

The Party of Labour

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Unknown

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The Party of Labour Defined

The Party of Labour is what it says it is, the banding together of the workers into one homogeneous bloc; the autonomous organisation of the working class into an aggregate operating on the terrain of the economy; by virtue of its origins, its essence, it shuns all compromise with bourgeois elements.

The grassroots cell of the Party of Labour is the trade union and it is by the trade unions coming into contact with one another, through their shows of solidarity that the Party of Labour reveals itself, shows itself and acts.

On the one hand, the trade union is affiliated to the national federation of its trade; on the other, to its Departmental Union. The federal agencies of these two in turn federate with each other and out of their union comes the agency that marshals the workers energies and interests: the General Confederation of Labour.

This federalism of overlapping concentric circles is a marvellous amplifier of workers; strength; its component parts reinforce one another and the particular strength of each is magnified by the support of all the rest. On its own, the trade union has no resources or energies other than its own and could operate in a restricted way only; whereas, through its affiliation to the Party of Labour, it can draw upon the considerable powers afforded it, in a ripple effect, by organised solidarity.

This enormous strength — which defies measurement in that it is forever growing — is the result of association on economic terrain. That is the only basis upon which such a thriving organism with nothing to fear from the intrusion of any disorganising factor can be constructed. In fact, since the construction of this coming-together is in the class interests of the proletariat, any attenuation of its demands and revolutionary power is pointless and every attempted deviation doomed in advance to futility.

The Party of Labour is a party of interests. It takes no account of the opinions of its component members: it acknowledges and co-ordinates only the interests — be they material or moral or intellectual — of the working class. Its ranks are open to all of the exploited regardless of their political or religious views.

Yes, the Party of Labour ignores opinions, no matter what they may be! On the other hand, it goes after the exploitation of human beings in whatever form this may assume.

A worker with baroque philosophical or political views — who may be a believer in some God or in the State — will have his place alongside his comrades within the ranks of this party. But what comes in for criticism within this party is the exploitation of theological, political or philosophical creeds; what is reproached is the intrusion of priest or politician, both of whom make a livelihood out of speculating with peoples beliefs.

Within the party, there is a place for all of the exploited, even if many of them (in todays society where there is nothing but absurdity and crime) are obliged to buckle down to pointless or indeed harmful undertakings.

The worker in the arms plant, the builder of warships, etc., are engaged in noxious tasks: they are doubly the victims of bad social organisation since they are not only exploited but must also do their bit towards malfeasant activity. However, their place is still inside the Party of Labour.

By contrast, anyone who is, by virtue of his personal function, a bringer of harm — the informer, say — is to be shunned. Such a person is a parasite of the most revolting type: sprung from the

working class, he has debased himself with the vilest of undertakings: as a result, only in the bourgeois ranks is there any place for him.

Thus the Party of Labour stands apart from all other parties by virtue of this essential fact: that in banding together those who work against those who live from exploitation of human beings, it marshals interests and not opinions. Thus, of necessity, there is a unity of outlook in its ranks. Among the personnel making up the more or less moderate, more or less revolutionary schools of thought, such a unity of outlook is feasible (and exists!); but such differences on the detail neither invalidate nor breach the syndicalist unity that arises from identity of interests. This power to absorb individual differences, under the umbrella of the agreement that necessarily springs from a community of interest, gives the Party of Labour an edge in terms of vitality and action and affords it an immunity from the blights afflicting the political parties.

Inside every party – the Party of Labour excepted – the over-riding objective is “policy”, and on the basis of a similarity of opinions, men of divergent interests – exploiters and exploited (and one must be either one or the other!), are thrown into one another's company. This is a characteristic of all democratic parties. They are, all of them, a motley collection of men whose interests run counter to one another.

Not that this anomaly is peculiar to the bourgeois democratic parties. It also disfigures socialist parties which, once having set foot upon the slippery slopes of parliamentarism, come to jettison the specific characteristics of socialism and become nothing more than democratic parties, albeit of a more accentuated variety.

More and more capitalists, bosses, etc. are being won over to socialism and these reconcile their parasitical existence as best they can with the acting out of their beliefs. One of the things that attracts recruits from the enemy camp is the deviation in the direction of parliamentarism. Whereas they have not quite completely been eliminated, then at least the fact that the theory of taking government power has relegated revolutionary concerns to the background, has whetted some appetites. And these defectors from the bourgeoisie have calculated the benefits of turning socialist and cherish the hope of gaining the upper hand in that way. So much so that there are those who become socialists the way that others become lawyers or publicans. It is regarded as a career move – an excellent way of getting ahead?

The Party of Labour need have no fear of such dangers. By virtue of the very fact that it is constructed upon the class interests of the proletariat and that its action takes place in the sphere on economics, there is no way that individuals can rely upon it or invoke it in the satisfaction of their selfish interests. The contradiction there is formal and insurmountable. Indeed, since the gratification of personal ambition is feasible only in the realm of politics, any who attempt any such chicanery and pursue a selfish private interest within the Party of Labour can accomplish but one thing: their own self-exclusion from the labour camp.

The same phenomenon can be seen when a working man becomes an employer: even though the parvenu may still be motivated by good intentions and cling to his revolutionary aspirations, as a rule he is excluded from collective groupings – his class interests having changed.

The same thing goes for the parvenu in politics: he quickly drops out of trade union activism and, in most cases, once he has achieved his purposes, and risen to the desired elevation, he willingly steps aside and refrains from all activity within the economic organisation.

Now, if individual deviations are incompatible with the organisational make-up of the Party of Labour, it is all the more firmly to be excluded as a possibility that that body as a whole should succumb to a deviation that would be nothing short of its very negation. By virtue of the very

fact that it is constituted upon the class interests of the proletariat, it cannot at any time or in any fashion be a breeding ground for the ambitious.

