

# Review of Carlo Tresca: Portrait of a Rebel

Anarcho

May 10, 2006

Carlo Tresca is one of those rebel workers whose memory deserves to be honoured and Pernicone's excellent biography does just that. Pernicone's has previously produced an excellent history of the Italian anarchist movement ("**Italian Anarchism: 1864-1892**", Princeton University Press, 1993) and this work is of equal quality and of interest to anarchists. He obviously understands anarchism and writes with sympathy and knowledge about it. Such historians are rare.

Tresca was born to a middle-class family in Italy in the 1879. He soon became a socialist and became active in the Italian Railroad Workers' Federation before emigrating to America at the age of 25. Once there he was elected secretary of the Italian Socialist Federation of North America and he took a full part in the class struggle. He switched political sympathies from social democracy to syndicalism as he realised the inherent reformism of the former and the importance of the direct action of the latter. He became associated with the IWW, taking part in strikes of Pennsylvania coal miners before becoming involved in many important (even legendary) industrial disputes. Overtime his syndicalism turned into anarcho-syndicalism and he became one of the leading anarchists in America, particularly in the Italian-American community.

Pernicone paints a picture of a deeply colourful and charismatic figure who played a key role in numerous fights for workers' rights. He was a newspaper editor (editing "Il Martello" – The Hammer – for over 20 years), a passionate and powerful writer, an agitator as well as an organiser. He was happiest in the struggle, taking up any call for his help in encouraging Italian workers to strike and fight. His agitation was legendary, including the victorious strike in Lawrence (1912), the Little Falls, New York textile workers' strike (1912), the New York City hotel workers' strike (1913), the Paterson, New Jersey silk workers' strike (1913), and the Mesabi Range, Minnesota, miners' strike (1916). He also played an important role in the unsuccessful attempt to save Sacco and Vanzetti.

After the First World War, Tresca turned his fire against both fascism and Leninist/Stalinist tyranny. He was an early and passionate opponent of fascism, quickly becoming the leading anti-fascist in America. His activities earned the hatred of Mussolini and his regime as he played a key role (both politically and physically) in stopping the spread of fascism in Italian-American communities (they tried to blow him up in 1926). Pernicone recounts in much detail how willing the "democratic" American state was to help Fascist Italy by trying to expel Tresca. He also recounts how Tresca used to send Mussolini a telegram on the latter's birthday. Before emigrating

to America, the youthful Tresca had meet with Mussolini (then a left-socialist leader) only to be informed that being in America would turn Tresca into a real revolutionary. Tresca's telegram simply reminded Mussolini that he had been right!

Unlike many during that period, Tresca had no illusions in the Soviet Union. He saw how Lenin's regime had crushed the real revolution in Russia and opposed the new "socialist" regime as vigorously as he did fascism. During the 1920s, however, Tresca did try to work with all opponents of fascism, even the communists (Tresca did not doubt the bravery of the rank and file and recognised their willingness to fight fascism). His attempts to build anti-fascist united fronts are recounted in some detail by Pernicone, as is Stalinist attempts to control such bodies. This, along with the Stalinist counter-revolutionary role in the Spanish Revolution, caused Tresca's anti-Leninism to grow during the 1930s until such time as he opposed any form of co-operation with the Stalinists. This earned him their hatred.

Tresca's fight for freedom, equality and solidarity continued right to his assassination at the age of 63. While no one was ever prosecuted for the murder, Pernicone does a good job in evaluating the evidence and conflicting theories (suspects include the Stalinists, the Fascists and the Mafia) before pointing the finger at Mafioso Carmine Galante. Suffice to say, the title of a previous biography of Tresca definitely summed up his life: "**All the right enemies**"!

This biography is the product of over thirty years work and the author clearly admires Tresca. However, this is no whitewash and the book shows the flaws as well as strengths of this untiring and fearless champion of liberty and justice. This is a riveting book and not only brings to life Tresca's only amazing story but brings to life the world of radical politics of the time.

One thing which does strike the reader is how sectarian the anarchist movement was at the time. Tresca was hated by the anti-organisationalist anarchists who followed Luigi Gaellani and they stopped at nothing to smear him (much to the joy of the Fascists in the 1920s and 30s). Letters from Malatesta, Goldman nor Berkman could not stop the personal attacks. It seems strange to see how, today, a similar process is at work with anti-organisationalist anarchists (such as primitivists) indulging in similar attacks. It would be nice to think we could learn some lessons of the past!

In summary, this is a very interesting book and well recommended. Tresca's memory should be honoured by all fighters for freedom today and Pernicone has done both Tresca and our movement a great service in writing this biography of an undeservingly forgotten champion of freedom. May it inspire many more!

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