Rebels with a Cause:
Revolutionary Syndicalism, Anarchism, and
Socialism in *Fin-De-Siècle* France

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In his influential book, *Revolutionary Syndicalism and French Labor*, Peter Stearns presents the *fin-de-siècle* syndicalist movement in France as “a cause without rebels.” Stearns asserts that syndicalist leaders and intellectuals “produced distinctive and abundant rhetoric...yet they did not characterize French labor in their heyday and they did not set an enduring trend.”\(^1\) For Stearns, the revolutionary syndicalists failed to meet the workers’ material needs and paralyzed the unionist movement because they did not have a centralized leadership dedicated to pragmatic business and organizational practices. Bernard Moss comes to a similar conclusion, stating that the workers’ shift from “a cooperative strategy in alliance with the reformist middle class” to “a revolutionary strategy of class struggle” through loose federations and autonomous trade associations hampered the centralized discipline and political power of unions at the turn of the century.\(^2\)

Stearns and Moss engage the French labor movement from very different perspectives, but in the end, both either discount or fail to recognize the specific ideals and moral tradition behind revolutionary syndicalism. Stearns’s concern with the importance of higher wages and job security conceals the fact that narrow, short-term gains were not the main objectives of the skilled labor force in the syndicalist movement. Moss, on the other hand, recognizes the ideological character of the movement, but fails to acknowledge that political socialism, as a path into twentieth-century industrial politics, eventually embedded the French syndicalists in the capitalist system they sought to overturn. By analyzing the ideological, moral, and social origins and goals of the revolutionary syndicates in France, this paper seeks to demonstrate how the tensions and convergences between anarchism and socialism not only fueled the labor strikes and discourse at the turn of the century, but also provided a framework for radical economic change for workers and an alternative to modern industrial capitalism.

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To many intellectuals in the 1890s, the advocacy of direct action through the general strike by anarchists and revolutionary syndicalists appeared more radical and revolutionary than the socialist reformism that had gained political influence within bourgeois circles and the recently formed government of the Third Republic. In his 1997 article in *French Historical Studies*, Gerald Friedman provides a vast amount of quantifiable data to show that revolutionary syndicalist-led unions in France were more effective in conducting strikes, influencing striker behavior, and winning strikes than other unions in France, Europe, and the United States. The appeal and effectiveness of the “anarchist” and “activist” ideology in revolutionary syndicalism was due in large part to the unique makeup of French labor during the Belle Époque and the “revolutionary tradition” in France dating back to 1789. In time, the revolutionary syndicalist trend filtered into Italy and Spain, but 1890s France provided the first template for the movement.

At the turn of the nineteenth century, the kind of large-scale industrialization found in Great Britain, Germany, and the United States was slowly developing in France. However, skilled labor and the small-scale economic organization of artisan, craft, and manufacturing businesses continued to be the norm throughout the country into the twentieth century. These workers and businesses represented the types of labor and production that anarchists and syndicalists wanted to protect from the surge of modern corporate industrialization. Within such an economic structure, mass mobilization and coordination might have seemed futile, but as the years 1789, 1848, and 1871 attested, loosely associated groups in France could be effectively assembled for revolutionary action without large centralized planning. Revolutionary syndicalism developed from the labor discourses of previous revolutions, but it was also the product of the perceived “failure” of those movements to provide the political and constitutional reforms necessary to satisfy the economic and social needs of the people.

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4 Gerald C. Friedman, “Revolutionary Unions and French Labor: The Rebels behind the Cause; or, Why Did Revolutionary Syndicalism Fail?,” *French Historical Studies* 20, no. 2 (Spring 1997): 155-181. Friedman provides an empirical rebuttal to revisionist labor historians like Stearns, who believe that revolutionary syndicalism was a small and ineffective movement that only should be studied for its role in hampering the “real” labor movement in France, i.e. the unions that worked with big business and the government. For Friedman, radicalism and loose federalism were assets, not drawbacks, in gaining worker support and concessions from employers.