It cannot turn into a party of politicians. Apart from the fact that that would be lapsing back into past errors which exhausted the working class in futile struggles and in efforts that brought it no benefit (albeit that they were not futile and without benefit for those keen to speed their progress up the ladder!), such a comprehensive deviation would be tantamount to an affirmation that the proletariat, deserting the prey for its shadow, would disdain to win economic and social improvements and be wholly consumed instead by the pursuit of political illusions.

So just as it is unthinkable that the working class should lay aside its interests, it is also unthinkable that the Party of Labour should turn into a democratic party.

Its necessity

The Party of Labour is a direct by-product of capitalist society: it is the concert of proletariat forces, for which the working class logically strives from the moment it wakes up to its interests.

The current society is made up of two classes whose interests run counter to each other: the working class and the bourgeois class: consequently, it is only natural that each of these should rally around its own social pole — the workers around one, the exploiters around the opposite social pole.

The coming-together of the working class makes up the Party of Labour: it, therefore, is the aggregation suited to the form of exploitation, which is why it emerges spontaneously with no preconceived notion governing its co-ordination.

It would be a waste of time for us to dwell upon demonstrating the existence within society of two antagonistic social classes which, far from amalgamating into one homogeneous unit, merely accentuate their differences. That is a fact so patently obvious that we need not labour the point.

This irreconcilable antagonism is the result of the seizure by the ruling class of all of the assets of society — its instruments of labour, property and resources of all sorts. From which it follows that the lower class is obliged, in order to survive, to submit to the conditions foisted upon it by these grasping types.

Such deference to the capitalist by the proletarian who, in return for his labour, receives a wage considerably less than the value of the labour forthcoming from him, the wage-slave, is, the bourgeoisie contends, a natural phenomenon. They even venture to argue that the wage is not subject to change — and are none too bothered in their contentions by the successive disappearances of slavery and serfdom, which ought to caution them against the absurdity of arguing that property (as held by them) alone is the exception to the laws of life which are movement and change. However, even as they contend that the waged — as a class — are doomed to eternal exploitation, they see fit to blind them with the chimera of individual emancipation, dazzling their victims with the possibility of escaping wage slavery and taking their place in the ranks of the capitalist class.

Aside from the fact that as far as the bourgeoisie is concerned such hopes have the merit of inducing the exploited to bear their misfortune with patience, they neutralise or at any rate slow down the growth of class consciousness among the proletariat.

The education and training bestowed upon younger generations have no other purpose: those generations are subjected to a method of intellectual castration based upon rehearsal of preju-

dices, peppered with preaching about resignation, as well as incitements to unrestrained self-seeking.

The argument is that in the present society, everyone has the bed he has made for himself and the place he deserves: that, if one is to make it one has to be an honest, sober, intelligent worker and so on. What is not said, although it is implied, is that to these qualities, one more must be added: one must be devoid of scruples and elbow ones way ahead without regard to ones fellows.

In the bourgeois view, life is an ongoing struggle of human against human; society is an arena where each is the enemy of all.

Distracted by such sophistry, the proletarian at first dreams of individually breaking free of wage slavery. Since work underpins everything and since wealth is there for the taking for those who display order and perseverance, he will make his fortune! Moreover, in his view, wealth is only the achievement of independence and freedom and the assurance of well-being. But alas! He must discard his dreams. Reality requires it and he has to admit that it is materially impossible for the workers to attain the yearned for relief. Before he could achieve individual emancipation, he would have to own his instruments of labour and the wherewithal to set them in motion. Now, modern production, being formidably industrialised, requires such considerable capital outlay that a worker would have to be mad to imagine that he might set aside, out of his wages, the capital he requires to acquire a factory.

To be sure, some proletarians do step out from their class: thanks to exceptionally favourable circumstances, some powerful personalities without scruples as to choice of method do manage to inch their way into the bourgeoisie. There are even some cases of men who started out as workers (Carnegie, Rockefeller, etc.) turning into the kings of wealth.

The bourgeoisie has taken these upstarts to its bosom. It is all the more pleased to welcome them aboard because, by introducing an injection of new blood, they consolidate its privileges: moreover, it parades them by way of unanswerable arguments to show that it is easy for parsimonious working men to become bourgeois.

It would be naive of the workers to let themselves be tempted by this bait and to content themselves with hopes of just such an eventuality. That would be tantamount to letting themselves be lulled by the same song as the shepherdesses of legend who dreamed of a Prince Charming showing up to ask for their hand in marriage.

And then what? Even if it were true that the most gifted members of the proletariat can make their fortune, the situation of the mass of them would not have altered: the workers would carry on slaving for their exploiters, grazing materially and spiritually, with no prospect to look forward to but the repose of the grave.

Thus the individuals escape from wage slavery, which anyway means that those who make it are obliged to exploit their class brothers, offers no remedy to the social ills afflicting the proletariat. Such escapes can only occur on a small scale and all that they imply is a few adjustments to a few individual situations, having no impact upon the fate of the workers as a whole, who carry on slaving for the benefit of the masters and rulers.

Furthermore, even were the numbers achieving comparative ease, indeed wealth, larger, that would do nothing to erase the antagonism that pits the producer class against the parasite class. For as long as social relations remain as they are — the relation of employer to wage slave, of ruler to ruled — the problem will remain and class struggle will be an inevitable phenomenon.

Even if we were to suppose that the moans of the masses crushed and broken on the social battle-field were to trouble the peace of mind of the smug and those who, out of a spirit of charity

or guile, may deign to cater for the material lives of the exploited, amalgamation of the classes would not be the outcome of such intervention and society would not be pacified by that remedy.

It has often been said: "Man does not live by bread alone!" Which is why the social question is not just a material problem. For us to be happy and content, it is not enough that we should be assured of our "crust": we also want to be free of all impediment and all domination: we want to be free, to be beholden to none and to have no relations with our neighbours other than those founded on equality, regardless of the differences in our abilities, expertise and functions.

