

The St. Imier Congress of the International

September 15 and 16, 1872.

Max Nettlau

September 1922

This September our Swiss comrades in the Jura mountains will commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the anti-authoritarian Congress of the old International held at St. Imier, September 15 and 16, 1873; and they will also recall the memory of the Jurassian Federation of the International, which for many years stood in the front ranks of the struggles of the '60s and '70s which created the Anarchist and revolutionary Syndicalist movements of our time. The Congress in question did more: it saved the continuity of the internationalist movement and rescued it from the clutches of the authoritarian politicians gathering round Marx, it even inaugurated the friendly co-existence of movements of different tendencies within the same organisation by establishing the solid basis of complete autonomy and mutual respect for all shades of opinion and tactics. Thus it pointed out ways and methods which have since been abandoned' to the detriment of the common cause of social emancipation To the present English readers many of the facts connected With these events will not be familiar, when they read this rapid Summary of these facts they will, I believe, feel solidarity with the Swiss comrades and send them fraternal greetings, and they may also consider whether these events of fifty years ago do not contain some lessons useful in our days, when, indeed, fresh impulse, fresh initiative are wanted more than ever.

The International Working Men's Association, as founded at St. Martin's Hall, in London, September 29, 1864, was to unite and weld together all workers who would work together for their emancipation from Capitalism, irrespective of the shades of opinion on principles and tactics which divided them. This broad principle was respected for five years, until after the Congress held at Basle, Switzerland, in September, 1869, where for the last time State Socialists or Marxists, Revolutionary Collectivists as the Anarchists were then called, Proudhonian Mutualists, Trade Unionists, Co-operators, and social reformers met in fair discussion and tried to elaborate lines of common action, useful and acceptable to all. The Congresses of 1868 and 1869 showed that the anti-authoritarian and truly revolutionary, anti-parliamentary ideas were making excellent headway, being spread from several intellectual centres of propaganda in Belgium, the Swiss Jura, and Spain, and with so much vigour by Bakunin, who had then lived for two years in and near Geneva, whilst before that time he had first spread these ideas in parts of Italy, mainly Florence and Naples.

Marx, who for all these years had had a free hand in leading the London General Council of the Association, and who had expected that by these means by and by his personal ideas would meet with international acceptance, was mortified when he saw in 1868, and more so in 1869 by the Basle Congress, that he was not making progress, that revolutionary Anarchism came to the front in a way alarming to him. This made him resort from that date to desperate and utterly unfair means by which he expected to terrorise or discourage the anti-authoritarian sections, and he did not mind trying by foul means to discredit and ruin the advocates of freedom, notably Bakunin, whom he had disliked for many years. A minute unravelling of these machinations will be found in the Life of Bakunin as compiled by me and in the records of the International collected by the late James Guillaume; but all this is surpassed by the cynical discussion of their doings between Marx and Engels in their private correspondence, which has since come to light to a large extent.

These intrigues were permitted a long impunity by the situation created by the war of 1870–71 and the Paris Commune, since this gave a plausible pretext for not meeting in congress in 1870 and a miserable, utterly unfair pretext for replacing the congress of 1871 by a private conference held in London and thoroughly engineered and controlled by Marx. At this conference he struck the blow long since premeditated, namely, to enforce an official doctrine, that Of political action (implying Labour parties, electioneering, etc.), upon the Association. This was too much.

Opinions as to how to resist these authoritarian encroachments were divided. We can study every phase of this from Bakunin's letter to the Paris Réveil (end of 1869), the Jurassian attitude against the Geneva politicians at the Congress held at Easter, 1870, Bakunin's letter of August 6, 1871, protesting against the voluntary dissolution of the section called "L'Alliance" at Geneva, the Jurassian letter to the London conference (September 4, 1871), etc.—there was always an opposition between the intransigent attitude of Bakunin, who did not mind a split in the Association, and the Jurassians' (for brevity's sake I will say James Guillaume's) position; the latter whilst repudiating the authoritarians as keenly as Bakunin, never ceased looking for means to maintain the cohesion or unity of the International in any case. This struggle of opinion never left the line of friendly discussion, as both sides had so thoroughly at heart their common cause.

After the London conference (September 17–23, 1871) the Jurassian Federation at their Congress held at Souvillier (Swiss Jura), November 12, exposed the situation in a long circular, defending the autonomy of the sections and federations, and calling for the intermediate convening of a general Congress to restore the lost freedom in the International. Bakunin did what he could to second this first open movement of protest, which met with hearty support in Italy, Spain, Belgium, etc.

