Ethique du syndicalisme, 53.

[80] Besnard could console himself that the spontaneous, massive strikes of May-June 1936 were occupation strikes, which he had predicted as the next stage in the natural evolution of workers' control, and he saw in them a new highwater mark of co-operation between manual and mental workers, a significant step toward his synthesis of class. Ethique du syndicalisme, 29; see also CS, 5 June 1936.

fourth CGT if he found himself outnumbered within the third. 'Some people cannot live in a minority.'[81]

Whatever needs of personality may have been at work here, sectarian propensities found repeated expression in Besnard's career. In February 1921 Besnard participated in a secret pact that committed over a dozen militants to defending syndicalism within the CGT by any means. Only after Besnard replaced Monatte in May 1921 at the head of an internal opposition, the Comites Syndicalistes Revolutionnaires, originally dedicated to winning a single CGT for Moscow, did a schism occur, followed by the formation of the CGTU. Displaced from the leadership of the new CGTU by the pro-Moscow faction, Besnard immediately founded a new internal opposition, the Comite de Defense Syndicaliste, but abandoned it in June 1923. In 1924 he helped to form, and by 1925 he headed, the Union Federative des Syndicats Autonomes de France, a loose association of autonomous unions that chose to defy both the CGT and the CGTU. In 1926 he was the chief founder of the CGTSR, itself fated to remain by far the smallest of the three national labour confederations. Not only could the CGTSR not expand significantly within the French working class, its policy of revolutionary purity and isolation failed to unite even the anarchosyndicalists, who found themselves in the early 1930s divided four ways between internal oppositions within the CGT and the CGTU, in a series of autonomous unions, and in the CGTSR.[82] The CGTSR's membership of several thousand in the era of the Popular Front was minuscule compared to the three-quarters of a million that the reunified CGT could claim in March 1936.[83] Critics sneered that the SR in CGTSR stood for 'Sans Rien'.[84] Besnard's career appears to confirm Monatte's observation of Besnard's need to have 'sa maison a lui'.[85]

When Besnard became the General Secretary of the Syndicalist International in 1936,[86] moreover, his schismatic and sectarian propensities, combined with the pressure of events in a Spain in civil war, led to a crisis within the International. In Spain, where a social revolution initially accompanied the civil war, the hard-pressed CNT soon believed it necessary to subordinate its revolutionary programme to the war against Franco. Above all the formal militarization of the informal militias originally fielded by the Spanish labour organizations, and the participation by CNT representatives in the Catalonian and later the national Republican governments, symbolized this suspension of syndicalist principles. Besnard was among the first foreign syndicalists publicly to criticize CNT leaders,[87] who regarded external reproaches as inappropriate in a period of civil war. Disagreements between Besnard and the CNT over foreign propaganda and

[81] Argence: quoted in Maitron, Mouvement anarchiste 2: 60; Chambelland and Monatte: Révolution prolétarienne August 1926, 16; 15 July 1927, 2.

[82] During discussions of CGT-CGTU unification, the CGTSR promoted unity of the 'revolutionary syndicalist forces' by inviting syndicalist autonomists and minorities in the CGT and the CGTU to a unity conference, but to no avail. CS, January-February, April 1931.

[83] The membership of the reunified CGT increased rapidly in the Popular Front period from 785,728 at reunification to about four million early in 1937. In 1939 membership had declined to about 2,500,000. Antoine Prost, La C.G.T. á l'epoque de Front Populaire: Essai de description numérique (Paris 1964), 37–48.

[84] CS, 1 March 1928.

[85] Pierre Monatte, Trois scissions syndicales (Paris 1958), 153.

[86] Amdur errs in putting Besnard at the head of the Syndicalist International from 1923. Syndicalist Legacy, 397, n. 16. Maitron similarly errs in attributing the Secretaryship of the CGTSR to Besnard from 1929. Dictionnaire b,iographique 19. 111. Besnard exercised his dominant influence in the organization through membership in its Administrative Committee and through CS, leaving the Secretaryship to others.