The point therefore is to work a change in the structure of society so that henceforth there is only one category, one class possible: that of the producers. Such essential change can only be wrought on the basis of communism — communism alone being able to guarantee that every individual enjoys complete autonomy and unfettered scope for development.

Once upon a time, before big industry drove the artisan from his tiny workshop — and stripped him off the instrument of his labours — the working man had some prospect of carving out a rough, but independent existence for himself. Today, in industry, such a dream is feasible only in exceptional cases.

Even now in the countryside the peasant can hope to carve out a comparatively free existence upon a tract of land. However, such liberation is tending to become more and more fraught with difficulties (and in most cases very precarious) because of the confiscation of the land by the rich, because of the escalating taxes and the rapaciousness of the middlemen. And anyway, the peasants liberation is accompanied by such worries! He lives in constant terror of the tax collector, the money-lender and leads a joyless, crushingly bleak existence slaving like an ox.

Such autonomy of peasant and artisan, gained at huge effort, is a particularly illusory emancipation in that both are beholden to capitalism and their earnings are modest, in comparison with the amount of toil required of them. They are societys hybrids who do not quite fit the description bourgeois, nor are they wage-slaves: they are a hang-over from the artisanate and the peasantry: although not readily classifiable, their interests and those of the working class are the very same. At present, though, they can be taken to task for preferring their own fate to that of the wage slave: except that they ought to be saying to themselves that their living conditions are a hang-over from the past and that it is in their interest to lend a hand in the coming social change: indeed, they have much to gain from offering no resistance to the Revolution, and instead playing a part in its success and adapting to the new modes of production and distribution.

So we can see how illusory is the bait of individual emancipation held out by the bourgeoisie: of the several methods of personal escape from wage slavery hypothetically on offer, none is liable to be widely taken up and thus cannot be embraced by the workers at large as a remedy to their sad lot, for none is likely to provide for a free and comfortable existence for all.

So, if this dream of individual escape from wage slavery has been peddled by the bourgeoisie, it is because the bourgeoisie has seen it as a siding that can stop the working class from attaining class consciousness. By stimulating appetites and over-stimulating selfish ambitions, it has counted upon keeping the proletariat divided against itself indefinitely so that with each individuals head filled with thoughts of nothing but the scramble to get ahead, his only concern will be with climbing on his comrades backs, which will act as a brake upon the spirit of revolt and nullify innate tendencies towards solidarity.

But the human being could not resign himself fatalistically to perpetual slavery: the seeds of discord and hatred which the bourgeoisie look forward to seeing sprout from the Peoples hearts so that its own security can be assured are a weed, the spread of which cannot forever strangle

the growth of instincts of sociability, for life through agreement is every bit as crucial to the survival of human society as the ferocious struggle to survive is dear to the exploiters.

Consequently, in spite of the sophistry and the falsehoods with which its head is filled, it was inevitable that the proletariat should attain consciousness of its class interests, especially as the merest flickering glimmer of reason had to open its eyes to the fact that societys afflictions are not inescapable.

Why these striking, revolting inequalities? How come there are wretches who want for their daily bread when there are some who cannot think up ways of squandering their surplus? How come men are paid only inadequate wages for hellish toil when there are parasites wallowing in comfort and luxury?

What is the reason for it all? Is agricultural and industrial output not up to meeting everyones needs?

No! In the course of his active life, any man devoting himself to useful toil produces more than he needs to match what he consumes (in food, clothing, accommodation, etc.), and then some; over that time he produces as well enough to reimburse the community for the advances it has made to him to rear him to manhood and he also produces enough to ensure that he has the wherewithal to live when, overtaken by old age, he will not be able to work any longer.

Now, if the existence of every single person is not guaranteed, for the present as well as for the future, out of this fund of intense personal productivity, the reason is that this wealth is not being used to guarantee the upkeep of those with a natural entitlement but is diverted by the capitalist class away from its social destination and mainly turned to its own benefit.

That the level of agricultural and industrial productivity is high enough for everyones needs to be met is now incontrovertible.

In industrial terms, production potential is, thanks to the tremendous improvement in tools, well nigh unlimited: so true is this that in spite of the prudence of industrialists who each try to tailor their workers output to the commercial demands of the market, there often is a glut in the shape of over-production. Those hardest hit in such circumstances are the workers: it is they who suffer the painful consequences of such crises, because, in order to restore the balance, the exploiters cannot think of any better solution than to slow down production, which leads to unemployment and leads to even greater wretchedness for the working class.

On the agricultural scene, the picture is equally sombre: the object of farming is not to reap mammoth harvests and thereby create food in great abundance: the object of farming is to sell at a profit. Now since sale prices slump in years when the harvest has been good, whereas man-power tends to become more expensive, farmers would rather a passable than an abundant harvest, the former being more easily and more profitably disposed of.

So here we have the general position: abundance of produce of all sorts is dreaded rather than desired and there is a tendency to keep the supply low so that it can be sold dear. The needs of the mass of humanity never figure among the preoccupations of the capitalists who preside over production: we have the monstrous spectacle of entire peoples bereft of the means of survival – and all too often literally perishing of hunger – when there is an adequate supply of food, clothing and accommodation available.

Such a glaring iniquity is condemnation enough, without further arguments being required, of the social organisation that engenders it. It is utterly necessary that this monstrous system of distribution that vests almost everything in an exploitative, parasitical ruling minority, most of whom have little or no hand in wealth creation, should be overthrown. Now, given the the

extent of industrial and scientific development, such a solution seems practicable only thanks to a fundamental transformation: the system of exploitation that marshals human resources in order to set them to producing for the benefit of the confiscator of natural resources and instruments of labour must be replaced by a system of solidarity taking natural resources and the instruments of labour into common ownership and setting them to work for the benefit of all.

