

Syndicalism: its origin and weakness

Eighty years ago this month the main French trade union confederation of the time adopted at its Congress in Amiens a Charter which, spreading far beyond France, became the doctrinal basis of a theory of unionism and revolution known as "syndicalism" (this is in fact merely the ordinary French word for trade unionism, so in France this doctrine is known as "revolutionary syndicalism"). As this doctrine has played an important historical role in working class thinking and organisation, we mark this event by publishing below an English version of the chapter on trade unionism that appeared in the pamphlet *Pour le Socialisme Mondial* ("For World Socialism") put out in French by the world socialist movement in 1981 and which reproduced the Charter in full as well as giving a socialist assessment of it.

Associations of workers of the same trade have existed since the Middle Ages but only became organisations of wage earners to negotiate wage rates and conditions of work with employers in the middle of the 19th century. Up till then these associations had been mainly mutual aid societies, but even these had been banned by the Le Chapelier Law of 1791 which was later incorporated into the Napoleonic Code. Workers' associations nevertheless continued to exist. It was not until 1864 that they were permitted to come out into the open and not until 1884 that they were fully legalised.

In the 1860s the main workers' organisation in France was the "Association Internationale des Travailleurs" (International Working Men's Association) which had been founded in 1864 by French and British workers. Although Karl Marx played a prominent role in its activities the IWMA was not a socialist organisation but was mainly concerned with organising trade unions and supporting strikes. It did, however, introduce some socialist ideas to French workers. Thus in 1869 we find a federation of workers' organisations in Paris proclaiming as its final aim "the total emancipation of the workers in a new social order where the wages system will be abolished" and in 1870 Leo Frankel declaring (not quite accurately) during a trial of some French members of the IWMA that "the international association does not have as its aim an increase in the wage of workers, but indeed the abolition of the wages system". This demand for "the abolition of the wages system" had first been raised by the British Chartists in the 1830s and 1840s and had been taken up by Marx in an address he gave to the General Council of the IWMA in 1865 (published after his death as a pamphlet entitled *Value, Price and Profit* which we strongly recommend for an understanding of trade unionism, its uses and limitations). It was to become a prominent slogan of French trade unionism in the period up till the First World War, after the working class movement had recovered from the setback represented by the bloody suppression of the Paris Commune in 1871.

In 1895 various trade unions and other workers' organisations joined together to form a "Confederation generale du travail" (General Confederation of Labour) which in 1902 declared its objective to be "the disappearance of the wages system and employers". In 1906 the CGT adopted at its congress in Amiens a new programme. In view of its historical importance we reproduce (in a contemporary translation) this "Charte d'Amiens" in full:

The General Confederation of Labour unites, independent of all political groupings, all workers who recognise the struggle to be carried on for the abolition of the wages system [. . .]

Congress considers this declaration to be a recognition of the class struggle which, on the economic field, places the workers in revolt against all forms of exploitation and oppression, material and moral, carried out by the capitalist class against the working class.

Congress makes this theoretical affirmation more precise by the following points:

Regarding day-to-day needs. Trade Unionism pursues the co-ordination of the efforts of the workers, the increase of the workers' welfare through the realisation of immediate amelioration, such as the shortening of working hours, wage increases, etc.

But this is only one aspect of its task. Trade Unionism is preparing complete emancipation which can only be realised by the expropriation of the capitalist class. It favours as a means to this end the general strike and considers that the trade union, now a unit of resistance, will in the future be the unit of production and distribution, the basis of social organisation.

Congress declares that this two-fold task, for day-to-day life and for the future, arises from the actual position of wage-earners, which forces the working class and imposes on all workers, whatever their opinion and political and philosophical views, the duty to belong to the basic organisation, the trade union. Therefore, so far as individual members are concerned, Congress declares complete freedom for every Trade Unionist to participate, outside of the trade organisation, in any forms of struggle in accordance with his political or philosophical views, confining itself only to asking him, in return, not to introduce into the trade union the opinions which he professes outside it.

In so far as organisations are concerned, Congress decides that in order that Trade Unionism may obtain utmost effectiveness, economic action should be exercised directly against the employing class and that the Confederal organisations should not, as trade unions, pay any attention to parties or sects which, outside or alongside, may pursue completely independently the transformation of society.

The doctrine here expounded became a current in the working class movement that has become known as "syndicalism". Only some of the leaders of the CGT accepted this doctrine and regarded the trade unions and the general strike as the means to overthrow capitalist rule and establish a new society. The bulk of the members were interested only in "day to day needs", though they were sometimes prepared to support revolutionary phrases as a means of frightening employers into conceding higher wages or better conditions.

