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The Sonvilier Circular

Circular to all the Federations of the International
Association of Workers

The delegates to the Congress of the Fédération
Jurassienne

12 November 1871

The undersigned delegates, representing a group of Sections of the International that have just constituted themselves under the name of *Fédération Jurassienne*, turn, by way of the present circular, to all the Federations of the International Association of Workers, and ask them to join in demanding the convocation, with the shortest possible delay, of a General Congress.

We are presenting in a few words the reasons that make us claim this measure, absolutely necessary in order to stop our great organization from being pushed, without realizing it, in a ruinous direction, at the end of which its fate would be dissolution.

When the International Worker's Association was created, a General Council was set up whose function, according to the statutes, was that of serving as Central Bureau of correspondence between the Sections, but which was not delegated any authority whatsoever, which would have been contrary to the very essence of the International, which is only an immense protest against authority.

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The attributions of the General Council are also precisely defined by the following articles of the General Statutes and of the General Regulations:

“General Statutes. Art. 3. — A general Council is set up composed of workers representing the different nations that are part of the International Association. The General Council comprises, according to the needs of the Association, the members of the bureau like the president, the general secretary, the treasurer and the specific secretaries for the different countries. “Every year, the Congress will meet and decide the location of the General Council, will elect its members, leaving to it the right of adding supplementary members, and will choose the place of the next meeting.”

“When the time arrives for holding the Congress, and without the need for a special convocation, the delegates will convene in the place and at the date fixed. In the presence of extraordinary circumstances, the General Council can change the place of the Congress, without however changing the date.”

“Art. 4. — On its annual meeting, the General Congress shall receive a public account of the annual transactions of the Central Council. In cases of urgency it may convoke the General Congress before the regular term.”

“Art. 5. — The Central Council shall form an international agency between the different co-operating associations, so that the working men in one country are constantly informed of the movement of their class in every other country; that an inquiry into the social state of the different countries of Europe are made simultaneously and under a common direction; that

the questions of general interest moved in one Society are considered by all; and that, when immediate practical steps should be needed, as, for instance, in case of international quarrels, the actions of the associated societies are simultaneous and uniform. Whenever it seems opportune, the Central Council shall take the initiative of proposals to be laid before the different national or local Societies.”

“The General Council will publish a bulletin in order to facilitate communication with the corresponding sections.”

“Regulations. — First Article. — The General Council is mandated to execute the resolutions of the Congress.”

“To this aim, it will collect all the documents that the different sections of the different countries have sent to it and those that it will be able to get through other channels.”

“It is responsible for organizing the Congress and making the programme known to all the Sections, by way of the corresponding bureau of the different countries.”

“Art. 2. — The General Council will publish, as much and as frequently as its means allow, a bulletin dealing with all the topics that are of some interest to the International Association: labour supply and demand in the different localities; cooperative societies; situation of the working classes in every country, etc.”

The General Council was based for the first year in London, for various reasons; it was from the meeting held in London that first came about the idea of the International; moreover, London offered better security, with respect to other European cities, concerning personal rights.

In the subsequent Congresses of the International, in Lausanne (1867) and Brussels (1868), the General Council was confirmed in London. With reference to its composition, all those who have taken part in a General Congress know how things happened: the vote was on the basis of trusting the lists presented to the Congress, and in those lists the majority of the names were of people unknown to the delegates. The trust was so high, that the General Council was also given permission to add members according to its wishes; and, by way of this disposition, the appointment of the General Council by the Congress became illusory. In fact, the Council could add, afterwards, other members that might completely modify the majority and trends.

At the Basel Congress, the trust was so blind that it became a sort of voluntary abdication in the hands of the General Council. Through *administrative resolutions* they injured, without much noticing it, the spirit and the letter of the General Statutes, where the autonomy of each Section, each group of Sections was so clearly proclaimed. See for instance:

“Administrative resolutions taken at Basel: Resolution IV.

– The General Council has the right to suspend, until the next Congress, a Section of the International.”

“Resolution VII. When quarrels arise between societies or branches of a national group, or between groups of different nationalities, the General Council has the right to decide about the different positions, leaving the door open to an appeal to the next Congress, which will make the final decision.”

In this way a dangerous amount of power was put in the hands of the General Council, without realising the consequences.

If there is one incontrovertible fact, borne out a thousand times by experience, it is that authority has a corrupting effect on those

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Léon SCHWITZGUÉBEL,
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Christian HOFER,
delegate of the Section of Moutier-Grandval;

Frédéric GRAISIER,
Auguste SPICHIGER,
delegates of the central Section of Le Locle ;

Nicolas JOUKOVSKY,
Jules GUESDE,
delegates of the Section of propaganda and revolutionary socialist
action of Genève;

Charles CHOPARD,
Alfred JEANRENAUD,
delegates of the Section of the engravers and steel cutters of the
district of Courtelary;

Numa BRANDT,
delegate of the Section of propaganda of La Chaux-de-Fonds;

James GUILLAUME,
A. DUPUIS,
delegates of the central Section of Neuchâtel;

A. SCHEUNER,
Louis CARTIER, delegates of the Circle of social studies of Saint
Imier.

in whose hands it is placed. It is absolutely impossible for a man with power over his neighbours to remain a moral man.