This change is an ineluctable necessity and its advent is hastened as the working class acquires a better understanding of its class interests. But this task of reorganising society can only be carried out and brought off in a context purged of all bourgeois contamination. This function of acting as midwife to the new society thus falls legitimately upon the shoulders of the Party of Labour, the sole agency which, by virtue of its very make-up, excludes all of the dross of society from its ranks.

Consequently, the marshalling of the working class into a bloc separate from all the parties – and with appropriate tactics and methodologies of its very own – is no flash in the pan; it is an inherent requirement of the present context, for only in such a party – which implies perfect homogeneity and utter identity of interests – can it feel utterly at home.

Anywhere else, any other grouping is open to infiltration by elements of the propertied class and the ambitions of individuals can have noxious implications. Which is why none of them can boast the unity of outlook, action and aim that are automatically attributes of the party of the proletariat class: which is why none is so plainly qualified to prosecute and accomplish the task of social revolution, expropriation and reorganisation.

Its Aim

The Party of Labour is the party of the future. In the harmonious society whose day is coming, there will be no place for anyone but Labour: parasites of every sort will of necessity be eliminated from it. So it is only natural that the Party of Labour, the crucible in which the social combinations of yearned for tomorrows are made, stands outside of all the existing parties. This is especially unremarkable since it stands apart from them by virtue not only of its form of cohesion, but also in terms of the aim it pursues and the methodologies it advocates and practises.

Whilst other parties have as their objective the retention or removal of the government line-up – according as they reckon that it is, or ought to be favourable to their own appetites, their ambitions or quite simply to their cronies – the Party of Labour ignores this outward and quite superficial business and sets its cap at working an internal and external change in the elements of society; it labours to change mind-sets, forms of association and economic relationships.

The goal it pursues is thoroughgoing emancipation of the workers. Espousing as its own the watchword of the International Working Mens Association, of which it is the logical heir, it takes it as inevitable that that emancipation will be the working class own doing, without meddling by outside or heterogeneous elements. It is obvious that, if it is not to be a mirage, that emancipation will have to imply the elimination of the bourgeois class and the utter demolition of its privileges.

Which is to say that the Party of Labour aims at a radical transformation of the social system.

Examination of economic phenomena demonstrates that that transformation must be achieved through neutralisation of private property and the burgeoning of a communist arrangement, so that the current relations between individuals – the relations of wage-slave to capitalist, of led to leader – may be turned into relations of equality and liberty.

In fact, there will be no thoroughgoing emancipation unless exploiters and leaders disappear from the scene and tabula rasa made of all capitalist and state institutions. Such an undertaking cannot be effected peaceably, much less lawfully! History teaches that the privileged have never surrendered their privileges without having been compelled so to do and forced into it by their rebellious victims. It is unlikely that the bourgeoisie is blessed with an exceptional greatness of soul and will abdicate voluntarily...Recourse to force, which, as Karl Marx has said, is “the mid-wife to societies”, will be required.

So the Party of Labour is a party of Revolution.

Except that it does not regard the Revolution as a future cataclysm for which we must wait patiently to see emerging from the inevitable working-out of events. Such pious awaiting of the final catastrophe would be nothing more than transposition to and continuation upon materialist ground, of the old millenarian dreams.

The Revolution is an undertaking for all times, for today as well as tomorrow: it is continual action, a daily battling without let-up or respite, against the forces of oppression and exploitation. A rebel embarked upon a revolutionary act is one who, repudiating the legitimacy of present society, works to undermine it.

It is to this unrelenting task of Revolution that the workers in their trade unions are committed. They regard themselves as being in ongoing insurrection against capitalist society and, within its bosom, they are hatching and developing the embryo of the society wherein Labour will be All.

However, in spite of this consistently subversive stance, they are prey to the requirements of bourgeois rule: but, whilst deferring to the needs of the present, they do not conform to the forms of legality and do not bless it with their acquiescence, even when it decks itself out with reforming colours. Their revolutionary efforts are designed to wrest partial improvements from the bourgeoisie, improvements that they never mistake for definitive. Thus, whatever the improvement they gain, and however significant it may seem, they always declare it to be inadequate and, as soon as they have the measure of their strength, they waste no time before demanding more.

There is another advantage to these struggles which are forever being relaunched in ongoing harrying of the exploiters, quite apart from the fact that they undermine and dismantle capitalist institutions, and that they blood and strengthen the working class.

It is this posture of ongoing insurrection against definitive conformity with existing conditions that marks the revolutionary character of the Party of Labour.

It is a mistake to imagine that violence is always characteristic of a revolutionary act: such an act can also assume a very moderate shape displaying nothing of the destructive brutality which our adversaries point to as the essential feature of revolutionism.

Indeed, it should not be forgotten that in most circumstances the act in itself has no definite character: it acquires one only as the motives that prompted it are subjected to analysis. Which is why the same acts can, according to the case in point, be declared good or bad, just or unjust, revolutionary or reformist. For instance: killing a man on the corner of the boulevard is a crime: killing him using a guillotine is, from the bourgeois point of view, an act of justice: killing a despot is an act glorified by some and despised by others.. And yet these various acts are in fact the same: a human life is ended!

It follows therefore that the revolutionism of the working class can manifest itself in very anodyne actions just as its reformist mentality might be underlined by unduly violent acts. This,

moreover, is what we can see in the United States: strikes there are often marked by acts of violence (renegades executed, dynamite outrages, etc.) which are not indicative of a revolutionary frame of mind, in that the object the strikers have in mind is restricted to improvements that pose no challenge to the principle of exploitation: the current society looks bearable to them and doing away with wage slavery does not enter their minds.

As a result, the index of the Party of Labours revolutionary character is that, without ever neglecting to fight for minor improvements, it aims at the transformation of capitalist society into a harmonious society.

Improvements, secured on a day to day basis, are thus merely stages along the road to human emancipation: the immediate material advantages they bring are matched by a considerable moral benefit: they bolster the working classs ardour, stimulate its desire for betterment and prompt it to press for more significant change.

