
The Socialist and Syndicalist Movements in France

by William Z. Foster

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In the January [1911] number of the *International Socialist Review*, in an article entitled "How to Kick," Mr. Robert Rives LaMonte sketches a program of action that the American workers must adopt if they are to achieve their economic emancipation. His theory is the well-known one of combined political and direct action. Whilst organizing and using in our daily struggles "such unions as the WF of M [Western Federation of Miners]" we must also pay our dues into the Socialist Party and vote its ticket.

Mr. LaMonte lays much stress on the necessity for the development of what he calls the "New Unionism," but which is known in France, its birthplace, as "Syndicalism." He considers the condition of the workers as "indeed hopeless" if they don't develop strong fighting genius of this Syndicalist character; unions "that use all their weapons at once" and which in aim, form, and tactics are radically different from the conservative AF of L trade unions. Political action of itself, however revolutionary or extensive it may be, can accomplish but little if not backed by real economic power, he tells us. Our economic might must be organized into this modern and potent form of labor organization. However, he hastens to assure us that these Syndicalist unions by themselves cannot accomplish the "miracle" of overthrowing capitalism, nor do they aim to try it alone. They must assist and be assisted by the Socialist Party. The working class direct action and political action organizations must go shoulder to shoulder together to the assault of capitalism. ON this condition alone is success assured.

To lend weight to his theory and to illustrate the beneficial effects of this political-economic cooperation, Mr. LaMonte cites French labor history as follows:

“In France, where ‘New Unionism’ has reached its highest development, the political movement, the Socialist Party, preceded it and prepared the ground for it, and was fortunately strong enough to give it much necessary protection in its early years.”

American Socialists, who will form the bulk of the readers of Mr. LaMonte’s article, are noted chiefly for their gullibility and unsophistication when the subject of Socialism is in question. With them the expression “The Socialist Party” is one to conjure by. It covers a multitude of sins oftentimes. The “revolutionary” farmer in Kansas, the “class conscious” lawyer in Kalamazoo, the “proletarian” millionaire in New York, the disfranchised worker in the West — Socialists all — howe their hearts beat in glad unison when they learn of some new and beneficent exploit of “The Socialist Party.” What matter what country it occurs in or what the nature of the Socialist Party is that performs it, or even if it ever occurred at all. They will never investigate. Suffice it for someone to say that one of the great international family of “The Socialist Parties” has done such a noble act. Only a vandal or iconoclastic intellectual would be sacrilegious enough to doubt it, and to tear the veil from the beloved “The Socialist Party” in question and find out the facts. Therefore, when Mr. LaMonte makes his statements about the French “The Socialist Party” having “prepared the ground for” and given “much necessary protection to” the redeeming Syndicalism and also broadly hints (though he would hardly dare say so) that the Socialist Party and the Syndicalists’ organizations still continue to preserve the former fond relations, he will be implicitly believed by the faithful. Such good deeds on the part of “The Socialist Party” are perfectly natural. However, being long since classed amongst the heathen, I will uncover for a few moments the clay feet of this French “The Socialist Party” idol and show the incorrectness of Mr. LaMonte’s statements and inferences.

The Socialist Parties.

The French Socialist Party was organized in 1879 at the congress of the National Federation of Syndicates (local labor unions). Two years later it split into two factions and these quickly divided themselves into still more factions, or "parties." Some of these "parties" were the Guesdists, Broussists, Allemanists, Blanquists, Millerandists, Jaurests. They represented every shade of thought in the Socialist political rainbow from the rankest opportunism to the most impossible impossibilism. They waged an incessant warfare on each other for years. All naturally sought the support of the syndicates and these for about 10 years reflected all the quarrels of the politicians. Many, torn by these dissensions, disappeared, others falling under the control of some "party" were either turned into voting machines or "study clubs." But the great mass of the *syndicats*, weakened by the incessant political dissensions, gradually developed and insisted on a policy of "No politics in the union."

Some seven of these independent and fighting Socialist Parties were tinkered together into the present nondescript Socialist Party in 1905, nine years after the formation of the General Confederation of Labor (CGT). Mr. LaMonte's "The Socialist Party" during the "early years" of syndicalism, therefore resolves itself into a sort of hash of "Socialist Parties," which not only didn't directly aid in the development of the budding labor movement, but distinctly retarded it. They were too busy helping themselves to waste time helping the *syndicats*.

