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Kropotkin and the rebuilding of the International Workers Association

Vadim Damier

2013

In December 2012, international anarchosyndicalism celebrates two anniversaries: the 90th anniversary of the rebuilding of the International Workers Association, and 170 years since the birth of the most prominent theorist of anarcho-communism, Peter Kropotkin. This coincidence of dates can be considered symbolic. Kropotkin was never a member of any revolutionary-syndicalist or anarcho-syndicalist organization, but he made a very important contribution to the creation of the anarcho-syndicalist International, and his ideas have had an enormous impact on its goals and principles.

Kropotkin was one of the first anarchist thinkers who launched a campaign for the restoration of the anti-authoritarian wing of the First International, and he led this campaign, even when most of the libertarian movement activists were carried away with so-called “propaganda of the deed.” Kropotkin saw the basis for this reconstruction in the workers’ unions. Back in the “Bulletin of Jura Federation”,

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Retrieved on 2020-04-07 from iwa-ait.org

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he repeatedly wrote about the labor movement and workers' unions, and in this period he tried to make contacts in trade union circles. In the newspaper "Le Révolte" he later published about 20 articles on the need to work in trade unions — at a time when these ideas did not yet have support from such anarchist activists and agitators, as Jean Grave, Errico Malatesta or Johann Most.¹

Kropotkin argued with much energy for the strengthening of trade unions and the inclusion of anarchists in their work. In 1900, in the newspaper "Freedom", he called for the convening of a universal "convention of labor", and in 1901 for the creation of "an international federation of trade unions of the Earth." He had great expectations caused by the radical metalworkers' strike in Barcelona in 1902 and by an upturn in the strike movement in Europe. These events led Kropotkin to propose the creation of an "International Union of Labor," and this idea he voiced through Anselmo Lorenzo in the newspaper "Tierra and Libertad" in September 1902. He raised the question of the organization of a working International, which would in general advocate socialist goals and the socialization of the economy, self-emancipation of the working people, and whose purpose was the preparation the strikes, the fight against the exploitation of female and child labor, the promotion of cooperation, and in the future, the development of plans of socialist expropriation of production.² By the development of a more detailed program, the differences from the old International should be taken into account. Interestingly, in the next two issues of the newspaper, its publisher, Federico Urales, rejected this proposal, considering it a simplified retrospective.

However, for the Russian anarcho-communist, it was not just about tactics, but about far more profound things. In

¹ Anarchistes en exil. Correspondance inédite de Pierre Kropotkine à Marie Goldsmith 1897 – 1917. Paris, 1995. P.290.

² Nettlau M. Eine Arbeiterinternationale in Kropotkins Auffassung // Die Internationale. 1932. Heft5. Mai. S.116.

Kropotkin's ideas on the future of the anarcho-communist society, professional and industrial associations of workers occupy an important place. In fact, he believed that the basis of the social organization of the free world would be formed by free, self-administered communes, oriented on self-sufficiency and voluntarism, which would then unite in a federation from below. However, it was important to complement these communities with unions and associations of different kinds, including free associations of producers. Kropotkin believed that these production associations would carry out the task of technical management and coordination of production and that workers' and resistance unions (trade unions) may be the prototype and the basis of these future associations, appearing now for the making of struggles for economic strikes by the workers under capitalism.

Trade unions, according to Kropotkin, were to become also the organizational basis for the resurrection of the anti-authoritarian First International. Kropotkin outlined his vision of this process in a letter to French anarchist J. Grave on July 3, 1902. At the time, he envisioned such a movement in the form of an international trade union organization at the heart of which would have to be a core of convinced anarchists – similar to how it was with the creation of the Spanish section of the First International. Kropotkin proposed, based on sympathy for the anarchists in the working masses of Spain and France, to convene an international workers' congress and to organize there an "international working alliance", independent from social democracy and focused on extra-parliamentary direct action. Thus inside the mass revolutionary workers' International, something like the Bakuninist Alliance in the First International should be formed.³

Essentially, Kropotkin proposed the following strategy : the anarchists should actively support the global unity of the trade

³ Ibid. S.116–117.

unions, and then, based on their own organization, give them a revolutionary character, displacing social democracy, and through them make a social revolution. It is interesting that the Argentine anarchists succeeded in this in the early 1900's. In this way (only without creating any internal "alliance") in the winning of the Argentine Workers' Federation (future Argentine Regional Workers' Federation, FORA) and in turning it into an anarchist labor movement.