The only thing is that it would be the most dangerous of illusions to confine trade union action to the securing of partial improvements: that would be to slide into a morbid reformism. Important though such improvements may be, they are not enough: they are merely a partial claw-back of the bourgeoisies privileges: as a result, they do not tinker with the relations between Labour and Capital. No matter how splendid these improvements might be imagined to be, they leave the worker still under the rule of wage-slavery: he is just as dependent upon his Master as ever! Now what the working class needs is complete liberation: which means wholesale expropriation of the bourgeoisie.

That decisive act, the culmination of preceding struggles, implies utter ruination for privilege, and, whereas the preceding struggles may have been pursued peacefully, it is unimaginable that the ultimate clash will come to pass without some revolutionary conflagration.

Historical Summary

The Party of Labour finds organisational expression in the General Confederation of Labour (CGT) which was launched in Limoges at the trade union congress held there in 1895. But if we wish to investigate its gestation and lineage, we must look a lot further back in time: there is a direct line showing the Party of Labour to be an emanation of the International Working Mens Association, of which it is the historical continuation.

Throughout the 19th century, the workers fought with indefatigable tenacity to break through the impediments imposed by the bourgeoisie upon their wishes to band together: instinctively, they set up class groupings (embryonic, naturally), under cover of mutual associations or in the shape of resistance societies. When at last the International Working Mens Association was established, a tremor of hope ran through the proletariat: its aspirations, hitherto ill-defined, acquired substance and the future struck it as a less bleak prospect.

In fact, in its “givens”, the International framed the programme of the Party of Labour: it declared:

“That the emancipation of the workers must be the workers own doing (...)”

“That the subjection of the worker to capital is the source of all servitude: political, moral and material.”

“That, on that basis, economic emancipation is the great goal to which all political movement must be SUBORDINATE.”

“That all efforts to date have failed, for want of solidarity between the workers of various trades within each country and of a fraternal union between the workers of various countries.”

There is a formal linkage of theory and tactics: the only differentiation made is in the mode of association, which is henceforth to be the interest group — the trade union — whilst within the International, general agreement was established through the affinity group — the branch — into which motley elements poured. It has to be pointed out, though, that this difference in the mode of association was something of a consequence of the conditions in which the social struggle was conducted under the Second Empire: so it would be incorrect to see it as a derogation from the principle of class struggle, especially as the “givens” cited above are indicative of the importance that the internationalists gave to trade association.

But it was not long before two camps emerged within the ranks of the International: on one side, the centralists, the authoritarians, including Karl Marx who, in accordance with the formula devised by his disciple Eccarius, called for “the conquest of political power in order to pass laws for the benefit of the workers”: and, on the other, the federalists or autonomists loyal to the spirit of the International who fought against this tendency “in the name of the social revolution we espouse, whose programme is: emancipation of the workers by the workers themselves, outside of any directing authority, even should said authority be elected and agreed by the workers.”

And the autonomists went on to add: “The society of the future should be nothing more than the Internationals universalisation. So we ought to take care to match that organisation as closely as possible to our ideals. How could one expect an egalitarian, free society to emerge from an authoritarian organisation? That would be an impossibility. It behoves the International, as the embryo of the human society of the future, to be, from this moment forth, the faithful reflection of our principles of freedom and federation and to cast out any principle leaning towards authority and dictatorship.”

The Party of Labour espouses these principles of autonomy and federalism as its own.

Trade union recovery

In the wake of the events of 1870–1871, following the ghastly massacres that followed the crushing of the Commune, the bourgeoisie, drunk on the bloodshed, reckoned that it had purged the working class for good of any inclination to press its claims. It forgot that the spirit of revolt is a by-product of a bad social milieu and not the result of subversive preaching and that it would inevitably return as long as the context remained likely to favour its development.

By the final years of the reign of Napoleon III, the trade unions had grown so much that they dared to organise themselves into a Federation and, although that rudimentary agency bound together only the Parisian unions, its propaganda activity and solidarity activity reached out into the provinces. These federated unions were simultaneously affiliated to the International: they took a hand in uprisings and, after the storm had passed, those which had not foundered utterly had to hold their tongues.

In 1872, a fore-runner of yellow unionism, Barberet thought that the time had come — with the revolutionaries crushed or scattered — to federate what few unions were left and steer them along the paths of righteousness. Twenty five unions answered his call, but the moral order was in such a fright about workers organisations that it banned the Cercle de l'Union syndicale. Whilst

no direct measures were taken against the unions, their isolation and weakness was a comfort to the government: they carried on existing on the fringes of the Code, merely tolerated.

Between then and 1876 trade union activity showed itself in delegations to the Expositions in Vienne (1873) and Philadelphia (1876), which delegations created temporary liaison between the various groups, but, reactionary though it may have been, they could scarcely have caused the government a second thought.

Growing bolder, the plan emerged for a labour congress: it met in Paris in 1876 and delegates from 70 Parisian unions and from 37 towns (with mandates from one or more trades associations) took part in it. The figures give some clue as to the growing vigour of the trade union movement: one year earlier, in 1875, figures rather higher than the real ones placed the number of existing unions at 35 in Paris and provinces alike, manifest proof that the workers did not wait for the licence granted under the 1884 legislation before setting up their unions. The 1884 law merely registered a *fait accompli*: the bourgeoisie, unable to thwart the rise of the trade unions, put a brave face on things by granting them legal recognition.

At the first congress in 1874 Barberet had pontificated: however, objections were voiced to his presence and from then on, it was made plain that authentic labour organisations jealous of their dignity and autonomy would never condescend to allow themselves to be tamed.