Socialist Assistance.

The later neutrality policy of the *syndicats* toward political action was very unpopular with politicians. The International Socialist Congress of London in 1896 illustrates the latter's attitude towards it. The French Socialist deputies (congressmen) attended the congress with no other credentials than their deputies' cards. The *syndicats* also sent delegates. To whip the French

syndicats into the political line, Millerand, Jaures, Guesde, Gerault Richard Viviana, and other prominent Socialists proposed that all neutralist *syndicats* be excluded from the congress. The motion lost by a vote of 57 to 56. The French *syndicats* narrowly escaped being “protected” out of the International movement. Many similar instances of opposition to the neutrality policy could be cited. The Socialists’ policy towards the Bourses du Travail also bears witness to the amicable relations existing between the political and economic movements during the early period of Syndicalism.

The Socialists vs. the Bourses du Travail.

After the passage of the much discussed “Law of 1884,” which gave the workers the legal right to organize, a general policy of steering the labor movement was adopted. Many municipalities built fine buildings, subsidized them, and turned them over to the local *syndicats* to serve as a general headquarters. These ungrateful organizations formed themselves into local unions of *syndicats*. These unions are commonly known by the title of Bourse du Travail, although this is really the name of their headquarters (labor exchange).

The Bourses are real *class unions*, including workers of every trade and from their first appearance have been strongly revolutionary. They were the real beginnings of modern syndicalism. They particularly distinguished themselves in the revolt against political domination in the unions. Many municipalities seeing the anti-political viper they were nursing in their bosoms attempted to kill their local bourses by withdrawing the subsidies or even by closing the Bourses altogether. Emile Pouget says (*La Condeederation General du Travail*, pg. 14):

“It is to be noted that these persecutions are not peculiar to municipalities of reactionary or simply republican opinions, but that the Socialist municipalities have persecuted their Bourses du Travail with the most vigor.”

Probably these Socialist tactics should be classes as “giving much necessary protection” to the “New Unionism,” as Mr. LaMonte puts it.

The popularity of the all-class Bourses in Socialist circles is well evidenced by Georges Sorel — one of Europe’s most prominent economists — who, writing in 1898, eleven years after the creation of the first Bourse, says:

“The Bourses du Travail, which unite the *syndicats* without any consideration of politics are poorly viewed by the Socialist deputies; it is rather curious to note that there are no institutions of this character at Calais, Roubaix, or Lille.”

Doubtless the Socialists so busy were “preparing the ground” for the “New Union” that they had no time to found Bourses.

Formation of the CGT.

The Bourses, in spite of the Socialist “protection,” rapidly increased in number and importance, and in 1892 they organized themselves nationally into the Federation of Bourses. This made two national labor organizations: the older National Federation of *Syndicats*, which grouped indiscriminately *syndicats* and federations (national trade unions) still functioning. The Federation of Bourses, one wing of the movement, was revolutionary and autonomous towards political action. The National Federation of *Syndicats*, the other wing, was under the “protection” of the Guesdist Socialist Party. To combine these two rival organizations was absolutely necessary to the development of the labor movement. It occupied several years of the direct actionists’ best efforts. They finally accomplished it by holding the national congress of Bourses at the same time and town as the holding of the congress of the National Federation of *Syndicats* and fairly stealing this organization from the Socialist dictator, Guesde.

The following year, 1905, the two organizations were merged, and the CGT was formed. This marked the definite rupture of the labor and political Socialist movements. Hence-

forth the Socialist Parties were forced to shower their blessings on the labor movement from a distance.

Hand in Hand.

The two movements gradually drifted apart. The working class organizations began to suspect the motives of the politicians and to fight decidedly shy of them.

In 1899 the various Socialist Parties held a general congress — preliminary to their unification in 1905. Of this affair Fernand Pelloutier, secretary of Federation of Bourses, one of the founders of Syndicalism, says:

“The chief characteristic of the Socialist congress is the total absence of the workers’ *sydicats*. This absence struck everybody. And I, myself, although knowing the horror of the *syndicats* have for a long time professed in regard to the political sects, was surprised at the small number of them there was at this first general congress of the Socialist “Party.”