Anarchists were some of the first to see this dichotomy in French history, recognizing that the rhetoric of freedom and equality seldom materialized into concrete economic change for the lower classes. William Godwin, Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, and later, Mikhail Bakunin and Peter Kropotkin all saw the weaknesses of the revolutionary gains in the rise of bourgeois liberalism and the beginnings of industrialized capitalism. Anarchists took the revolutionary ideals of liberty, equality, and fraternity to mean individual freedom from the oppressive “government of man by man.” They believed that society had thrown off the shackles of their old masters only to create new forms of oppressive restraints by retaining a central authority. As early as 1793, Godwin asserted, “Government lays its hands upon the spring that is in society and puts a stop to its motion.”

Kropotkin would echo these sentiments and recommend replacing government with “mutuality” or “common association” as the basic structure of society, thus connecting the individual to the collective without coercion. The individual could retain autonomy while participating in a society of free and voluntary association. Many of the syndicalist unions used these ideas when forming their loose federalist structures.

For anarchists, the new central authority was not the only problematic product of the revolution. Society needed to be bound by common economic interests arranged by mutual agreement and free contact. This meant that all productive forces needed to be based on cooperative labor in which the individual is no longer subject to wage slavery and exploitation by others. Godwin proposed that economic equality could be accomplished through social ownership of land and the instruments of labor. In *What is Property?*, Proudhon asserted that “Property is theft,” and thus identified capitalism and private ownership as enemies of society. This slogan became one of the century’s most used phrases for both anarchists and socialists. The Enlightenment ideal of the individual’s inalienable right to property seemed to favor the rich who could buy and sell their land as they pleased without regard for the needs of the poor. Rejecting the “Darwinistic jungle” for mutuality and harmony, many anarchists, like Jean Grave, viewed the idealization of private property as a coercive element in society. The competitive nature of modern capitalism placed wealthy individuals in the position of

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11 Varias, 51.
Andrew Miller

exploiters. For anarchists and socialists, the ideals of the revolution meant nothing without economic equality.

Throughout the nineteenth century, this trend towards inequality became more apparent as industrialization and the number of wage laborers steadily increased in France. Many anarchists believed that the mechanization of modern life took away the ethical and human character of work, and many intellectuals looked back to the medieval guild system to try to find an alternative to capitalism. They saw “authentic” community life in premodern industries, and the quality craftsmanship of the artisan seemed more desirable than the mass-produced products that came out of large factories. In the twentieth century, Max Weber observed that the rationalization of Western culture, the drive for efficient control of outer and inner life, provides a theoretical framework that helps to explain antimodern longings for liberation. Yet the anarchists were not completely against modern industrialization and innovation. Kropotkin saw potential in technology “to help create an equitable society in which urban and rural forces would balance.” Unlike thinkers such as William Morris, he thought mechanization would eventually liberate man from tedious and degrading work. For him, the key issue was scale. Modern industry was not an end in itself, but was instead a tool to insure man’s material subsistence and future needs. When factories are too large, industry becomes difficult to change by adjusting to new requirements and skill sets. Instead, people are forced to adapt to the industrial mechanisms already in place, and thus are trapped in a new form of despotism.

Anarchism’s ambivalent nature manifested itself in many different ways and would eventually shape the revolutionary syndicalist movement. One aspect of this ambivalence was anarchism’s relationship to socialism. Until his break with Bakunin in 1872, Marx often described anarchists as rivals rather than enemies because the ultimate goals of the two movements were very similar. Both anarchists and socialists wanted a free communal society in which capitalism and the state ceased to exist. In addition, they both hated the militarism and patriotism that was pervasively growing in Europe. However, anarchists and socialists could not agree on the means by which to achieve these ends. As mentioned above, anarchists distrusted centralized organization and rationalized bureaucracy, large-scale industry, and politics. Bakunin thought that Marx’s transitional phase from capitalism to communism sounded more like authoritarianism, and he and others did not trust Marx’s determinism. For anarchists, dialectical materialism was too

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13 Varias, 15.
Rebels With a Cause

theoretical and abstract. Less than a century later, the Western Marxist Theodor Adorno shared these misgivings when he asserted that Marx’s historical certainties sought to make the world into a “giant workhouse.” Anarchists believed that social transformation had to be consistent with the moral world they sought to create.