At that time, the demarcation lines between political organisations and trades associations were blurred: social studies groups and trade unions engaged in joint propaganda, took part in workers congresses, etc. and did so all the more agreeably for political concerns being relegated to the background. The movement was plainly anti-parliamentary: all of the revolutionaries joined forces to see off the barberettiste menace.

That danger averted – it was warded off once and for all at the Marseille congress (1879) and the Le Havre congress (1880) – a number of schools of thought surfaced. For a start there was the division between the anti-statists, steadfast advocates of anti-parliamentarism (the anarchists) and those who, with the seal of approval, of Karl Marx after he put his “Minimum Programme into circulation, laid claim to the designation of collectivists and leapt into the parliamentary arena, hypnotised by the hope of capturing power. There was a rational basis to that first split, in that it arose from divergent outlooks. It became apparent that personnel who made everything secondary to capturing public office and those who still staked all their hopes upon revolutionary action could no longer travel the same road.

But if that split was explicable in terms of a difference of principle, the same cannot be said of the splits that came after: they were simply the consequences of regrettable but inevitable electoral competition. The desire quickly to capture a majority of votes cast led to a watering-down of the programme: the diehards, faithful to the “Minimum Programme”, were called Guesdists, after their leader Jules Guesde, and they hung the label of Possibilists on those who were more inclined to follow Paul Brousse and Joffrin.

It was the Saint-Etienne congress in 1882 that their paths separated: the Guesdists found themselves outnumbered there and after some stormy proceedings they withdrew to hold a congress in Roanne.

A few years on, in 1890, a further split added to the dispersion of worker elements: this split hit the Possibilist ranks at the Chatellerault congress: the moderates turned into followers of Brousse (Broussists) whereas the revolutionaries whose sympathies lay with Allemane were described as Allemanists.

These internecine squabbles had a particularly damaging effect because the trade union groupings were an integral part of the various feuding factions and, quite naturally, professed to belong to this faction or the other, in line with the preferences of the militants by whom they were headed. This state of affairs led to an understandable weakening of the trade unions: the more or less conscious workers were too inclined to keep them at arms length — as were those who looked to a faction other than the one that held sway within their own trade association. Trades organisations, neutered by political jockeying, were thus reduced to having scarcely any more influence than the social studies groups with whom they rubbed shoulders when workers congresses were held.

Towards autonomy

One can only be wrong-footed for a certain length of time. The trade unions gained strength. Being the essential coming-together, they are too necessary a thing for the political jockeying acted out within their ranks to do any radical damage.

The unions grew and, as they grew, becoming conscious of their *raison d'être* and the mission that has fallen to them, they dreamed of wriggling free of political tutelage. The first sign of this was the organisation of a congress that met in Lyon in 1886. Participation was open only to trade union delegates: the main issue posed was the creation of a Federation to liaise between the unions.

The government believed that this distancing of the unions from irksome, discordant political concerns was going to serve its own plans for domesticating the workers and, in the hope of a resurgence of *barberettisme*, it advanced subsidies for the congress.

How cruelly disappointed it was! Examination of the 1884 law on trades unions was the touchstone issue at the congress. This law, only recently implemented, was gone over with a fine-tooth comb. It was established that the unions had not at all waited for its promulgation before expanding and that its only justification was a capitalist desire for self-preservation and an ulterior notion that the trades union movement might prove susceptible to be channelled through it.

Then it was decided that a nationwide Federation of trade unions should be launched to marshal trades bodies on a class struggle basis against the powerful organisation of the bourgeoisie, for the purposes of offence and defence.

But, considerable though they were, the ravages of politics were not yet, in everyone's mind, sufficiently plain for any thought to be given to preventive action against their repetition. No prophylactic steps were taken and so the trade union Party which tended to make its stand outside of the various schools of socialism continued to come under fire from that quarter and the trade unions remained in thrall to those schools. However, in spite of the climate of the Federation of trade unions being still heavy with the miasma of politics, the thinking peculiar to syndicalism was hatching and gathering weight there. Thus, at its third congress, held in Bordeaux in 1888, the principle of the general strike was passed: another motion, also passed, committed "the workers to separate from the politicians.. and to organise trades councils on a firm footing (these) alone will make up the great army of social demands." Again the following congress (Calais, 1890) enjoined the workers, as of 1 May 1891, to "report to the factory as normal and then to walk out, after eight hours on the premises, whether the boss likes it or not."

These trends in economic action were to grow, in spite of the opposition mounted by the socialist (Guesdist) school of thought which at that time was in the majority in the trade union Federation: this can be seen plainly at the congress of Marseilles in 1892: in spite of the pressure from the Guesdists, the efficacy of the general strike was again affirmed and the futility of seeking public position proclaimed.

One blemish — a product of the preeminence afforded by the trade union Federation to political concerns — ruled out adaptation of that organisation to the needs of syndicalism which were becoming plainer and plainer. It was a body connecting the trade unions only singly, so that they remained isolated within the umbrella group (which was a federation in name only) and it neglected to establish between these single unions the links that were essential at local level as well as within each trade. Now, since “the function creates the agency”, it was inevitable that a grouping suited to the unions needs would be launched.

The Bourses du travail were already in existence, coordinating the trade union forces at local level: trades federations too were already in existence, linking the unions within the same trade right across France. But these agencies were, if not isolated from one another, then at least without regular contact with one another.

