

# Anarchists and Trade Unions

Pëtr Kropotkin

1907

[The following letter from Comrade Kropotkin, which appears in the Temps Nouveaux of May 25, we reprint in FREEDOM for the reason of its special interest at the present moment. It is only necessary to explain that a discussion on "Anarchism and Trade Unionism" has been carried on in the columns of the above paper between Pierrot and Lagardelle, in the course of which the latter had insinuated that Pierrot held a letter of Kropotkin's which attacked Trade Unionism. The letter to Pierrot had been destroyed, but as Kropotkin discovered the copy he made, it was printed to dispel the false impression Lagardelle had tried to convey. The letter was addressed to the French Publication Group of Socialist Students, and in other particulars explains itself. All the notes have been added by Kropotkin since the letter was written. For the better comprehension of the following it may be noted that the French "Syndicates" are Trade Unions, but that the French "Syndicalism" differs from English "Trade Unionism" in its revolutionary character. It considers the "Syndicate" as the arm for the Social Revolution and the cell of the future Communist society.]

DEAR COMRADES,—

I had agreed to write a preface to your pamphlet "Anarchists and Syndicates" before having read it; now, after reading it, I see that I should have to write, not a preface, but a criticism, and even a very plain-spoken one, upon certain facts.

Instead of limiting themselves to arguments which might be adduced in favour of taking a more active part in Trade Union work, the authors have set forth general ideas on Anarchy that I cannot agree with, and besides they have subjected those who differ from them to little pin-pricks which I do not approve of.

The conception of Anarchy that existed in the Collectivist and Federalist International is certainly not that of present-day comrades, and is not mine (page 10). An entire evolution has taken place during the last thirty years—a retrogression, some will perhaps say—a forward movement, according to my opinion. Between the "Idée sur l'organisation sociale," of the Jura Federation, and "La Société Nouvelle," "La Conquête du Pain," etc., there is a whole generation which, to my

mind, has neither trod the same ground nor gone back, and which would have been welcomed by Bakounin himself had he lived in our time.<sup>1</sup>

The conception “Anarchist because Communist” is *your own*. Well, it has perhaps the advantage of making Communism the more important; but at least admit that it is not shared by a great number of Anarchists; that for many liberty is as dear as bread—I am one of those<sup>2</sup>—that there are many who call themselves Anarchists *although* Communists, and that there are absolutely sincere comrades who believe Communism and Anarchism to be incompatible, which in no wise hinders many of them thinking there is much to be done in Trade Unions.<sup>3</sup>

In the third part of your pamphlet you allow yourself to be carried away so far by your argument that you make several assertions which you would find it difficult to prove. No doubt on entering a Trade Union an Anarchist makes a concession—just as he does when he goes to register the name of his newspaper, or when he asks for permission to hold a meeting in Trafalgar Square; even when he signs the lease of his lodging or of his co-operative farm, or when he allows himself to be handcuffed without retaliating with his fists. To style “ideologists” those who demonstrate that there is a concession is neither just nor justifiable. Without these ideologists you would be flogged in prison, as is still the custom in England.

On entering a Trade Union you make a concession, and when you say that the concession is less than is generally believed, you are right; but let us not deny that it is a concession, like those mentioned above (asking for authorisation, lease, handcuffs), which make us hate the present system the more.

On entering a Trade Union you are certainly carried away by your surroundings, as in Parliament,<sup>4</sup> only the difference between a Trade Union and a Parliament is, that one is an organisation for fighting capital, while the other (Parliament, be it well understood) is an organisation to uphold the State and authority. The one sometimes becomes revolutionary, the other never does. The one (Parliament) represents centralisation, the other (the Trade Union) represents autonomy, etc. The one (Parliament) is repugnant to us *on principle*, the other is a modifiable or a modified side of a struggle that most of us approve of.

If Trade Unions set up a Social Democratic hierarchy, we could not enter them before having demolished it.

In short, there is enough for Anarchists to say about the use of endeavouring to wrest Trade Unions from dabblers in politics, and to inspire them with broader and more revolutionary ideas, without striving, for all that, to limit their possibility of action to those who have their own special conception of Anarchism. I know Anarchists of *all* shades who have taken part in workmen’s Unions. Once they work at a trade, it is natural that they should associate themselves with

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<sup>1</sup> Today we have a clearer understanding of the necessity of *immediate expropriation* and the necessity of *Communism*.

