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Workers Societies

Eugène Varlin

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11th March 1870

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Many of their members are often unconscious at first of the role that these societies are called upon to play in the future; at first they think of only resisting the exploitation of capital or of obtaining some superficial improvements; but soon the hard efforts they have to make to achieve insufficient palliatives or even, sometimes, negative results, easily lead them to seek radical reforms that can free them from capitalist oppression. Then they study social questions and get represented at workers congresses.

The congress of the international association held in Basle last September recommended that all workers should group themselves into resistance societies by trade in order to secure the present and prepare for the future. I propose to make a study of the various forms of corporative workers' societies, and their progressive development, in order to make known to workers who are not yet associated the present advantages which they can gather from their organisation, and to make them benefit from the experience bitterly acquired in these past years by other trade associations.

It is necessary that the new groups get in step with the old ones, for it is only through solidarity, widely understood, by world-wide union of workers of all professions and all countries that we will surely arrive at the suppression of privileges and equality for all.

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It is to this last idea that most workers who in recent years have been energetically pursuing the emancipation of their class tend to rally. It is this which has prevailed in the various congresses of the International Workers Association.

But it should not be believed that such an organisation can be easily improvised in every respect! For this a few intelligent, devoted, energetic men are not enough! Above all, it is necessary that workers, thus called to work together freely and on the basis of equality, should already be prepared for social life.

One of the greatest difficulties that the founders of all kinds of [workers] societies tried for the last few years have encountered is the spirit of individualism, excessively developed in most men and even amongst those who understand that only by association can workers improve living standards, and hope for their liberation.

Well! Workers societies, in whatever form they exist at present, already have this immense advantage of accustoming men to social life, and so preparing them for a wider social organisation. They accustom them not only to reach an agreement and understanding, but also to take care of their affairs, to organise, to discuss, to think about their material and moral interests, and always from the collective point of view since their personal, individual, direct interest disappears as soon as they become part of a collectivity.

Together with the advantages that each of these societies can provide to its members, there is, by this fact, the development of sociability, enough to make them recommended to all citizens who aspire to the advent of socialism.

But trade societies (resistance, solidarity, union) deserve out encouragement and sympathy, for they are the natural elements of the social construction of the future; it is they who can easily become producer associations; it is they who will be able to operate social tools and organise production.

constitutional and oligarchic, as in Belgium or England; autocratic, as in Russia, or personal, as in France since the Empire; it is always authority charged with keeping working people in respect of the law established for the benefit of a few. This authority may be more or less rigid, more or less arbitrary, but this does not change the basis of economic relations, and workers are always at the mercy of the holders of capital.

To be permanent, the next revolution must not stop at a simple change of government etiquette, and some superficial reforms; it must completely liberate the worker from all forms of exploitation, capitalist or political, and establish justice in social relations.

Society can no longer leave the disposition of public wealth to the arbitrariness of the privileges of birth or success: the product of collective labour, it can be used only for the benefit of the collectivity; all members of human society have an equal right to the benefits derived from them.

But this social wealth can ensure the well-being of humanity only on the condition of being put into operation by labour.

If, then, the industrial or commercial capitalist should no longer arbitrarily dispose of collective capital, who then will make them productive for the benefit of all? Who, in a word, will organise the production and distribution of products?

Unless you want to reduce everything to a centralising and authoritarian state, which would appoint the directors of mills, factories, distribution outlets, whose directors would in turn appoint deputy directors, supervisors, foremen, etc. and thus arrive at a top-down hierarchical organisation of labour, in which the worker would be nothing but an unconscious cog, without freedom or initiative; unless we do, we are forced to admit that the workers themselves must have the free disposal of their instruments of labour, under the condition of exchanging their products at cost price, so that there is reciprocity of service between the different specialities of workers.