In 1892 the establishment of the Federation of Bourses du Travail went half-way to meeting the unions requirements: although it grouped only the Bourses du Travail or Local General Trades Unions, it quickly gained considerable influence. This was because it addressed the aspirations to economic union and turned a blind eye to political opinions. These trends towards economic cohesiveness surfaced at the trade union congress sponsored by the Federation of Bourses and held in Paris in July 1893. The resolution below which was adopted there posed once and for all and with clarity the fundamental status of class agency that the General Confederation of Labour (CGT) would turn out to be:

“All labour unions must, with all possible urgency:

1) Affiliate to their trade Federation or, should none exist, launch one: band together into a Local Federation or Bourse du Travail, whereupon these Federations and Bourses du Travail ought to set themselves up as National Federations:

2) The National Trades Federations, once in place, will have to come to some accommodation with the Federations abroad and establish International Federations. ”

In an effort at conciliation, the congress expressed the wish that the Federation of Bourses du Travail and the Federation of trade unions might amalgamate into a single organisation. Such an amalgamation was to be attempted at the Nantes congress in 1894: but instead of the rapprochement that was aimed at, there was a definitive split. It could scarcely have been otherwise: the outlook of the tendencies present made the falling-out predicable. The issue of the general strike was the touchstone: a wide-ranging debate proved the theoretical and tactical irreconcilability between political-parliamentary action and economic action: the vote that endorsed the latter gave the victory to those who went on to become the syndicalists: 67 votes were cast in favour of the general strike and 37 against.

That spelled the end for the trade union Federation and the congress realised that, so much so that it decided that a National Labour Council would be launched. It vegetated for a year, up until the Limoges congress in 1895.

Economic take-off

The falling-out at the Nantes congress went considerably further than merely severance from the political elements: it involved a final breach with the capitalist regime. The working class was to create its own autonomous agencies which, for the time being, would be combat organisations and, in the future, would garner enough revolutionary strength to stand up to the bourgeoisies political and administrative institutions and to destroy them or take them over as the need might be.

At the Limoges congress the launching of the General Confederation of Labour (CGT) did not proceed without some resistance. Article one of the confederations charter laid down the principle that was to breathe life into trade union associations: the personnel making up the Confederation must stand outside of all schools of politics. This triggered heated arguments. In spite of everything, it was passed by a huge majority: out of 150 votes cast, 124 were in favour and only 14 opposed.

Those arguing for pride of place to be given to political actions moved that only the Confederation as such was obliged to keep out of politics: as for the component unions, it would be up to them to make their own decision. This argument was rejected. In practice, though, all too often, this was the principle that was adopted. The congress had laid down guidelines, but no one could – and no one tried to – enforce obedience through authority. This itself was an indication of the consciousness of the workers.

The important thing was to affirm the necessity for organising on the economic terrain and eliminating all preoccupation with politics. As for the germination and development of this principle, that was left to the passage of time and to the initiative of the militants.

Over the following five years, the CGT remained stalled at the embryonic stage. Its activities were virtually nil and most of its time was spent on underlining a regrettable antagonism that had developed between itself and the Federation of Bourses du Travail. This latter organisation, which was at that time autonomous, was a rallying point for all of the revolutionary activity of the trade unions, whilst the CGT (which by this point was only an umbrella for the trades Federations) was in a state of vegetation.

Over this period of time, the Confederation took its lead and its guidance from elements which have since tended to be labelled as reformist. Since the politicians were unable to take the organisation over, they looked down their noses at it: some of their disciples were part of the majority within it, however, but, irritated by the congress of Limogess decision, they were unable to engage in proper politicking and, lacking any real belief in the value of economic action, they did not to encourage development of the Confederation.

It was only following the trades congress held in Paris in 1900, when the Confederations own mouthpiece (*La Voix du peuple*) was launched and when revolutionary elements flooded into and gained the upper hand within the Confederation, that under this dual stimulation, that body graduated from its larval stage.

From then on, it never looked back. In 1900, at the opening of the Paris congress, it embraced only 16 national federations and 5 different organisations: by September 1904, and the opening of the Bourges congress, it embraced 53 trades federations or national unions, plus fifteen single unions. Moreover, under the sway of revolutionary elements, a sort of moral unity was created between the Federation of Bourses du Travail and the CGT, and this was vital for the struggle and was a prelude to what has since been termed “labour unity”. The Montpellier congress in 1902

proclaimed the need for just such unity and made it a reality by knitting together the Federation of Bourses du Travail and the Federation of national trades federations (which is what the CGT had amounted to up until then).

And so, nine years on, the motion passed by the trade union congress held in Paris in 1893 was fleshed out, organisationally.

Since the Montpellier congress, the General Confederation of Labour (CGT), the organisational structure of which seems to have settled .. with only a few minor adjustments, as the need arises — has expanded normally: from then on it was a force with which bourgeois society had to reckon: it made its stand against capital and the State, determined not merely to render them less harmful but to lay the groundwork for and encompass their final ruination.

In the brief historical survey above, we have seen trades associations banding together to establish an organism genuinely free of all tutelage and tailored to the revolutionary task at which they work. Such a panoramic overview is more revealing about the power of the Party of Labour than doctrinal affirmations and shows that the economic approach of the unions is no fleeting phase but rather the logical outcome of the development of worker consciousness.

The new partys programme is concise: article one of the Confederations statutes offers a summary of them:

The CGT embraces — outside of all of the schools of politics — all workers cognizant of the struggle to be waged for the elimination of wage-slavery and the employer class. That brief statement of principle encapsulates the entire essence of syndicalist doctrine: it is the very definition of it. As for the other articles of the CGT statutes, they mirror the moment and are thus subject to amendment just as they would be in any living organism. They are not to be taken as a prerequisite framework, but rather as the labouring masses form of cohesion, the form best suited to the demands of the current struggle. The Party of Labour does not owe its power to its statutory framework: its strength arises from the individuals who are its component parts and from the intensity of the spirit of rebellion by which they are driven.

What sets syndicalism apart from the various schools of socialism — and makes it superior — is its doctrinal sobriety. Inside the unions, there is little philosophising. They do better than that: they act! There, on the no mans land of economic terrain, personnel who join, imbued with the teachings of some (philosophical, political, religious, etc.) school of thought or another, have their rough edges knocked off until they are left only with the principles to which they all subscribe: the yearning for improvement and comprehensive emancipation. Which is why — without erecting any doctrinal barriers, and without formulating any credo — syndicalism looms as the quintessential practice of the various social doctrines.