Given such perspectives of Kropotkin, it is not surprising that he showed great interest in French revolutionary syndicalism. He enthusiastically welcomed the strong rise of the revolutionary syndicalist movement in the world. In the report "Our attitude to the peasant and labor unions", prepared for the London Congress of Russian anarcho-communists (September 1906), he had emphasized the fact that workers join unions and industrial federations "outside the existing political parties, including the social-democratic parties" and seek to "restore the International Union of Workers, which would lead a direct, immediate struggle of labor against capital — not through the parliament, but directly, by all means accessible for the workers, and only for the workers". Moreover, he emphasized the role of trade unions in creating a future free society, in the "organization of communist life and production on the general principles" and in the huge case of "restructuring of industry in the public interest." According to Kropotkin, "anarchists look at labor unions as cells of the future social order and a powerful means of preparation for a social revolution which would not be restricted by only change of rule but also turn the modern forms of economic life, that is, the distribution of wealth produced and methods for their production." Thus, Kropotkin led a campaign for the creation of a revolutionary-syndicalist International, which he regarded as a continuation and as a direct successor of the anti-authoritarian wing of the First International.

who stood at the origins of the IWA (which declared itself the revival of the anti-authoritarian wing of the First International) were exactly the anarchists who had long worked with Kropotkin, corresponded or met with him in the last year of his life. The first secretaries of the IWA were Rudolf Rocker, Agustin Souchy and Alexander Shapiro, who was forced to leave Bolshevik Russia, and did much to ensure, as the old man advised him in Dmitrov, to reveal to revolutionary workers activists what was happening in his home country, to bring together and unify European syndicalists. Therefore, it would not be an exaggeration to say that the current IWA is a brainchild of Kropotkin, who did so much to restore the anarcho-syndicalist International, and, as he could, to help to prepare for this event.

Vadim Damier,
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Throughout 1920, the old anarchist who lived in the small provincial town of Dmitrov, actively promoted this idea in correspondence and in conversations with libertarian movement activists visiting him. “What I particularly wish – Kropotkin wrote to Shapiro – is that 3–4 of us will meet foreign friends and syndicalists, working out with them a most common program, and then, having this program in our hands, begin with organizational work in Russia. With the purpose and with a clear vision of the enormous task : to create the same International – anarchic, the peasant-worker, with the same broad goals, based on the daily struggle against capital, which our forefathers began to develop in 1860s, consisting of heterogeneous elements that survived the defeat of 1848 and radicals who were influenced by them.”⁸ He said to American anarchist Alexander Berkman that the Bolsheviks showed “how the revolution is not to be made.”⁹ In the same 1920, the delegate of German anarcho-syndicalists, A. Souchy got to Dmitrov with a letter from Rocker, old friend and comrade of Kropotkin. Kropotkin and Souchy discussed the Russian revolution, the evils of Bolshevism, the ideal of a free federation of free cities, councils, communities and unions, and the prospects of the workers movement.¹⁰

Piotr Alexeyevich Kropotkin did not live to the day when, in late December 1922 in Berlin the Congress of revolutionary workers’ unions of the world assembled, which announced the rebuilding of the anarcho-syndicalist International, the International Workers Association (IWA). He died in Dmitrov on February 8, 1921, but, of course, not accidentally, people

⁸ Кропоткин, П.А. Письма М.И. Гольдсмит, А.А. Боровому и А. Шапиро // Труды Комиссии по научному наследию П.А. Кропоткина. Выпуск I. М., 1992. С.193.

⁹ Berkman A. The Bolshevik Myth (Diary 1920–1922). L ; Winchester, 1989. P.75.

¹⁰ Souchy A. “Vorsicht : Anarchist !” Ein Leben für die Freiheit. Politische Erinnerungen. Grafenau,1985. S.46–49.

What role was to be played by the anarchists in the workers unions and in the syndicalist movement as a whole ? Kropotkin proposed that the anarchists of various countries act on this issue in different ways, depending on the situation of the union movement. Where labor unions were under the complete and undivided influence of social democracy, it made sense to leave them and to organize “new, albeit smaller free labor unions,” of “anarchist tendency.” If unions of a country were already revolutionary (as in France in the early twentieth century), it is better for the anarchists to work there, not allowing the transformation of workers’ organizations into the instrument of any political parties or the appendage of a parliamentary struggle. He also proposed the creation of non-party trade unions with an anarchist influence (as was the case in Spain).⁴ Subsequently, the idea of various forms of revolutionary syndicalism was reflected in the statutes of IWA.

