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Syndicalism and the co-operative commonwealth

August 18, 2008

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A review of a classic of French revolutionary syndicalism.

Essential reading for anyone wanting to find out about its

ideas on social change.

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How we shall bring about the revolution: Syndicalism and the co-operative commonwealth, Emile Pataud and Emile Pouget, Pluto Press

This book was written in 1909 by two leading French revolutionary syndicalists. Originally translated into English and published in 1913 by two British anarchists, it can be considered as representative of the ideas of the then syndicalist French union, the CGT. Successfully applying the ideas of Bakunin and the libertarian wing of the First International, the activism, militancy and ideas of the CGT had inspired many across the globe, including many of those active in our own “syndicalist revolt” of the 1910s.

The work itself is a novel in which the two Emile’s present a summary of the ideas then dominant in the revolutionary wing of the CGT. The title indicates the nature of the book, namely how a successful revolution was conducted in France — with the CGT at its head. In some ways, it is a syndicalist “Conquest of Bread” and, perhaps unsurprisingly, Kropotkin provides an

extremely important (from an anarchist perspective) preface. In other ways, it is like Morris's "New from Nowhere," a syndicalist utopian novel. However, as it stresses the means rather than the ends, the work follows more in Kropotkin's footsteps (if not in his breadth of vision).

What strikes the reader is how this work refutes some of the myths grown up around revolutionary syndicalism. For example, rather than seeing the revolution as coming about by means of a passive general strike (the folding of arms), Pataud and Pouget see it as insurrectionary. The revolt is anything but passive, with the stress continually placed on how the workers took the initiative to hinder and fight the state, to spread the strike, to expropriate capital, and so on. The general strike is seen not only as a result of local action, but as the starting point for wider action. Equally, the idea that syndicalists simply ignored the state and focused on expropriating capital is shown to be false. The state is not ignored, rather it is purposely and definitely destroyed by the revolt which turns from a rolling general strike into insurrection. The way the revolution unfolds also destroys the idea that syndicalists thought that revolution would have to wait until *all* workers were unionised. Like Bakunin, the Emile's see the role of the revolutionary unions as encouraging the process of revolt, with the revolution itself organising those outside of the unions.

The book is utopian in the best and worse sense of the word. It shows that another world is possible and, equally as important, a means of getting there. Undoubtedly the book gets the overall nature of a libertarian social revolution correct, even if some of its more "visionary" ideas seem weak. It stresses the ability and power of working class people to change the world, which can only inspire. However, its account of the problems facing the revolution is weak (i.e. utopian in the worse sense!). Defence of the revolution is over in two chapters (one for internal and one for external threats). As such, Kropotkin's com-

ments that they downplay the resistance the revolution would face are spot on. And it shows its age, with the application of technology defeating the counter-revolution. Jules Verne would have been proud of the gas warfare, ray-guns and guided missiles applied by syndicalist France to repeal the enemy! Today, all libertarians would leave such means to Bolshevism (after all, Trotsky did approve the use of poison gas against Kronstadt!).

So, this work raises important issues, even if its coverage is not always sufficient (e.g. defence of the revolution, the liberation of women, the role of “money,” the way the revolution stops at the border and so on). It is stronger on the means, the struggle, rather than the ends. As such its emphasis on local action, the need for workers to expropriate capital directly to overcome the disruption caused by any revolution and start to meet social needs, the awareness that revolution is a process and that different areas will progress at different speeds are all in its favour. In addition, it recognises that revolutions need to create new forms of organisation to replace those whose purpose is no more. Thus the union self-management replaces wage slavery, the CGT congress becomes in effect a soviet congress to co-ordinate joint activity (again, echoing Bakunin and other anarchists). The book does, unfortunately, downplay the divisions between reformists and revolutionaries in the CGT (revolutions tend to deepen such divides, not eliminate them as the authors wished) as well as the influence of politicians and political parties. These parties rarely disappear as easily as the Emile’s would like us to believe and, as the Russian Revolution shows, their negative impact can be divisive. And, of course, the descent of the CGT into reformism and Communist domination may make us question the validity of certain aspects of the CGT’s syndicalism, a topic impossible to cover here.

All in all, this book is worth reading. There is no denying that some of it is dated and inadequate, but it does give the

reader a sense of power and possibility, that we do not have to live like this, that better ways are possible. Equally as important, it gives us a sense of what a libertarian revolution would be like. Their utopia is created and run from below upwards, by the actions and organisations of working class people themselves. It gives, as Kropotkin put it in his preface, the “general idea” of how a social revolution would develop and if that encourages us to apply our libertarian ideas in a similar way today then Pataud and Pouget’s work is still of validity today.