

Anarchists and the trade unions

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The importance of the trade unions, which is increasing every day, makes it our duty to consider and especially study what position we must assume towards these groups and to what extent we must participate in their development, whether by becoming members of them, or by helping to create them.

Every social form contains within itself the agents of its own metamorphosis, and it is the capitalist regime's own laws that militate in favor of the its destruction, as a result of the class antagonism generated by the capitalist mode of production.

The modern industrial regime, that is, the prevailing economic form, possesses a corollary, in social relations, of the trade-based association. The trade union is the group that most effectively represents the exploited class in its struggle against the greed of the exploiting class. We must therefore not oppose this movement of association of the various groups of workers. To the contrary, we must resolutely encourage their creation and attempt to prevent their leadership from falling into the hands of ignorant or careerist elements, which would divert them from the revolutionary path.

Forced to resist the constantly-increasing avarice of the capitalists, the workers have organized by trade to put an end to their exploitation. This is how the workers trade unions were born: they are associations of workers in the same trade who organize to defend their material and moral interests, creating relations of solidarity among their members, for the purpose of resisting the greed of the possessors of capital.

For us revolutionaries, however, their activity must not stop there. We discern two movements in the Trade Unions:

1. A reformist movement to safeguard their material and moral interests, which tends to seek the satisfaction of immediate interests, such as wage increases, reduction of the working day, and generally any kind of improvement in the worker's situation.
2. An economic movement of the working class against the capitalist class, whose specific goal is the suppression of the latter and of the regime that it represents.

These two movements are, in our view, the different points towards which the trade unions tend. A purely reformist movement and a revolutionary movement that together propose to change the form of society. This is proven by the following sentence inscribed at the head of an appeal to the workers of the metal industry to organize a trade union:

“The Committee declares that the goal that it pursues is the complete suppression of the employing class and of wage labor.”

Our attitude towards these two tendencies of the trade union movement is simple: demonstrate the vanity of partial reforms and foment the revolutionary spirit among the trade unions.

With respect to wage increases, for example, it is easy for us to show that if, momentarily, such a wage increase would be in our interests as buyers, the time will come when, everyone’s wages having increased, the prices of their products will inevitably have risen in a proportionate degree and the wage increase will have been of no use because, although the worker may have more money, he cannot buy more. I think this is what the learned doctors of scientific socialism call the iron law of wages.

Let us take just one example: in the United States it is not rare to see a worker earn 3 or 4 dollars a day, which is the equivalent of 15 or 20 francs, despite the fact that the American workers are no happier than we are, as is demonstrated by the great strikes that we hear about all the time. Our propaganda in the trade unions must therefore propose to restrict the movement that seeks partial reforms, by proving its uselessness to our comrades whenever the opportunity arises. Naturally, this is not to suggest that if our comrades want a wage increase, we should oppose their demand, but that we must show them that such an action only has temporary significance since we will soon have to start all over again if we do not want to forfeit the advantage we have gained; in this manner we shall support the development of the trade union movement as an element of the struggle against the capitalist class.

Our position, faced with these two movements of the trade union movement, is thus perfectly defined by the following two formulas:

1. Prove the uselessness of reforms.
2. Support the development of the revolutionary dimension of the movement.

As we saw above, if there is a group that occupies a position on the economic terrain of the class struggle, it is indisputably the trade union group. Nowhere else does one so vividly experience the antagonism between employers and workers. Whether they like it or not, the interests of the workers are in opposition to the interests of the employers, and vice versa; there is an ongoing struggle between the two elements, and the corporative group is more conducive to the effective conduct of this struggle than any other kind of group; at least it reminds its members of this struggle, because it is after all its supreme reason to exist. This is proven by the frequency of strikes over the last few years, a frequency that only increases as the trade unions spread.

The struggle on this terrain also has the advantage that it does not leave the slightest operating space for alliances and pacts with the bourgeois class or the intermediate classes (petty bourgeois, shopkeepers, the upper echelons of the civil service) whose immediate interests conflict with those of the workers, as is the case in the political movement, where alliances between groups with opposed interests are not rare, quite the contrary. In other words, there is a relation of antagonism between the corporative movement and the political movement, and the latter, in spite of all its intentions, has never been able to absorb the former.

To get to know the desires of the Trade Unions, to become familiar with the degree of development of these groups, are things that should be of the utmost interest to us, since they present a field of activity that is especially suitable for us. Already, on several occasions, the influence of our propaganda has had a major impact on them. The London Congress, where some comrades expressed the ideas and tendencies of the corporative groups, has shown us the advantage that we could derive from such activity; and the distinctly anti-parliamentary campaign waged by the

working class delegates to disseminate the results of the Congress on their return from London, has not been without significance.

Even today, the antagonism that exists between the politicians—for whom the conquest of public power is the supreme panacea—and the syndicalists (as some people so disdainfully call them), advocates of a transformation of society who extol the general strike as the means to carry out this transformation—which is really nothing but a new form of revolution that is appropriate for the modern industrial regime—shows us all the benefits we could obtain for our ideas from the purely working class movement of the Trade Unions.