For it is not in theory only that the Party of Labour has a profile of its own: its tactics and methodology are peculiar to itself and, far from drawing inspiration from the democratic idea, they are the negation thereof. But tactics and methodology are so natural that the workers, even those most imbued with democratism, once they enter the trades organisations, are subjected to the influence of their surroundings and act just like all their colleagues do, as syndicalists.

The modalities of syndicalist action are not the expression of the consent of the majority manifesting itself through the empirical procedures of universal suffrage: they draw their inspiration from the means by which, in nature, life in its many forms and aspects manifests itself and develops. Just the way that life appears first at one point, in one cell: just as, with the passage of time, there is always one cell that is the agent of ferment and change; so, in a syndicalist context, the first move comes from the conscious minorities who, through their example, their thrust rather

than through authoritarian injunctions) draw the most frigid masses into their orbit and sweep them into action.

This tactical approach is Direct Action in action! From it flow all of the modes of trade union action. Strikes, boycotts, sabotage, etc., are all merely translations of Direct Action.

Appendix

THE CONFEDERAL ORGANISM — The network of the confederal organisation that binds the unions one to another is as straightforward as can be, given the demands of propaganda and of the struggle with which they have to contend.

The CGT is made up of two sections: that of the trades Federations and that of the Bourses du Travail.

Through affiliation to the Bourse du Travail (or Local Union of trade unions) the various trades unions gain a facility of propaganda within a city or specific region: this is a task that they would find difficult, if not impossible, to tackle if they were to slide into a pernicious isolation. That mainly educational undertaking consists of establishing new unions and of honing the consciousness of the unionised so as to draw the largest possible numbers of workers into the trade union orbit. To this end the Bourse sets up reading rooms and lays on classes, helps with anti-militarist propaganda by welcoming young barracked troops under its wing, offering legal advice, etc.

Affiliation to the national trade Federation addresses, rather, the need for combativeness and resistance. These Federations are an umbrella for the unions belonging to the same trade or industry and they encompass the whole of France, which makes them energetic fighting associations: should a dispute arise anywhere, the solidarity of the masses is mobilised to defeat the employers. Thus, the strength of a given union is magnified by moral and material backing from its federated unions right across France.

The only thing was that if the Bourses du Travail remained isolated one from another and if the trades Federations did likewise, the cohesiveness of labour, stopping at the mid-way mark, could never attain a generalised strength, given that the local bodies would not be able to reach beyond the boundaries of their own regions and the national bodies would not see any further than the boundaries of their own trades. In order to attain to a greater power, these several bodies federated with one another, in accordance with their natures: the trades Federations with trades Federations and the Bourses du Travail with other Bourses du Travail.

It was at this level of the trade union organism that the General Confederation of Labour (CGT) arose: it comprises both sections — the section made up of trades Federations and that made up of the Bourses du Travail. Each of these federal wings is topped by a Committee made up of delegates from each affiliated organisation: these delegates are subject to recall at all times: as a result, they remain in ongoing liaison with the association from which they receive their mandate, which is at liberty to replace them at any time.

The Federations wing and the federated Bourses du Travail wing are each autonomous bodies.

Finally, at the last level we have the National Confederal Council: it is made up of a coming-together of the delegates from both wings, and within its remit fall general propaganda matters of relevance to the working class as a whole. Thus, to cite some examples of the tasks that fall within its remit, we need only note that the campaign agitating against the placement bureaux

and the eight hour day agitation campaign were taken in hand by special commissions appointed by it to do the needful.

Such, in broad outline, is the confederal organism: it is not a leadership body but a body that co-ordinates and amplifies the working class revolutionary activity: it is therefore the very opposite of the democratic agencies which, by dint of their centralisation and authoritarianism, stifle the vitality of their component parts. Inside the CGT, there is cohesion but not leadership: federalism prevails throughout: at every level, the various bodies — from the individual, through the trade union, the Federation or the Bourse du Travail, up as far as the confederal wings — are all autonomous. Herein lies the secret of the CGT powers of projection: the initiative comes, not from the top down, but from anywhere and the vibrations of it are passed on by means of a ripple effect through the masses of the Confederation.

CONGRESSES. — Every two years, the CGT organises a national congress with the participation only of delegates from its affiliated trade unions. The Congress is the equivalent of what the general assembly would be at the level of the trade union: thanks to these meetings, trade union members are brought into contact with one another and a useful fermentation follows: currents of opinion emerge and guide-lines are defined.

International solidarity. — The activity of the Party of Labour is not confined within artificial boundaries: most of the trades Federations are affiliated to an international Federation linking the various national organisations and with ramifications everywhere. Moreover, the Confederation is affiliated to the International Trade Union Federation based in Amsterdam, which keeps the “confederations” around the world in contact with one another. Thus is established and developed a living network which materialises the International Workers Association more firmly than ever.

This quotation, like the next one, is lifted from the Circular issued by the Jura Federation congress held in Sonvilier (Switzerland) on 12 November 1871. The signatories included one Jules Guesde who subsequently ... In return for his attempts at domesticating the workers, Barberet was appointed (sometime around 1880) the mutualist great Manitou at the Interior ministry. At the Paris congress in 1918, an overhaul of the statutes abolished the Federation of Bourses du Travail which was replaced by a section made up of Departmental Unions, as Article 2 of the CGT statutes attests:

Article 2 — The General Confederation of Labour (CGT) is made up of:

1. National industrial Federations
2. The Departmental Unions of the various trade unions

And the make-up of the Confederal Committee was amended as follows:

Article 9 — The National Committee is made up of a coming together of delegates from the Federations and the Departmental Unions. It meets thrice each year, in March, July and November, and, extra-ordinarily, at the invitation of the Steering Commission and the Bureau.

It is the executor of decisions made by national congresses. It takes a hand in every aspect of worker life and pronounces upon matters of a general order.

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