Later on, speaking of the *syndicats*, he says:

“At present our position in the Socialist world is this: Proscribed from the Socialist Party because, not less revolutionary than Vaillant or Guesde, nor less resolutely partisans of the suppressions of private property, we are in addition what they are not — rebels of every hour, men truly without a God, master, or country, the irreconcilable enemies of all despotism, moral or material, individual or collective.”

These statements, emanating from such a high authority as Pelloutier, may be taken as fairly indicative of the friendly relations existing between the multi-colored Socialist Parties and the struggling labor organizations during this period.

Developments of Syndicalism.

In 1899, as a result of the Dreyfus affair the French Socialists secured much political power and Millerand became Minister of Commerce in Waldeck-Rousseau’s ministry. The frightened

capitalist class and expectant working class anxiously awaited the beginning of the long-talked of revolution. Millerand answered these expectations by handing the workers a large lemon. By *de-cree* he established the "Superior Labor Council," an "advisory body with great moral influence on labor legislation." It is composed of 66 members — 22 workers, 22 employers, and 22 *other persons*.

It is needless to comment on the merits of this French Civic Federation. In this layout Jean Jaures was one of the "other persons." Millerand delivered himself of many other "social peaces" schemes of similar character. He was soon joined in the ministry by Briand and Viviani, and between the three they have kept up the lemon diet for the workers for 10 years, varying it from Briand's soldier sick to Vivian's famous old age "pensions for the dead." The Socialist deputies have also kept up the good work. They have interpreted "the class struggle" as "the collaboration of the classes," having fused first with one party and then another as opportunity dictated.

The disappointment and astonishment of all but a few of the militant workers at these events was intense. They found themselves in their *syndicats* forced to vigorously fight the "Social Peace" schemes of "their" Socialist representatives, the acceptance of which would have stripped their organizations of their power. Hitherto their difficulties with the politicians had been largely due to the efforts of the various "sects" to secure domination over the *syndicats*, a national situation, so it seemed. But now that the Socialists were in power and they showed a distinct hostility towards the direct action organizations it put the matter in a different light. The theory of political action came in for a serious investigation, and largely as a result of this investigation has come the new Syndicalist movement, with its own plan of working class tactics, which is violently antagonistic to that of the Socialist movement.

Socialism vs. Syndicalism.

The Socialist program, only thinly disguised by Mr. La-Monte, divides working class activity into two fields — economic and political. The labor unions operate in the one, the SP in the other. This division is arbitrary, however, as all social questions have economic bases. The political and economic “fields” overlap each other; they are the one “field” — the economic. The labor unions in the Socialist program therefore have to differentiate between the Socialist so-called “political” and “economic” questions. They must confine themselves to the latter, leaving the former to the care of the SP. They must pursue a course of “hands off” in regard to the questions that the SP considers “political” in nature. It would be manifestly absurd for the working class direct action organizations to *fight against* on the economic field what the political organization has *fought for* on the “political” field.

Hence the labor unions should be subordinate to the political party and accept the freak laws, social peace schemes, etc., that it secures from the government. Governmental interference in strikes is also a matter for the political party to handle, not the labor unions. Victor Griffuelhes, ex-secretary of the CGT, thus states the Socialist roles for working class organizations: they must be “Adversaries of the government on the political field, servitors of the government on the economic field.”

The Syndicalist movement, to the contrary, recognizes but one “field” of working class activity — the economic; only one kind of social question — the economic. To solve these economic questions it uses, in all cases, direct action tactics alone. It forces the state to pass laws in the same manner as it forces a private employer to raise wages, or to better working conditions — by strikes, sabotage, boycotts, etc. And not only does Syndicalism feel perfectly sure of its ability to force the state and private employers to grant concessions by its direct action tactics, but — if we are to believe its best writers — it also intends to overthrow the whole capitalist system by the supreme application of direct action, i.e., the general strike. It makes absolutely

no provision for the conquest of the political power by “penetration,” but aims to overthrow present society complete...and to substitute its own institutions in place of those that have been overthrown.

For Syndicalism to accept the Socialist “double action” theory, entailing the subordination of the economic to the political organization, would render it incapable of fighting its most powerful enemy — the government, which is not only by far the greatest employer in France, but also a highly developed strike-breaking machine for the whole capitalist class. Not for a moment is Syndicalism willing to leave this great enemy to the care of the politicians. Experience has taught it that these intermediaries serve only to obscure the outlines of the class struggle and to act as a shield, not for the workers, but for the government. Syndicalism recognizes in the state its most insidious as well as powerful enemy and rejects all participation in it. Its attitude towards the state is well stated by Victor Griffuelhes:

“Adversaries of the state and all its institutions from a ‘political’ point of view, adversaries of the state and all its institutions from an economic point of view.”