Revolutionary syndicalism germinated from the social aspirations shaped in the debates of the First International in the 1860s and early 1870s. The libertarian ideas held by Bakunin’s wing of the great workers' alliance developed into a direct critique of the theories and methods of political socialism. They stressed that society could be changed through direct action and the voluntary association of free individuals. Anarchists believed that the state could be overthrown by a series of violent upheavals regardless of whether the economic conditions were right or not.

However, the aspirations of the anarchist and syndicalists would be delayed for a time. After the suppression of the Paris Commune in 1871, the newly formed Third Republic began to enact laws suppressing unions and professional associations from forming. The Loi Le Chapelier of 1871 promoted free enterprise capitalism and prohibited coalitions, unions, and strikes. The bourgeois liberalism that anarchists and socialists saw as contradictory and oppressive was stronger now than it had ever been. The radical groups emerging from the First International and the brief local authority in Paris in 1871 now had to wait until the political climate became more favorable for pushing social and labor agendas. Conditions did not get better for organized protest and radical politics until the law was repealed in 1884. The political circumstances in France began to change gradually through the 1880s, and French unions slowly started to emerge and assert their presence.

While talk of “association” and “collective” action was pervasive among anarchists in these years, by the Third Republic there was no real identifiable anarchist movement to bring these ideas about. Anarchism consisted of a diverse array of individuals and ideas with no certain doctrine or class identification. Radical individualism and nonconformity to social norms often left anarchists on the fringes of society. At the beginning of the 1890s, café bombings, violent murders, rampant theft, and secret plots were becoming more frequent in France, especially in Paris. Those who took responsibility for such acts often described themselves as anarchists. These individuals frequently claimed that they were “the true defenders of the oppressed.” Whether Nietzscheans, anarchists, nihilists, or

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something completely different, individuals were acting out their discontent with
the police and bourgeois society in general in France. Radicals, attempting to
portray themselves as revolutionaries, frequently preached of high ideals and
principles as they stood trial for their crimes. Yet most criminals seemed more
interested in their petty personal problems than those of society. Many anarchists
like Kropotkin, Jean Grave, and Élisée Reclus were concerned about the
ineffectiveness and pointlessness of random, individual acts of violence and terror.
Kropotkin expressed this sentiment in the journal *La Rèvolver*, stating that “if the
development of the revolutionary spirit gains enormously from heroic individual
acts, it is none the less true . . . that it is not by these heroic acts that revolutions are
made . . . Revolution is above all a popular movement.” Many anarchists found
that overthrowing capitalism and the government had to stem from some form of
organization, and they found an ideal solution in revolutionary syndicalism. The
syndicate structure appealed to anarchists because it took the form of a federalist
network of individual factories and industries that emphasized decentralization and
independence.

While the syndicalists’ main aim was to bring together workers in order to take
over the system, their other goal was to actively seek improvements in working
conditions and benefits. This philosophy took its cues from the anarchist leadership
that criticized the socialist unions for mainly organizing their workers to increase
parliamentary power through voting practices and party participation. Socialists
Jules Guesde (leader of the *Parti ouvrier Francais*) and Alexandre Millerand
(coalition government member in 1899) promoted established political avenues of
change without the help of worker agitation. Marxists had traditionally disregarded
the gains achieved through strikes and economic action, believing that the small
benefits achieved were either ineffective, or worse, might cause workers to become
content with the capitalist system. Revolutionary syndicalists, on the other hand,
wanted to avoid political association and focused instead on changing the
economic social conditions of workers through an immediate insurgency.
Revolutionary praxis for the syndicalists was activity on the picket lines, not in the
voting booths. Real change could not come from working within the system as it
existed; revolutionary syndicalists wanted to find their own way. As Victor
Griffuelhes once exclaimed, “We [workers] demand nothing. We take.”

