

# Carlo Tresca Remembered

Review essay

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Dorothy Gallagher, *All the Right Enemies: The Life and Murder of Carlo Tresca*, Rutgers University Press, 1988

Dorothy Gallagher's biography merits the highest praise for fusing the career of the Italian anarcho-syndicalist Carlo Tresca with the great class struggles and other social movements of the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Her work is the product of years of painstaking research, interviews with survivors who participated in the struggles, and those who knew him personally.

Tresca was a natural rebel. To escape military service and punishment for "subversive" activities he fled to Switzerland and finally emigrated to the United States in 1904. He was then a socialist (in Italy he edited the Socialist paper *Il Germe* (The Seed), becoming an anarcho-syndicalist eight years later in 1912. He propagandized the cruelly exploited Italian immigrants herded into virtual slave mining camps and steel mills in the Pittsburgh and other midwestern areas. Tresca participated in the great IWW struggles, the Lawrence, Massachusetts textile strike, the Paterson, New Jersey silk mill strike, the New York City hotel and restaurant workers strike, the great Mesabi Range iron ore miners strike in Minnesota, the demonstrations calling on the workers to avenge the Ludlow, Colorado massacre to crush the miners strike, the hunger march of the unemployed in New York, and many other no less militant struggles. In all of these struggles, as against the liberals and socialists, Tresca urged the adoption of anarcho-syndicalist direct action tactics.

Tresca's propaganda included not only purely economic issues but also attacked the priesthood, the gangsters and extortionists like the notorious "Black Hand" who came from Italy, as well as a host of other social evils. In this connection, Tresca's journal *L'Avvenire* (The Future) congratulated the parents of newborn infants who shunned baptism and pledged their children as the champions of free thought. During his lifetime Tresca was jailed dozens of times, fined, threatened with deportation, charged with offenses ranging from disturbing the peace and assault to high treason; was bombed, mutilated by an assassin armed with a razor, almost kidnapped, shot at, and finally murdered. Tresca's journal *L'Avvenire* was barred from the mails for opposing World War One and often for violating other postal regulations.

What has been mistakenly called the "Tresca Movement" was neither a party nor a movement guided by a written constitution, rules and regulations, but rather, an informal association

of comrades communicating with each other through personal contacts, gatherings, correspondence, and informal exchange of views. Decisions were reached by consensus. Thus, for example, the campaign that drove the fascists from the streets of New York by assaulting their speakers and breaking up their meetings was informally launched by Tresca and his comrades.

The impression that Tresca, because of his participation in IWW strikes, was a member of the organization is not true. When he became an anarcho-syndicalist, he became a freelancer, never a member of any labor organization. Regardless of their affiliation, he was devoted solely to the cause of the rank-and-file, the underdog. He persistently exposed the corruption, class collaboration, and dictatorship of their officials. For example, Gallagher reports that Tresca, in 1910 during the Westmoreland miners strike, proved that the officials of their union, the United Mine Workers, were in league with the coal operators.

Tresca, while proclaiming consistent adherence to anarcho-syndicalist principles, was nevertheless at times given to poor judgment in interpreting events. Gallagher cites two examples; approval of the Soviet regime and the electoral victory of the Italian Socialist Party. Ignoring the obvious fact that Russia was ruled by a ruthless Communist Party dictatorship, he maintained that the position of the Spartacists (a communist sect) and the Italian Communist Party were all in accord with revolutionary syndicalism. Tresca preferred the electoral victory of the Italian Socialist Party rather than the clergy, the employer, and the government. But as in Russia, a new socialist party government, like all states, indicates not an orientation toward Socialism but to the monopoly of power.

When I criticized him for associating with reformist class collaborationist unions, Carlo explained that since the practical disappearance of the IWW from the textile mills after the defeat of the Paterson strike, the Italian-speaking workers joined reformist unions like the ACW (Amalgamated Clothing Workers) and ILGWU (International Ladies Garment Workers Union), leaving him no alternative.

Tresca's organ *Il Martello* (The Hammer) was bankrupt. For him, the disappearance of *Il Martello* meant the loss of effective contact with the Italian workers. He was so constituted that without such activity he could not exist. In a revealing meeting with Luigi Antonini, Secretary-Treasurer of Italian-speaking Local 89 of the ACW, Tresca told him that his only condition for cooperation was that financial assistance be provided by the union. Antonini reminded him that he should be grateful because "*Il Martello* would not exist without me." Tresca was not employed by the union in any capacity, sought no privilege for himself and served without compensation. In return for financial assistance Tresca would collaborate—as he put it—"give my work to you."