The all-class Socialist movement is statist, the working class Syndicalist movement is anti-statist — the one advocates working class conquest of the state by political action and the submission to its decrees; the other, abstention from participation in the state and revolt against its arbitrary laws. The one considers the state as a possible working class friend; the other, as an inveterate enemy. The two movements cannot exist in harmony — they are trying to absorb each other. Syndicalism claims to be self-sufficient; Socialism says it needs a guardian and helper — a political “shield.” It tries to force the guardianship on the unwilling Syndicalism. A Socialist success is a Syndicalist defeat and vice versa. The two movements are competitors for the undivided support of the working class. There can be no cooperation between them, they must fight to a finish.

It is true that the SP officially endorses the economic organization, and even advises its working class members to join them

and that the CGT — true to its function as an economic organization — is neutral towards all political parties, but these are only diplomatic pretenses. their real sentiments are evidenced by the continual guerilla warfare being waged between the militants of the two organizations. “But,” the unsophisticated American Socialist will say, “why this warfare? If political action is compatible with the interests of the working class, why not abandon it and adopt direct action tactics entirely — cut out the SP and build up the CGT?”

The “Nigger” in the Woodpile.

The answer is simple. The French workers are “seeking salvation;” they have very hazy ideas of the nature of capitalist governments; they are also gullible and in addition have universal suffrage. A good combination for the ambitious Socialist lawyer, doctor, or shopkeeper to work on, and the prize is worthwhile; the French government being particularly rich in “snaps,” not to mention the vast amounts of patronage and “graft” or the innumerable judgeships, mayorships, postmasterships, etc. There are some 1,000 positions as deputies and senators at \$3,000 per year to be had for the asking — provided it is done skillfully enough.

On the other hand the CGT, the direct action organization, offers no inducements to the horde of Socialist intellectuals — who, in the majority of cases not being workers, are not even entitled to membership in it. It has but three regularly paid officers who each receive \$50 per month. Its component organizations are as sparingly officered. There are no soft berths in the direct action movement for the unemployed intellectuals.

These intellectuals have no economic interests in common with the workers. They are not forced to help them build up powerful fighting organizations in order that their own condition be improved. Their interest lies in building up a strong political organization in order to more successfully “penetrate” the government. the nature of their program demands the support of the working class. The Syndicalist movement, by demonstrat-

ing its own self-sufficiency and showing the fallacy and uselessness of political action, pulls working class support from the Socialist movement and is a distinct menace to the latter. The politicians, seeing their lucrative profession thus menaced, consider the Syndicalist movement a legitimate object for attack. Hence the continual warfare between the two movements. French railroad history, like that of other industries, is a series of battles between Socialists and Syndicalists. A few citations from it may be instructive.

“Briand, Rothschild & Co.”

In 1896 the Rothschilds — the French railroad kings — got into the labor movement. Through an intermediary they bought *La Lanterne*, a well-known Parisian journal. Briand and Count Conduet were placed in charge of it. An unholy trinity, Jew millionaire, Bonapartist count, and revolutionary Socialist, operating a radical paper. Millerand, Jaures, Viviana, and other prominent Socialists were its principal contributors.

In 1898 Rothschild's railroad slaves threatened to strike. “Friday” Briand hastily resigned his editorial position in order to lead them to victory. A brilliant talker and writer, he soon found himself at the head of the agitation. He advocated the general strike and organized the famous “Knights of Labor” — a secret organization, whose object was to destroy railroad signals, bridges, stations, etc., immediately after the strike was declared. He became the confidant of Guerard, the Socialist dictator of the railroad unions. The strike date was set and Briand “squealed.” The government was fully prepared for the strike. No sooner was it declared than Briand announced, through *La Lanterne*, the discovery of a great military plot to overthrow the government (during the Dreyfus affair). The SP immediately protested against the threatened outrage and elected a permanent vigilance committee to protect the interests of the government. In this great “crisis” the railroad strike was a danger to the republic. Guerard immediately called it off. Needless to say, the “plot” was simply a manufactured one, and never materialized.