Unlike the electoral and political struggle that takes place only at widely-separated time periods, the struggle against the greed of the employers is an everyday battle, it keeps individuals in a constant state of readiness and, something that is very important, it does not require political bosses or parliamentary deputies to carry out the labor of all the associated workers; all are invited to take an active part, while in the electoral political struggle, the individual engages in an act of sovereignty—and we know what kind of sovereignty it is—once every four or five years at most.

These are the undeniable advantages of the economic movement over the political, since in the former the individual is actively involved and does not need any intermediaries. Our professional politicians have shown that they are perfectly well aware of this fact, so that Jaurès said not long ago that they were trying to relegate politics to second place, when, in our view, the importance of the economic movement is everything, and that of the political movement, nothing.

Revolutions have not been effective unless they were economic revolutions; political revolutions have done nothing but change the form of government without having any effect on the foundations of society, nor have they had any influence at all on the living conditions of the worker. Disregarding reforms—which, as I believe I have demonstrated above, are nothing but palliatives that are good, at most, for temporarily deceiving those in whose favor they are implemented, and who will not take long to understand this—the end pursued by the Trade Unions is therefore, in reality, a revolutionary end, which can only be achieved by revolutionary means (the general strike, for example), because the supreme desire is to bring an end to the exploitation of man by man, with a tendency—it must be admitted—on the part of some towards a centralized state (the collectivist theory). We must not deceive ourselves, and pretend to believe or want to make people believe, that if everyone were to desire the transformation of capitalist society, everyone would expect that their emancipation will come from a libertarian communist society. Many people still only have a kind of authoritarian communism or collectivism as their ideal, and still have faith, despite all the sufferings that have been inflicted on them, in the function of the providential state. I do not have to speak here about the state that would produce and dispense all wealth; enemies of capitalist centralization, we are no less hostile towards socialist centralization; to be governed by Guesde or Lafargue, would do us as much good, we won't say as being governed by nobody, but as being governed by Waldeck-Rousseau or Méline.

This tendency of the trade unions to transform society is a revolutionary tendency. And if, on the other hand, the transformation of society is possible by way of the purely economic group, the complete uselessness of a political leadership is thus completely demonstrated at the same time. Another advantage of the Trade Unions, and not the least of their advantages, consists in the fact that they strengthen the bonds of solidarity between the members of the working class, and not just in the single workshop, but the workers in an entire city, a whole country, or even frequently across national borders.

One will surely recall the International, that great association of the workers of the entire world, who had a common goal: the destruction of the capitalist bourgeoisie. It was the embodiment of practical internationalism, and our adversaries, the bourgeoisie, understood this very well, so well that they also organized internationally to destroy the workers International, thus providing us with an example of what we believe is a not so distant future.

The Trade Union also offers the advantage that, since it organizes its members for the purpose of pursuing their common interests, it does not encompass antagonistic elements, as is the case in a purely political movement that always divides individuals of the working class with regard to the supremacy of personalities or party loyalties, something that we may currently observe within the great French socialist party.

Agitation on the economic terrain, at the same time that it demonstrates the complete uselessness of the political movement, admirably prepares the alliance of the groups of producers for the day when they will find themselves in a position to take possession of the instruments of labor. For what other group besides the corporative group is better qualified to assure production and confront the necessities of consumption on the day after the revolution?

When people talk about revolution, however, they too often forget that it will be necessary to be prepared to assure consumption requirements of the population on the day after the revolution. For the working class, organized in its corporative groups, it will be easy to guarantee production. And this is what we would expect. Such a development of the Trade Unions will take place more rapidly the more we emphasize and favor it in our propaganda.

We can only quote our comrade Pelloutier in this connection, the Secretary of the Federation of the Bourses du Travail. He, too, believes that the Trade Unions are the embryos of the producers' groups of the future.

"Between the corporative Union that is being constructed and the communist and libertarian Society in its initial period, there is a perfect concordance.

"We want all social functions to be reduced to the satisfaction of our needs; the corporative union also desires this, it has this same goal, and is increasingly freeing itself of the belief in the necessity of governments. We want the free union of men; the corporative union (and it is becoming increasingly more aware of this fact) cannot exist except on the condition that it uproots from within itself all authority, all coercion. We want the emancipation of the people to be the work of the people themselves; the corporative union wants the same thing. Every day it feels more acutely the necessity of administering its own interests; the taste for independence and the unrest of rebellion germinate every day; we dream of free workshops where authority has given way to the personal sense of duty; there are signs of a surprising open-mindedness concerning the role of the workers in a harmonic society. In short, the workers, after having for so long believed that they were condemned to the status of mere tools, want to educate themselves so that they can be both the inventors and the creators of their works." (The Corporative Organization and Anarchy, pp. 17-18.)