<sup>2</sup> I must remind you of the numberless strikes for man’s *rights*. They are in general the most bitter, a fact I have often mentioned in my articles on the Labour movement.

<sup>3</sup> The readers of *Freedom* know that this opinion was based upon a misunderstanding, consisting in the belief that Communism must be authoritarian. To dispel this false prejudice, and to show that, on the contrary, Anarchism is only possible under Communism, and Communism will only be possible when it is Anarchistic, we have devoted a good deal of our energies since the year 1880, when the Italian and the Jura Federations of the International declared themselves Anarchist-Communists.

<sup>4</sup> Look at England. Forty years ago Trade Unions were fighting organisations. When they became rich, protected by the Government, and flattered by the Royal Family, they lost their combativeness. The workers often complain of the bourgeois proclivities of their army of functionaries—like the Social Democratic workmen in Germany.

comrades in the factory, without asking whether they understand Socialism or Anarchism in a particular way. That has nothing to do with the case.

Here, at page 8, my original letter ends. Probably I should not have added much to it. As to the date, I had written on this rough copy: "Trade Unions and Anarchists. April, 1898."

Now that I have answered M. Lagardelle's little insinuation, I shall take it upon myself to ask him a question. Was there nothing more interesting to say about Trade Unionism than to talk of this letter? Is he reduced to this? Supposing I had been a rabid enemy of Trade Unionism—would this in any way have altered the relation between Anarchy and the Trade Union movement? Are they only *personal* relations? And would it not be precisely the duty of a man who pretends to be scientific, to study the relations between Anarchist ideas and those of the French Syndicalism?

And lastly, if M. Lagardelle absolutely wished to speak of my ideas on the Labour movement, had he not, if it really interested him, my articles in *Le Révolté*, *La Révolte*, and *Les Temps Nouveaux*. (As I am not French, they can easily be recognised by their style). In perusing these papers between the years 1886–1898, I find one or two articles in each number during times of Trade Union struggles—leading articles and notes on the Labour movement—in which I always return to these same ideas: Workmen's organisations are the real force capable of accomplishing the Social Revolution—after the awakening of the proletariat has been accomplished, first by individual action, then by collective action, by strikes and revolts extending more and more; and where workmen's organisations have not allowed themselves to be dominated by the gentlemen who advocate "the conquest of political power," but have continued to walk hand in hand with Anarchists—as they have done in Spain—they have obtained, on the one hand, immediate results (an eight-hour day in certain trades in Catalonia), and on the other have made good propaganda for the Social Revolution—the one to come, not from the efforts of those highly-placed gentlemen, but from below, from workmen's organisations.

I have perhaps annoyed my readers by returning too often to this subject, but I now ask myself if it would not be useful to make a selection of these articles and publish them in a volume. What is most important is, that if we consult the collection of newspapers that followed the *Bulletin de la Fédération Jurassienne* and *l'Avant Garde* till the *Temps Nouveaux*, we see that Anarchists have always believed that the working-class movement—organised in each trade for the *direct conflict* with Capital (to-day in France it is called "Syndicalism and direct action") constitutes true strength, and is capable of *leading up to* the Social Revolution and of *realising* it, by the transformation based on equal rights of consumable commodities and production. Those of us who have believed in this during the last thirty-five years have simply remained faithful to the original idea of the International, as it was conceived in 1864 by the French (*in opposition to* Marx and Engels), and such as was always applied in Catalonia, in the Bernese Jura, in Eastern Belgium, and partly in Italy. The International was a great Syndicalist movement which determined everything that these gentlemen give out that they have discovered in Syndicalism.

We Anarchists do not pretend to have discovered a new idea or a new religion. We say we have simply remained faithful to the practical idea that inspired the third awakening of the French proletariat and of the Latin proletariat in general. We have refused to associate ourselves with the juggling away of this idea, which was done by Germans and a few French Jacobins at the Hague Congress in 1872, when, profiting by the defeat of the French proletariat, they tried to cause the International to deviate from its economic struggle, and to drive it into conquering governing power in the bourgeois State. And now that the proletariat, disgusted with Parliamentary Social Democracy, returns to the old idea of direct international conflict against Capital, and that some

gentlemen are again endeavouring to divert this movement, so as to make of it their political stepping-stone, we shall oppose them as we opposed their forerunners, so as to always uphold the same idea: *The enfranchisement of the proletariat by direct and aggressive action against its exploiters.*

PETER KROPOTKIN.

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