Briand had earned his seat in the ministry and the political movement secured a victory. The direct action movement amongst the railroaders was given a deadly blow, and for 10 years Guerard's domesticated union protested via political channels. It became a common saying that the railroaders would never strike again.

The Recent Railroad Strike.

In 1909 Guerard was forced to resign, and shortly afterward the railroad slaves began to stir again. They threatened to strike if their long deferred demands were not granted. This agitation was the work of the famous "Syndicalist minority." The agitation rapidly grew and a general strike on all the railroads was planned.

On October 8, before the strike plans were fully developed, the strike burst out spontaneously, and in two days two systems were completely tied up. A general strike on all the roads in France was then called. The key to the situation was the big East railroad system — the unions of which were under the thumb of their general secretary, Niel, ex-secretary of the CGT. If this road could be induced to strike, the strike would undoubtedly be a success; if not, failure was certain. The other four roads still at work waited to see what the East railroad was going to do. Niel, the Socialist dictator, became the man of the hour; he had it in his power to give Europe one of the greatest strikes it had ever known.

The CGT congress at Toulouse had just ended (October 10). The Socialists, led by Niel, had suffered a complete defeat at the hands of the Syndicalists. The opportunity for revenge presented itself, and Niel, instead of hastening to Paris and doing all in his power to swing the East railroad into line, remained in the South of France, and sent a long telegram to *Le Matin* — a widely read capitalist paper — criticizing the strike as premature and stating that it would not (he meant "should not") be a general one until the strike order had reached every group or local. This, although every paper in France had pub-

lished the order. His lieutenants on the East railroad took the hint and awaited the arrival of the official strike order. The strike committee at Paris, not being able to trust either the mails or telegraph, sent messengers all over France with copies. Briand had also taken Niel's tip, however, and arrested these messengers. The result was a great confusion; many of the unions got no orders, others waited to hear from the rest of the unions, etc. The psychological "moment" slipped away. Briand's mobilization order arrived and the Socialist East railroad, numbering 70 percent of union men — by far the highest of the railroads in France — remained at work and hauled soldier scabs to break the strike in the other roads. The failure of the East railroad to strike undoubtedly caused the loss of the strike.

Niel's telegram was a master stroke, but it was not the only Socialist factor in the loss of the strike. The committee, largely Socialist, using practically as headquarters the office of *L'Humanite* — the official organ of the SP — were surrounded and dominated by Socialist politicians openly hostile to the strike. The necessary vigorous action — even had it been wished — was absolutely impossible under these circumstances. Their inertia also contributed greatly to the disaster.

On the warfare between the Socialists and Syndicalists the loss of this great strike marked an important surface victory for the former. Direct action tactics were discredited and 3,300 militant Syndicalists discharged from the strategic railroad industry, thus leaving it once more in almost complete control of the Socialists.

The Socialist delegation in the Chamber of Deputies was also given much free advertising by its spectacular defense of the railroaders' right to strike, its criticisms of Briand's tyrannical measures, its pleading for the reinstatement of the discharged railroaders, etc. The railroaders may be expected — at least for a time — to once again protest through political channels.

The real victory, however, in spite of appearances, is on the side of the Syndicalists. They have one more proof that the Socialist movement, like all other political movements, holds its own interest to be superior to that of the working class and that

it is distinctly hostile to the direct action movement. It has once again shown its “cloven feet.” The object lesson will be of incalculable value in the propaganda of the purely direct action idea. The displaced Syndicalist railroader will soon be replaced by others of an even more virile type.

Mr. LaMonte’s citation of French labor history, in order to lend weight to his theory of combined working class economic and political action, is without value. Such cooperation does not exist now in France, nor has it in the past. Whether it was recognized or not, the two movements have always been opposed to each other, as the foregoing incidents demonstrate. The most prominent feature of the “New Unionism” that Mr. LaMonte extols so much, are its growing consciousness of this opposition and its rejection of all political action.

As for the IWW — the American Syndicalist organization — its militants, who are imbued with the real Syndicalists theories, will do their best to prevent the SP from “protecting” or “preparing the ground for” their organization. They will insist on a policy of *strict official neutrality towards all political parties*, and as individuals they will vigorously combat the political action theory, be it advocated by the SP or any other “party.”

Yours for the Revolution,

William Z. Foster.

Paris, January 24th, 1911.

Edited by Tim Davenport

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