The Charter was not as anti-political as it has sometimes been claimed to be. It does not proclaim the incompatibility of trade union and political

action, but only that political divisions should not be introduced into the trade unions. This was sensible, since to be effective in their role of bringing pressure to bear on employers over wages and working conditions trade unions need to organise as many workers as possible, irrespective of their political or philosophical views. They are, and must be, composed of workers of all views. To introduce political views (including the anti-political views of the anarchists) is to risk division, so weakening the union in the face of the employers. In recognising this the Charter of Amiens adopted a sound position (one which is unfortunately not always remembered today).

Trade unions arise out of the wage-relation that is at the basis of capitalism. Capitalist society is divided into two classes: the capitalist class who own and control the means of production and the working class who, excluded from such ownership and control, are forced to sell their mental and physical energies in order to live. The wage which workers receive is the price of their labour-power and the price of this commodity fluctuates, like that of all commodities, around its value as determined by the amount of socially-necessary labour incorporated in it. If competition between workers for jobs was unrestricted then wages would tend to fall below the value of labour-power, as often happened in the 19th century before effective trade unions existed. Combining together in trade unions to exert collective pressure on employers is a way workers can prevent their wages falling below the value of their labour-power. Put another way, it is a way of ensuring that they are paid the full value of what they have to sell. This is the usefulness of trade unions to the working class but they can do no more than this. They cannot substantially increase the living standards of their members under capitalism but they can ensure that wages are not reduced below the subsistence level.

Trade unions, then, are defensive organisations of the working class which, in order to be effective, must recruit all workers, on the basis merely that they work for wages in a particular industry or trade and not on the basis of their political or philosophical views. This means that they are not, and cannot be, revolutionary organisations since they will be composed of non-socialists as well as of socialists. In fact at the present time, when the working class does not yet want and understand socialism, the overwhelming majority of trade unionists will inevitably be non-socialist and hence non-revolutionary. This was so before the First World War too. This was why it was absurd to expect, as did the syndicalists, the trade unions to act in a revolutionary way for this was to expect non-revolutionaries to behave as revolutionaries.

To end capitalism the great majority of workers must have first come to want and understand this change since the new socialist society which will be established in place of capitalism can only function with the conscious and active participation of its members - something the syndicalists did not accept. They imagined that they, as a conscious minority, could lead the discontented mass of workers in a general strike against capitalism. This would inevitably have been defeated with many workers being killed, especially as the anti-political stand of the syndicalists meant that the state, which controls the means of coercion, was to be left in the hands of a government representing

the capitalist class.

Although the sincerity of the syndicalists' desire to end capitalism cannot be questioned, their understanding of the future society to replace it can be. In suggesting that society should be organised on the basis of trade unions - "the trade union [. . .] will in the future be the unit of production and distribution, the basis of social organisation" - the syndicalists were merely projecting into socialism the industrial and professional divisions of workers which exist under capitalism. Since socialism is based on the social ownership (= ownership by society) of the means of production, the trade union ownership proposed by the syndicalists was not socialism at all but a modified form of sectional ownership.

The First World War revealed that not only were the bulk of CGT members not revolutionary but that they were patriotic. From this time on began a process of collaboration with and integration into the state by the trade unions which continues to this day, with the unions represented on many governmental institutions at national and local level and receiving subsidies from the state for certain of their activities. Trade unionism, in other words, has dropped its pretence at being revolutionary, though the present CGT did not eliminate its paper commitment to "the disappearance of the wages system and of employers" till 1969. This has led some to argue that as the trade unions are no longer revolutionary they should not be supported by those who want social revolution, but should on the contrary be opposed. This is not a fair criticism nor a valid conclusion.

The trade unions are essentially defensive organisations with the limited role of protecting wages and working conditions and it is by this criterion that their effectiveness or otherwise ought to be judged. By this standard, although they make many serious mistakes (disunity and rivalry, collaboration with the state and with political parties), by and large the existing trade unions do succeed in protecting wage rates and working conditions against what Marx called "the never-ceasing encroachments of capital". Our members do join the existing trade unions and work within them to defend wages and conditions. We do not criticise the unions for not being revolutionary, but we do severely criticise them when they depart from the principle of an antagonism of interests between workers and employers; when they collaborate with employers, the state or political parties; when they put the corporate interests of a particular section of workers above that of the general interest of the working class as a whole.

But even if the unions made no mistakes of this sort, what they can achieve for the working class under capitalism is very limited. They can - and do - enable workers to get the full value of their labour-power, but they cannot stop the exploitation of the working class. This exploitation is inherent in the wages system and can only be abolished along with it through the conversion of the means of production into common ownership under the democratic control of the whole community. But this requires political action based on socialist understanding by a socialist political party for which the trade unions, with their limited defensive role, can never be a substitute.