Until then, apart from slanders spread in semi-private communications to Germany and the United States, which have since come to light, and other slanders circulated by zealous subordinates Marx had left Bakunin alone personally, though anxiously collecting material (namely, of his revolutionary activity) against him by means of repulsive persons like N. Utin and others. But when the Souvillier circular set the ball rolling and the very foundation of his power was in danger of being either deprived of its prerogatives or abolished altogether, he shirked the fair struggle of opinion, freedom versus authority, which Bakunin and his comrades expected to fight out at the coming Congress, and he lowered the level of the debate to personal quarrelling by gathering heaps of incriminations against the revolutionists into a longer private circular signed with the names of the members of the General Council (nearly all of whom had never read or even seen it), called "On the Pretended Split in the International," dated March 5, and printed

and circulated end of May, 1872. Bakunin and several others published replies and refutations in the Jura *Bulletin* of June 15. Shortly after this the general Congress was convened to meet at The Hague in September. The location of the Congress in Holland, so near to London and Germany, and far from Switzerland and the Southern countries, showed that Marx intended absolutely to control this Congress by a packed majority and in one of his letters to his American agent, F. A. Sorge (June 21, 1872; published 1906), Marx asked for not less than twelve American credentials, to be sent to himself and his London partisans. The Congress so long waited for in vain was now to become an absolute farce, another tool of Marx as the conference of 1871 had been and as the General Council still was. The Anarchists were determined to stand this no longer and henceforward to fight for the liberation of the International from Marx's domination. But again opinions as to how to act differed in the sense described above.

Without entering upon dates and documents, published and unpublished, the principal phases may be described. When in the middle of July Bakunin and some of the Jurassians met, the latter also were for an intransigent policy, meaning that if the Congress was not held in Switzerland instead of The Hague they would invite the anti-authoritarian federations not to go to Holland but to meet with them in Switzerland and to organise an intimate federation among themselves. In this sense, no doubt, Bakunin then wrote long letters to Italy and to Spain, and the idea was acted upon and further enlarged by the Italians at their conference held at Rimini early in August, where the immediate rupture with the General Council and the convocation of a Congress to be held at Neuchatel were decided upon.

Meanwhile, however, James Guillaume's constant idea of doing the utmost to keep within the International had prevailed also in the Jura, and found expression in the instructions given to the Jura delegates at the local Congress held in August! They would go to The Hague and the Italians would not. Bakunin sided with the Italians, but—as it was right for true Anarchists to do—all were free to act as they chose, and Guillaume pursued his politics at The Hague with the disapproval of the Spanish Anarchist delegates and of the Italian, Cafiero, who attended the Congress merely as a visitor, but Guillaume met with no interference from their side though they thrashed out the matter in hot discussions.

Guillaume's idea was that instead of a split, leaving authoritarians and Anarchists absolutely separated, it was preferable that all should remain within the International who would accept the *economic solidarity of the workers against Capitalism* and the *complete autonomy of federations, sections, and individual members as to ideas and tactics*, provided the principle that *the emancipation of the workers should be their own work* was not lost sight of. To put it in a nutshell, he worked with the purpose that the *authoritarians* those who would not recognise anybody's freedom but their own and who were bent upon domineering over all the others, should leave the International, which they never ought to have joined at all, and that all who loved fair play and mutual toleration should be made welcome in it, whatever their shade of Socialist theory and practice should be. During the week of the Congress whilst the packed majority voted almost dictatorial powers to the ruling clique, and Marx imagined that he won constant victories, Guillaume went round quietly discussing these ideas with many delegates, dispelling their prejudices and welding together their forces. Then when the triumph of Marx was at its height, when the vote was about to be taken decreeing the expulsion of Bakunin and his friends, the minority by a declaration read by V. Dave, a comrade who is still alive declared the mutual solidarity of the autonomous federations which did not recognise any of the regulations and resolutions interfering with their autonomy, and which would henceforth communicate among themselves and prepare

the realisation of federalist autonomy within the organisation at the next Congress. Marx was dumbfounded; his authority was defied, and The Hague resolutions were already declared null and void by the Internationalists of Spain, Belgium, Holland, and the Swiss Jura, as far as the delegates who signed the declaration represented them.