The trade unions, originally formed for mutual aid in case of illness or unemployment, rapidly expanded their prerogatives, transforming themselves into groups for negotiation to resolve conflicts between capital and labor. The bourgeois employers do not want them to be anything else at the present time. Now, however, the trade unions have plunged fully into the struggle. The workers direct the force of their organizations of resistance against the growing avarice of the capitalists, whether to fight against wage reductions, or else to demand higher pay, a reduction of the working week or any other demand that would improve their conditions. Furthermore,

without having lost all their primitive characteristics, the corporative groups, firmly consolidated, consider the near future in which they will be the embryos of the groups of free producers of the future. An immense task, if there ever was one, and thus of interest to us.

It is true that they will have to continue to evolve, but we are convinced that the next revolution will arise from the workers movement in the form of a general strike; so it seems to us. For us, then, if we do not want the revolution to once again be a farce, it devolves upon us to transform the corporative groups in accordance with our ideas.

We must bend all our efforts to prevent this movement from being taken over by the advocates of the fourth estate, those false friends of the proletariat named Jaurès, Millerand, Guesde, etc., who dream of expropriating and expelling the bourgeoisie in the name of a vague dictatorship of the proletariat, in which they would themselves be the dictators.

Once strictly mutualist in its operations, the trade union movement rapidly became a movement for immediate demands, or a reformist movement (wage increases, reduction of the working day, etc.). Today it has become socialist and revolutionary; many comrades, who have participated in it, have instilled it with our ideas. We shall therefore attempt to completely free it of the old formulas; to make it communist and anarchist.

Now all we have to do is refute the objections, which are numerous, that have been raised against our participation in the trade union movement. I shall not attempt to avoid it; to the contrary, I shall attempt to refute the main objections.

Many comrades have opposed us, plausibly enough, with the same objection that we oppose to the advocates of electoral and parliamentary propaganda. We must fear, they say, that just like parliamentary socialism, trade union agitation will lose sight of the ultimate goal, the transformation of society, and become a reformist movement. The trade unions, they also tell us, are now popular only because they organize workers for the purpose of achieving immediate improvements in their living conditions. And I will certainly not attempt to deny the value of these arguments that are unfortunately all-too-often valid.

Far from deterring us, however, these arguments are excellent reasons for us to penetrate the trade union movement and form an anarchist movement within it. Repudiating the concern with immediate benefits and demonstrating their uselessness, we would impress upon the movement a character that is more in conformance with our own ideas.

Another objection that could be made and whose value no one, and I least of all, can ignore, is the claim that there is no need to form trade unions to organize workers on a revolutionary terrain, and that, to the contrary, the corporative movement tends not to concern itself with more than exclusively corporative interests, in other words, that many individuals, expelled from their specialized jobs because of the constant development of machinery, form a true reserve army and cannot join any trade union, and that these individuals are precisely the ones who have a more immediate interest in revolution and the transformation of society. However, nothing prevents these individuals from organizing on a revolutionary terrain, where our propaganda would be able to have a greater impact on them. In any event, we have always sought to do so as effectively as possible, although we have all personally encountered all the difficulties presented by such activity. Many comrades have also attempted to organize the unemployed and have been discouraged. This whole army of those without jobs, of vagabonds, is actually very difficult to arouse. There are still people who go to beg for a piece of bread at the monasteries or from secular charities, and I sincerely desire that the comrades who devote their energies to this field of organizing have better luck than I did.

In any event, it cannot be denied that the unemployed constitute a real force that, when the time arrives, will have to be brought to our side.

The ideal, of course, would be an exclusively revolutionary group; the groups that we have striven to create comprise proof that, as anarchists, we have not been idle. Since, however, other groups exist whose members have not come to us, shouldn't we go to them? Is it not true that our place is wherever propaganda must be disseminated, wherever there are individuals to convince? And is it not true that the Trade Union, more than any other group, is an excellent field for propaganda? The Trade Union is gradually liberating itself; it is no longer, as I have attempted to prove, exclusively a group that pursues corporative interests and immediate demands; it is going beyond these limits, and will forge within its ranks the organization of a better society. And this is what we all desire. The Trade Unions have also brought the workers of different countries closer together; they have begun to learn about each other; trade and industrial federations have also been created and are flourishing. This is practical internationalism. The workers any given workshop or any given city experience this internationalism. The relations that span the borders between the workers, will soon make them aware that exploitation has no boundaries and that it is the same everywhere. Our propaganda has the same goal. These approximations, and these sympathies that are founded among all the exploited, are the most propitious signs for us. The day when everyone has understood that everyone is equal inside and outside all borders, the capitalist bourgeoisie will be doomed.

Finally, as anarchists, we can always prevent the trade union movement from deviating towards an authoritarian organization or from creating a labor aristocracy.

For all these reasons, we must resolutely participate in trade union activities, and prove, by means of incessant propaganda, to our comrades of the Trade Union, that our complete emancipation can only come from an International Communist and Anarchist Revolution.

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The text of a pamphlet first published in 1900 encouraging anarchists to get involved in the trade unions, which the author claims are the “embryos of the groups of free producers of the future”. Originally published as a pamphlet by Éditions de L'Éducation libertaire in 1900.

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