Even during the peak of the pre-war French CGT, Kropotkin, in fact, warned of the dangers that can be hidden in “neutral” revolutionary syndicalism, which is not inspired by the ideas of anarchism. He and his supporters in the Russian anarchist movement (group “Bread and Freedom”) warned of “blinding”, criticized the tendency to bureaucratization and to the forming of a centralist apparatus in the CGT, the ideological confusion in the ranks of the revolutionary syndicalist organizations, the risk of loss of influence of the revolutionary wing and of evolution towards conventional trade unionism. They suggested steps such as the activation of grassroots unions and groups of the trade union movement with the decentralization of decision-making and the distribution of the anarcho-communist ideal within the Confederation. It was also necessary for it to abolish bans on political propaganda

⁴ Анархисты. Документы и материалы. 1883–1935 гг. В 2 тт. Т.1. 1883–1916 гг. М., 1998. С.242.

existing in the trade union movement. The anarchists hoped the CGT could ultimately accept the idea of anarchism as their ideological basis.

An important role in this process must be allocated to discussion with the activists of the revolutionary-sindicalist movement on the strategic goals and objectives of the struggle and on the contours of a future society, that is, in fact — on program issues. As part of this discussion, Kropotkin wrote in 1911 a foreword to a book written by CGT members E. Puget and E. Pataud about “How we will make a revolution,” which outlined essentially the social changes and the free social order as conceived in the circles of the French syndicalist movement. He welcomed revolutionary syndicalism and its views on the revolution as a great step forward, but called to it overcome some centralist views and issues which he believed syndicalism had inherited from Marxist syndicalism : the desire to preserve the elements of a centralized management staff (through the structures of trade unions), the refusal to generally implement libertarian communist principles in distribution, etc.⁵

The points of criticism by Kropotkin on ideas of a “neutral” revolutionary syndicalism from positions of anarchist communism proved extremely useful for the creation of the new IWA. The Declaration of Principles of the postwar German anarcho-sindicalists of FAUD was written by Rudolf Rocker. It was not accidental that exactly Rocker (who worked closely with Kropotkin in the pre-war time in Britain, and at the same time was active in the trade union movement) was the author of this first paper, which rejected the ideological “neutrality” of syndicalism, and in fact, he made a synthesis of methods and organizational forms of a revolutionary -sindicalist trade union movement with anarcho-communist ideals and objectives in a

⁵ Крoпoткин П.А. Предисловие // Пато, Э., Пуже, Э. Как мы совершим революцию. М., 2011. С.3–10.

spirit of Kropotkin. In 1922 — 1923 this declaration of principles formed the basis of the declaration of principles of the IWA.⁶

Kropotkin was not present at the London conference of revolutionary sindicalist unions in 1913 (at this time he was treated in Italy), but the most active role in the organization was played by Russian anarcho-sindicalist Alexander Shapiro who was very intimate with him. As is known, the plans of rebuilding of the IWA at that time were buried by the First World War.

When in 1918 the guns became silent and the revolutionary storm begun, the situation in the labor movement was quite different. A fierce fight for the legacy of revolutionary syndicalism begun between the Bolsheviks, on the one hand, and the anarchists. Kropotkin had lived to see the beginning of this struggle for influence in the labor movement. It became clear that Bolshevism was not truly a revolutionary alternative and would not lead to a free communist society. In a letter to the workers and progressive society in Western Europe, written in June 1920, the anarchist, already old and sick, called on the workers of the world not to go the way of the Bolsheviks, through “strongly centralized state communism, under the iron rule of party dictatorship”. Kropotkin once again called upon the workers of the West to create revolutionary unions, independent of any political party, and to “revive the idea of the great International of all workers of the world — but not in the form of a union led by one party, as it was in the Second International, and is again in the Third.”⁷ He gave this as a letter to delegates of British trade unions who visited him.

⁶ См. об этом : Дамье В.В. Забытый Интернационал. Международное анархо-синдикалистское движение между двумя мировыми войнами. Т.1. М., 2006. С.60–65, 272–278 ; Damier V. Anarcho-Syndicalism in the 20th. Century. Edmomton, 2009. P.66–69, 80.

⁷ Крoпoткин П.А. Обращение Крoпoткина к рабочим и передовым кругам общественности о текущих событиях // Вопросы философии. 1991. №11. С.43–51.