[87] See CS, 23 and 30 October 1936.

fund raising on behalf of the Spanish syndicalists further embittered their relations.[88] Critical of its ideological deviations and fearful that the CNT might abandon the International, Besnard in July 1937 canvassed the International's national affiliates, except the CNT, on possible support for an internal opposition within the Spanish organization.[89] The Secretary of the International was considering splitting its largest national affiliate. The crisis led to an Extraordinary Congress of the International, with 11 countries represented, in Paris in December 1937, in which both CNT leaders and Besnard came in for heavy criticism. Besnard took the view that his writings had established proper syndicalist strategy; had the CNT only followed it, all would have been well in Spain. For their part, the Spaniards insisted that Besnard never hold office within the International again. The role that Besnard had more than once played in the French labour movement — of precipitating an organizational crisis in the name of ideological purity — he also played in the international arena.

VII

The adequacy of syndicalist doctrine and strategy had been called into question before 1914, when diverse revolutionaries sought to reinvigorate a flagging CGT, reconsidering priorities, casting about for more efficient organizational forms to unite all workers without abandoning either union autonomy or a revolutionary agenda. War and revolution accentuated that challenge, for if economic concentration and rationalization continued only gradually in post-war European society, new national and international political options emerged quickly for the labour movement, and in both war and revolution an unprecedentedly interventionist state had emerged. Discussing 'the two syndicalisms' in the CGT in 1913, the reformist printer H. Jury argued that 'sound syndical theory … can and ought to develop in the shelter of republican and democratic institutions'. Indiscriminately bunching his anarchist, revolutionary syndicalist and revolutionary socialist adversaries in a second camp, for purposes less analytical than polemical, Jury asserted that 'they prop up their methods on utopias or fantastic theories [théories abracadabrantes]'.[90] The post-war CGT embraced a variety of Jury's reformism and struck its uneasy deal with the democratic state. The CGTU, espousing revolution but forfeiting union autonomy, struck its own deal with the Communist party. Over a decade later the reunified CGT would enter into the political alliance of the Popular Front.

The appeal of the CGTSR for a federalist, autonomist, revolutionary trade unionism, in short, found relatively little resonance within the inter-war labour movement. The CGTSR's self-identification as 'the continuation of the C.G.T. of 1906',[91] moreover, constituted a case of mistaken identity, for Besnard conflated the small minority of anarchist syndicalists in the prewar CGT with revolutionary syndicalism as a whole. He therefore saw the task of updating syndicalism, and that of adapting the legacy of such anarchists as Michael Bakunin,

[88] Relations between the CNT and the International during the Spanish Civil War are briefly discussed in Wayne Thorpe, 'Syndicalist Internationalism before World War II', in Marcel van der Linden and Wayne Thorpe, eds, Revolutionary Syndicalism: An International Perspective (Aldershot 1990), 252–7.

[89] Circular 13, 1 July 1937. AIT Congres 1937, Rudolf Rocker Archives, International Institute of Social History, Amsterdam.

[90] T,ypographie français 16 November 1913.

[91] EB,theiquse dnu sayndricadlis,me 139.

Peter Kropotkin and James Guillaume to a modem capitalist world,[92] as one and the same. The CGTSR struggled to keep one strand of pre-war syndicalism alive, but remained fettered by an explicitly anti-political doctrine of limited appeal and an organizational strategy that fostered self-isolation. It could provide no evidence that an anarchosyndicalist direct actionist creed could inspire a mass union movement in the much altered circumstances of inter-war France.

Besnard nevertheless earned a distinctive position in the history of French syndicalism, and beyond it. His writings not only constitute the most systematic statement of French anarchosyndicalism in the twentieth century, but by incorporating a sustained attempt to adapt that tradition to post-war conditions, they testify to a modernizing current within it. The post-war CGT's implicit reformism, its opening to the prospectively conciliatory and mediating state on the one hand, and the CGTU's revolutionary programme on the other, had much greater appeal in those new conditions, but Besnard was not without influence in France.[93] Like his mentor Griffuelhes, who died in 1922, Besnard died (1947) in the wake of a great war uncertain about what role to take up in the post-war labour movement. The reappearance of Combat syndicaliste after the Second World War and its continued appearance in the 1990s, however, bears witness to the persistence of anarchosyndicalist impulses in modem France.[94] Beyond inter-war France, moreover, in the Spain of the 1930s, where neither Besnard's personality nor his strategic preferences were an immediate issue, his writings had greater impact. Anticipating a workers' revolution in Spain in 1936, even Besnard's syndicalist rivals in France, such as *Révolutionnaire Prolétarienne* and Georges Valois's *Nouvel âge*, conceded the influence he commanded there.[95] When civil war and attempted revolution came, however, the CNT found itself confronting hard ideological choices and a Besnard elevated to the head of the Syndicalist International. To the beleaguered leaders of the CNT, daily confronting the realities of a desperate civil war, the Besnard of 1937 appeared to be hopelessly doctrinaire, a man wedded to 'théories abracadabrantes'.