Precursors of Syndicalism

It is a standard cliché of Marxist attacks on anarchism to contrast “individualistic” anarchism with “collectivist” syndicalism. The former are backward looking, reactionary and beyond the pale while the latter are almost Marxist, and so worthy of faint praise. Another, also wrong, cliché has wider acceptance, namely that syndicalism arose in France during the 1890s in response to the failure of “propaganda of the deed.”

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Yet rather than being two different ideas or movements, anarchism has always had its syndicalist elements. Proudhon argued for workers’ associations to replace wage-labour, rejecting political action in favour of workers self-organisation and self-liberation on the economic terrain. However, he was a reformist and rejected strikes as a means of change, arguing that economic power was too skewed against workers to be effect. Co-operatives not unions, were his means of social transformation.

Proudhon’s works were eagerly by workers across Europe and adapted to their needs. In 1864 French and British trade unionists – *not* Marx – created the International Workers Association and at its national congresses the practice and theory of the workers movement were discussed and developed. As well as extending the socialisation and association of property from industry to land, the idea that the workers’ unions would both fight capitalism and be the framework to replace it was raised and embraced.

The Belgium section were firm advocates of this idea, as shown by their report to the International's Congress in 1868. Frenchman Jean Louis Pindy expressed it the *Resolution on Resistance Societies* at its 1869 Congress. Bakunin championed it, arguing that for workers there was "but a single path, that of *emancipation through practical action*" which "has only one meaning. It means workers' solidarity in their struggle against the bosses. It means *trades-unions, organisation, and the federation of resistance funds*." This would create "an earnest international organisation of workers associations from all countries capable of replacing this departing political world of States and bourgeoisie."

So by 1870, the International had two tendencies: syndicalist and social-democratic. A fact Marx was aware of, when, unlike his latter-day followers, he admitted that Bakunin argued that the "working class must not occupy itself with politics. They must only organise themselves by trades-unions... by means of the International they will supplant the place of all existing states."

Yet Marx underestimated the influence of these ideas. For the syndicalist wing was the majority, as proved when he tried to impose social-democracy onto the International after the Paris Commune. However, expelling Bakunin did not nullify his all-too accurate prediction that sending socialists to Parliament would see the "worker-deputies, transplanted into a bourgeois environment, into an atmosphere of purely bourgeois ideas... cease to be workers and, becoming Statesmen, they will become bourgeois... For men do not make their situations; on the contrary, men are made by them."

This is more than reclaiming a much distorted history. We see echoes of the same debates today. A rejuvenated Labour Party membership is in conflict with its thoroughly bourgeois MPs. Worse, the hopes and energies of these new activists are being wasted, constructive socialism is being ignored, waiting

for a general election the Tories are unlikely to call so a few enlightened politicians may save capitalism from itself.

We end with an all-too relevant article by Eugène Varlin (1839–1871), a leading French Internationalist. Son of a poor peasant family, he was a bookbinder by profession and organised mutual aid societies alongside unions and strikes. Unlike many French Internationalists, he was firm advocate of equality of the sexes. An associate of Bakunin, he was active in the Paris Commune before being tortured and shot after his capture during its final week. Sadly, few writings by this pioneering syndicalist activist are available in English which hopefully this a new and complete translation corrects to some degree (a much edited version appeared in *The Paris Commune of 1871: The View from the Left* [1972]).

Workers Societies

While our statesmen try to substitute a parliamentary and liberal government (Orleans style) for the regime of personal government, and so hope to divert the advancing Revolution threatening their privileges; we socialists, who by experience know that all the old political forms are powerless to satisfy popular demands, must, while taking advantage of the mistakes and blunders of our adversaries, hasten the hour of deliverance. We must actively work to prepare the organisational elements of the future society in order to make the work of social transformation that is imposed on the Revolution easier and more certain.

So far political states have been, so to speak, only the continuation of the regime of conquest, which presided over the establishment of authority and the enslavement of the masses: Republican Governments, as in Switzerland or the United State;