Besides this solidarity on the basis of mutual toleration, another link, that of Anarchist ideas held by all, was to keep together the definitely Anarchist federations. This idea Guillaume discussed at Amsterdam (September 8) with Cafiero and the Spanish delegates, and Bakunin since August 30 had already written (at Zurich) the principles and rules of the secret society, the “Alliance of Revolutionary Socialists,” which was to ally the action of the Italian and Spanish Anarchists with that of himself and others. To discuss this matter with him the Italian delegates to the anti-authoritarian Congress first met in Zurich (September 6 and following days); on September 11 the Spanish delegates and Cafiero arrived from The Hague; on September 13 the rules of the secret society were definitely accepted, and the St. Imier Congress was then discussed.

Bakunin and these comrades, also a number of Russians, travelled to St. Imier, where the “International Congress” was held on September 15 and 16, being composed of Spanish, Italian (Bakunin among them), French (mainly Commune refugees), and Jurassian delegates.

Here again the Italian view of complete rupture with the General Council and the Jurassian standpoint, defended by Guillaume, were face to face, and the latter was prevailing. Thus the famous second resolution, called “Pact of friendship, solidarity, and mutual defence between the free Federations,” did not go further than the declaration of the minority above described, but this was quite sufficient, as coming events showed.

Bakunin, after long conversations with Guillaume, adhered also to these views and began to act upon the Italians in this sense. It may be said that finally, in March, 1873, the next Italian Congress, held at Bologna adopted a resolution expressing these views of *economic solidarity against Capitalism* and *complete autonomy as to ideas and tactics* in the most definite terms, so this idea of mutual toleration generally prevailed over that of a clean separation.

The further development was facilitated by the maniacal behaviour of the Marxist General Council at New York, which simply suspended all the independent federations, with the result that in the turn of a hand these excommunicated federations continued to form the International *on the basis of the St. Imier principles*, and the General Council and its few acolytes were left out in the cold and henceforth taken no further notice of. The Congress held at Geneva (September, 1873) reorganised the Association on this anti-authoritarian basis, and further Congresses were held at Brussels, Berne, and Verviers.

The continuity of the International was thus saved by the methods adopted at St. Imier. After the death of Bakunin (June, 1876) another similar effort was made by the Anarchists to live on friendly terms with their opponents on the basis of this autonomy of ideas and tactics, and the universal Congress held at Ghent (1877) is yet another instance. It was owing to this tradition that the more Ghent International Socialist Congresses held at Paris, 1889, and so forth, at the beginning as a matter of course comprised Socialists of all shades of opinion; and it will be remembered that the Marxists will not rest until by successive and increasing vexations and acts of brutality they gloriously managed at the London Congress of 1896 to at last erect barriers excluding henceforth all who disbelieved in Parliamentary tactics. Then they were *alone* once more and quite happy, and they culled that *unsocial* isolation the “Second International”! There is no more unsocial being than an out-and-out Marxist, who recognises no Socialist comradeship and knows only dictators and slaves

It appears to me that if ever *Internationalism* is to be restored it will never be done by the “diplomacy of the proletariat” (a phrase coined by Engels in a letter to Marx), which is quite as abominable as official diplomacy, never by the leaders of the Second, Two-and-a-half, and Third Internationals putting their heads together in as many conferences, and at a similar cost, as the present capitalist masters of poor Europe. It might be tried on these or similar lines, if the lessons of St. Imier are worth anything:

Solidarity in the economic struggle against Capitalism;

Solidarity in the defence of mankind by the repudiation of war and all nationalist oppression;

Autonomy as to ideas and tactics, provided these do not uphold the State, Capitalism, Nationalism, or war.

When by these means the ground has been cleared for independent action, then another series of international ties would come into operation, namely, those joining together men and organizations holding similar ideas and pursuing similar tactics. Then Internationalism will give them combined strength and they will be able to decide where best to begin to act by free experimentation. Then, at last, something *new* will be before us, not as an oppressive organism imposed by dictatorship, but as an organic growth, and we will all learn by this experience and the present period of stagnation or oppression will be over.

The Anarchist Library (Mirror)
Anti-Copyright



Max Nettlau
The St. Imier Congress of the International
September 15 and 16, 1872.
September 1922

Retrieved on 11th May 2023 from www.libertarian-labyrinth.org
Published in *Freedom*, September 1922.

usa.anarchistlibraries.net