The General Council was no exception to this inescapable law. Made up for five years running of the same personnel, re-elected time after time, and endowed by the Basel resolutions with very great power over the Sections, it ended up looking upon itself as the legitimate leader of the International. In the hands of a few individuals, the mandate of General Council members has turned into something akin to a personal possession and they have come to see London as our Association's immovable capital. Little by little, these men, who are not our representatives — and most of them are not even regularly mandated by us, not having been elected by a Congress — these men, we say, accustomed to walking in front of us and speaking on our behalf, have, by the natural flow of things and the very force of this situation, been induced to try to foist their own special program, their own particular ideas upon the International. Having, in their own eyes, become a sort of government, it was natural that their own particular ideas should have come to appear to them as the official theory enjoying exclusive rights within the Association; whereas divergent ideas issuing from other groups struck them, not as the legitimate manifestation of an opinion every bit as tenable as their own, but rather out-and-out heresy.

And so, gradually, a London-based orthodoxy has evolved, its representatives the members of the General Council; and soon the Council's correspondents for each country set themselves the task, not of serving as neutral and disinterested intermediaries between the various Federations, but of performing as apostles of the orthodox doctrine, seeking out disciples for it and serving sectional interests to the detriment of the overall interests of the Association.

What was the inevitable outcome of all this? The General Council naturally ran into opposition along the new course upon which it had embarked. Irresistible logic forced it into trying to break that opposition. Hence the struggles that have begun and, with them, the personal intimacies and factional manoeuvres. The Gen-

eral Council becomes a hotbed of intrigue; opponents are shouted down and vilified: in the end, warfare, open warfare, erupts within the ranks of our Association.

Since the Basel Congress in 1869, the General Congress of the Association has not been convened, and the General Council found itself left on its own during the last two years. The Franco-German war has been the reason for the absence of a Congress in 1870 and 1871. The Congress has been replaced by a secret Conference summoned by the General Council even if the Statutes did not give it this power. This secret Conference, that certainly didn't grant a full representation of the International, as many Sections, ours included, were not informed; this Conference whose majority was manipulated from the start because the General Council had taken the licence of admitting six delegates elected by it with the right to vote; this Conference which absolutely could not pretend to be invested of the rights entitled to a Congress, has nevertheless taken some resolutions which gravely infringe the General Statutes and intends to transform the International, from a free Federation of autonomous Sections, to an hierarchical and authoritarian organization composed of disciplined Sections placed under the power of a General Council which can, at its own mercy, deny their admission or even suspend their activity. And, to crown all this, a decision taken at this Conference, establishes that the General Council will fix the date and the place of the next Congress or of the Conference which will replace it. In this way we are threatened with the suppression of the General Congresses, these large public conventions of the International, and their substitution with secret Conferences similar to the one just held in London.

In the presence of this situation, what should we do? We are not accusing the General Council of criminal intent. The personalities who make it up have found themselves succumbing to a fatal necessity: in good faith and to ensure the success of their own particular doctrine, they have sought to introduce the authority principle into the International; circumstances appeared to encour-

age this tendency and it strikes us as quite natural that this school, whose ideal is *the conquest of political power by the working class*, in the wake of recent developments, should have thought that the International should amend its original organization and become a hierarchical organization directed and governed by a Committee.

But while we can understand such tendencies and such actions we are nonetheless compelled to combat them, on behalf of the Social Revolution, which we pursue, and its program: "Emancipation of the workers by the workers themselves," free of all directing authority, even should that authority be elected and endorsed by the workers.

We ask for the retention within the International of that principle of autonomy of the Sections which has been the basis of our Association thus far; we ask that the General Council, whose powers have been rendered unnatural by the Basel Congress' *administrative resolutions*, should revert to its natural function, which is the function of a simple correspondence and statistical bureau; and we seek to found the unity some aim to build upon centralization and dictatorship, upon a free federation of autonomous groups.

The society of the future should be nothing other than the universalisation of the organization with which the International will have endowed itself. We must, therefore, be careful to ensure that this organization comes as close as possible to our ideal. How can we expect an egalitarian and free society to emerge from an authoritarian organization? Impossible. The International, as the embryo of the human society of the future, is required in the here and now to faithfully mirror our principles of freedom and federation and shun any principle leaning towards authority and dictatorship.

Our conclusion is that a General Congress of the Association must be summoned without delay.

Long live the International Working Men's Association!

Sonvilier, 12 November 1871

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