Tresca's collaboration was accepted, not because the union leaders suddenly became anarchists, but because his influence in the Italian locals would serve to reinforce their power. To ask the dictator of a pro-state capitalist union to subsidize an anarchist journal is an illusion—an unprincipled and unworkable deviation. True to our principles, the publication of *Il Martello* should have been suspended if the funds to sustain it could not otherwise be raised.

To her credit, Gallagher documents the very important point that Tresca, in collaborating with the ACW did not sell out, did not repudiate anarcho-syndicalism but on the contrary, tried to sustain and reinforce his principles. She notes in this connection that Tresca, in opposition to the euphoric pro-Roosevelt "New Deal" policy of the reformist unions, argued that "Roosevelt was an industrial and social dictator whose attempts at reform served only to preserve the failing capitalist system," a charge that applies equally to Roosevelt's labor allies as well as Tresca's cooperation with these very same unions. Tresca trapped himself in the insoluble contradiction

between collaboration and his dearest revolutionary aspirations. Notwithstanding his mistakes, his dedication to our cause never faltered.

Without reservations, Tresca endorsed the position of our anarchist communist/syndicalist journal *Vanguard*, a position based on the anarcho-syndicalist principles of the International Workers Association (IWA). Like Tresca, *Vanguard* castigated both the CIO and AFL for helping the government to regulate the labor movement into the pattern of emerging state capitalism. The *Vanguard* fearlessly exposed the sickening duplicity and opportunism of the pro-capitalist collaborationist unions and their dictatorial conduct, gladly reprinting an article from the Italian IWW organ *Il Proletario* by fellow worker Joseph Mangano, denouncing the dictatorship of Luigi Antonini, Secretary-Treasurer of the Italian-speaking Local 89 of the ACW. We gladly accepted Tresca's offer to provide a supplementary page in English in *Il Martello*, uncensored, and with full expression of our views.

I first met Tresca in 1933 when a united front defense committee was organized to defend the militant anti-fascist Athos Terzani (an anarchist whom I first met in the "Road to Freedom" group). Terzani was falsely accused of having shot and killed his young comrade Anthony Fierro during a free-for-all battle at a meeting of the fascist Silver Shirts of America. By way of supplementing Gallagher's account, I must stress the key role of Herbert Mahler, Secretary of the IWW General Defense Committee in gathering the information needed for Terzani's release. To celebrate Terzani's acquittal and publicize the demand for punishment of the real killers, Terzani and his fiance accepted Mahler's suggestion that they be married on the stage of Irving Plaza Hall. They were married by Municipal Court Judge Dorothy Kenyon, an event widely reported in the press and radio.

Since united front arrangements between anarchist and non-anarchist groups were successfully concluded, there was all the more reason to expect much closer cooperation between the Italian anarchist *L'Adunata* and *Il Martello* groups. From my own observation, it was the antagonistic attitude of the *L'Adunata* group and their willingness to engage in sectarian attacks against *Il Martello* which made any kind of cooperation impossible. For example, Emma Goldman severely condemned Marcus Graham, editor of the anarchist paper *Man!* for writing, and *L'Adunata* for publishing, an article full of lies and misrepresentations, even insinuating that she justified the Bolshevik crushing of the Kronstadt rebellion and Alexander Berkman attacked Graham for his "jesuitry and vindictiveness."

I spoke with Tresca on the same platform on many occasions before, during, and after the Spanish Civil War and Revolution and at no time did he display the slightest inclination to modify his anarcho-syndicalist convictions. The "pure" anarchists condemned Tresca for his friendly relations with influential politicians and individuals. But his critics ignored the fact that he used these connections to help people in need of protection, who could not cope with the byzantine governmental bureaucracy. Tresca was, so to speak, a one man social agency. His assistance made life a little more bearable *now* for hundreds of desperate troubled people at the bottom of the social pyramid. In the words of Patrick Henry, I defy Tresca's detractors: "If this be Treason Make the Most of It."

While Tresca faithfully abided by necessary temporary agreements with different groupings, he would debate even personal friends who were political ideological opponents at the "drop of a hat." I remember his debate with the then Trotskyite communist Max Shachtman before a huge audience in Irving Plaza Hall—the subject: Anarchism versus Bolshevism. Shachtman, a skilled debater, eloquently argued his case in fluent English. But Tresca, in spite of his halting English,

in the overwhelming opinion of the audience convincingly presented the anarchist position and devastatingly refuted Shachtman's arguments.

Over forty years ago I took my place among Tresca's comrades and strewed flowers on the spot where he fell, murdered by hired assassins, paid tribute to his gallant achievements for the emancipation of the oppressed. Since then, only a few of us remain. The rest of our dear comrades have passed away. Dorothy Gallagher's biography is a fitting tribute to his memory.

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