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EDITORIAL

“Syndicalism.”

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“**S**yndicat” is the French word for the English “Union.” From that it would seem that “Syndicalism” must mean “Unionism.” It does not. Due to one of those unaccountable freaks of language, “Syndicalism” has come to be understood everywhere as meaning a particular sort of “Unionism,” to wit, a theory of economic organization with the revolutionary purpose of overthrowing capitalism by the specialized means of physical force.

Everybody, whose information is not below par, knows that, in order to understand an institution, a movement, or a document, the history of the country and of the times in the country of its birth must first be known. No play of Aristophanes can be properly appreciated without knowing the history of Greece; Don Quixote is a closed book, at any rate, merely a funny book, to those who do not know Spain; or, who could weigh the Civic Federation who knew nothing of American conditions? “Syndicalism,” a word of French origin, reflects a thing of French birth. If these facts were kept in mind, then, on the one hand, the non-French Europeans, who denounce “Syndicalism” sweepingly, would curb their pens, and, on the other hand, the American would-be imitators of “Syndicalism” would realize that they but play the role of monkeys at the North Pole, or Polar bears under the tropics.

The point can be best understood by turning the telescope upon two typical representatives of the two seemingly opposed currents of the Movement in France—Guesde, the Anti-Syndicalist, and Lagardelle, or Herve, Pro-Syndicalists.

At Nancy, in 1907, Guesde expressed his estimate of the economic organization as a place whither men were attracted in search of immediate material and individually selfish (not therefor improper, or unnecessary) gain. The economic organization, according to him, was not and could not be a body animated with any high ideal, least of all with that loftiest of ideals, the Socialist Republic. That ideal could be pursued only by the political movement. Yet, before closing, Guesde completed his speech saying he by no means meant to deny that the hour for physical force would arrive.

That hour was certain to arrive. Then the men of the party would seize the gun, and fall to.—Stick a pin there.

Lagardelle, in his scholastic style, Herve, in his hammer and tongs way, interspersed with wit and satire, ridiculed the excessive expectations their opponents entertained from the political movement. That neither Lagardelle nor Herve repudiate political action appeared substantially from their being delegates to the convention of a political party. The burden of their song was, however, that the economic organization had the pre-eminent mission, and was pre-eminently called upon to gather within its fold the insurrectionary elements that would furnish the requisite physical force wherewith to knock down capitalist rule.—Stick a pin, there, too.

At first blush, it would seem that the two tendencies are irreconcilable; that they are not off-shoots from a common trunk; that, consequently, one or other must be a freak affair. Not so. At this stage of maturity in the International Movement, there is no freak manifestation that does not, besides betraying intellectual weakness, generally betray also intellectual uncleanness. The Guesde and the Lagardelle-Herve forces are too intellectually powerful and intellectually clean for either to be a freak-fraud affair, or to be even remotely tainted therewith. They are children of identical parentage: their principles will be found to resolve themselves into the identical practice.

A knowledge of French conditions makes this clear.

Herve stated in Stuttgart to the writer of this article that the factor that acts as the most powerful deterrent upon the ruling classes to push the proletariat to extremes, is the knowledge that “on the continent everyone knows how to handle a gun.” The observation is pregnant with most pregnant conclusions, that bear directly upon “Syndicalism,” and, not very much less directly upon the course that events dictate in other countries:—

First. In a country where compulsory military service has not only made the people skillful in the handling of a gun, but has familiarized them with military tactics, an insurrectionary call to arms cannot be imagined to gather 50,000 men without the vast majority of them are readily organizable. From the militarily schooled mass the requisite military chief and lieutenants will spontaneously spring up, and be spontaneously acknowledged. The organized insurrectionary force would be on foot.

Second. In a country like France, where as yet there is no large capitalism to rank the proletariat into the battalions of an industrial insurrectionary organization, and

thereby to furnish the Revolution, as an equivalent for a military force, with a mighty non-military engine of physical force, but where, on the other hand, compulsory military service has amply prepared the soil for militarily organized insurrection, and in which, moreover, national traditions lightly turn the thought to just such methods,—in such a country the only real difference between the Guesde forces and the Lagardelle-Herve forces is that the latter utter the still unconscious sentiments of the former. It is a difference of importance, salutary to both. It rescues present Anti-Syndicalism from the possible danger of losing itself in the mystic mazes of what Marx called the “cretinism” (idiocy) of bourgeois parliamentarism, and it holds Syndicalism in check, lest it rush headlong, driven by premature impetuosity. It is a difference that marks the one somewhat unripe, the other somewhat too ripe. In fine, it is a difference that proves identity—the spot where both currents will and are bound eventually to merge.

Third. In all the other European countries, where, as in France, compulsory military service prepares the soil for militarily organized insurrection, but where, differently from France, temperament and traditions are other, thoughts of “Syndicalism” naturally seem wild—at present; and as naturally, will seem rational and be adopted in the ripeness of time. Present condemnation, provided the condemnation be not too sweeping, of “Syndicalism” from such quarters is imperative, even to those who may see beyond the present. Any other policy on their part would have no effect other than the harmful one of furnishing grist to the crack-brained mill of Anarchy.

Fourth. In a country like the United States, where, differently from France and other European countries, there is no compulsory military service to prepare the soil for militarily organized insurrection, but where, on the other hand and differently from everywhere else, large capitalism is in such bloom as to have ranked the proletariat into the battalions for an industrial insurrection, and thereby to have furnished the Revolution, as an equivalent for a military force, with a mighty non-military engine of physical force,—in such a country Syndicalism has no place. In such a country, whosoever struts in the phraseology of Syndicalism is as ridiculous as a monkey would be in the frozen North, or a Polar bear in the wilds of the torrid zone. The social-political atmosphere makes them freak-frauds.

Fifth. Stripped of some casual expressions, “Syndicalism” is not “Industrial Unionism.” Syndicalism lays hardly any stress—it cannot choose but fail to lay stress: the capitalist development in the land of its birth does not furnish it with the foundation for laying such stress—upon the STRUCTURE, its main stress is laid upon the FUNCTION of the economic organization,—that function being, according to

“Syndicalism,” physical force. Industrial Unionism, on the contrary, being the product of American highly developed capitalism, lays main stress upon the STRUCTURE of the economic organization; the FUNCTION of the same—the overthrow of the Political State and the seizing of the reins of government as the Socialist or Industrial State—flowing, as a matter of course, from its structure.

Transcribed and edited by Robert Bills for the official Web site of the Socialist Labor Party of America.

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