Besnard asserted that syndicalism was not an imposed theoretical construct, but simply the constant interpretation of a perpetually evolving working-class experience. In this he echoed the pioneer syndicalist Fernand Pelloutier, the prime mover in the early Bourses du Travail movement in France, who wrote that the labour unions 'scoffed at theory, and their empiricism … is worth at least all the systems of the world, which have precisely the duration and exactitude of

[92] Besnard, Syndicats ouvriers, 23, 343. Proudhon's influence on Besnard is also clear. See for example Besnard's 'Syndicalisme', Encyclopédie a,narchiste 4: 2702, and CS, 24 July 1936.

[93] An oral history of libertarian unionists active in the inter-war Lyon area produces a list of their 'inspirateurs' limited to Proudhon and Bakunin as theoretical forebears, Fernand Pelloutier as the practical creator of the movement, seconded by E. Pouget and V. Griffuelhes, with only one name from the inter-war period: that of Besnard. Auzias, 'Mémoires libertaires', 165.

[94] On Griffuelhes's post-war waverings see Vandervort, 'Griffuelhes', Ch. 11. CS reappeared in Paris in 1945 and in April 1947 became the organ of the Confédération Nationale du Travail, formed in May (founding congress in December) 1946 as a continuation of the CGTSR. Abandoning his former strategy at the end of his life, the ailing Besnard counselled against its creation, advising anarchosyndicalists to work instead within the Communist-dominated CGT. See the memoires of Amédée Domat in Jacques Caroux-Destray, Un couple ouvrier traditionnel La vieille garde autogestionnaire (Paris 1974), 190–3. Once the new confederation appeared, Besnard apparently gave it his blessing only reluctantly. The otherwise laudatory obituary of Besnard in CS (April 1947) refers to his advocacy of 'certain momentary alliances' as a mistake. Like the CGTSR, the new confederation — which invoked Besnard's works as prefiguring future society (CS, February 1948) — led a marginal existence. Le Combat syndicaliste continues to be published in Paris.

[95] Révolution P,rolétarienne 10 July 1936; N,ouvel âge 2–16 August 1936.

predictions in the almanac'.[96] And yet Besnard proved to have a far more formulaic mind than Pelloutier. His claim merely to be interpreting the workers' movement never concealed his penchant for imaginative — one is tempted to say prescriptive — extrapolation from it. His old rival in France, Pierre Monatte, later called Besnard a typical utopian.[97] And it is under the rubric of utopian, and not that of explorer suggested by his admirer's comparison of Besnard with Christopher Columbus, that we must finally consider him. For while Columbus found what he had never imagined, Besnard imagined what he had never found. Ultimately Besnard best fits in the tradition of the Condorcets, Saint-Simons, Fouriers, and others, about whom Frank Manuel wrote over 30 years ago as the 'prophets of Paris'.[98] Certainly no French syndicalist contemplated a prospective syndicalist revolution and postrevolutionary society as fully as Besnard, a notable twentieth century contributor who added an anarchosyndicalist version to a long standing tradition of French utopian thought. Utopian thought at some level charts human aspirations and hints at human possibilities by suggesting that mankind need not forever be tied to what is, but should always consider what might be. As Oscar Wilde put it, 'a map of the world that does not include Utopia is not worth even glancing at'.[99] Besnard's utopia, it is true, drew only a minority of workers in inter-war France; his vision was not able to compete with the more present-minded offerings of the reformists or the revolutionary credentials and promises of the Communists. What the earlier prophets of Paris had already learned, Besnard, who earned a place among them, also learned: that however absorbing it may be to contemplate one's destination, it is always easier to plot the itinerary than it is to make the journey.

[96] Pelloutier, Histoire des Bourses de Travail (Paris 1902), 155.

[97] Monatte, Trois Scissions, 152.

[98] Frank E. Manuel, The Prophets of Paris (Cambridge, MA 1962).

[99] 'The Soul of Man under Socialism', The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde, ed., Vyvyan Holland (London 1966), 1089.

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