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18 Ibid., 117.
19 *La Revolve*, March 1891, quoted in Jean Maitron, *Histoire du mouvement anarchiste en
For the syndicates, the general strike became the best method of radical action. As early as 1874, Adhémar Schwitzguébel, a Swiss Jura anarchist, advocated the general strike as the most effective way to take control of the means of production:

The idea of a general strike by the workers which would put an end to the miseries they suffer is beginning to be seriously discussed. ... It would certainly be a revolutionary act capable of bringing about the liquidation of the existing social order and reorganization in accordance with the socialist aspirations of the workers.\(^{21}\)

The weapons of the state (large armies, police, etc.) could easily crush a large insurrection or centralized movement, but a massive strike made up of loosely affiliated workers would make it difficult for authorities and employers to isolate a precise target for suppression. The general strike could paralyze the economy and force employers to yield control because of the overwhelming numbers of workers picketing and using violence when necessary.

In France in the 1890s, the general strike was not only valuable as a method of achieving specific goals, but also served as a learning experience for its participants. Revolutionary syndicalists promoted strikes for higher wages and better working conditions, visualizing them as vital arenas for teaching the benefits of solidarity and collective action. These strikes were new “participatory” schools for developing an all-worker based political economy for social revolution. The French syndicalist organization Confédération générale du travail (CGT) allied itself with the Fédération des Bourses du Travail (FBT), an association that consisted of centers of learning and debate for working-class issues, solidifying the idea of education and discourse as a means to bring about a worker consciousness in France. Many socialist critics asserted that craft egoism would eventually lead to jealous hostility between workers in different fields of production, and thus would prevent working-class solidarity in strikes. The revolutionary syndicalists, on the other hand, “believed attitudes are variable products of experience and subject to change by socializing experience.”\(^{22}\) The syndicalists wanted workers to learn how to act in the present as they would in the future when the revolutionary goals had been attained.

At the turn of the century, republican intellectuals, like Léon Bourgeois, formulated new social theories based on solidarité that emphasized the organic interdependence of organized groups such as syndicates. Bourgeois and others promoted solidarité as social welfare through government action. Sociologist

\(^{21}\) Bulletin de la Fédération Jurassienne, November 1, 1774, quoted in Maitron, 261.

\(^{22}\) Friedman, 159.
Emile Durkheim developed a similar premise but rejected the state-centered, paternalistic control of Bourgeois’ doctrine for a more decentralized, republican federalism. These ideas influenced syndicalist educational aspirations, but their own artisanal, anarchistic, and socialistic pedigrees changed their role in the discourse from citizen to producer. Liberal and republican “barbarism” needed to be replaced with a noble working-class élan to invigorate labor activity over bourgeois decadence.\textsuperscript{23} Syndicalists believed that this élan, energized through the general strike, could transform the subordinate economic status of workers into a more potent and pragmatic program without the need for Marxist determinism or centrisim.

The influential anarchist Jean Grave shared the syndicalists’ fear of the centralized planning of the socialists, but he also was skeptical of syndicalist federalism for the same reason. In La Révolte, Grave stated that “We do not believe…in long term associations, federations…for us, a grouping…must only be established on a well-determined point for immediate action; the actions accomplished, the group re-forms itself on a new basis, either among the same elements or with new ones.”\textsuperscript{24} Grave, Emile Janvion, Jacque Prolo, and others advocated a “purer,” more individualistic form of anarchist revolution, suspecting that radical individuals might be restrained or co-opted by syndicalist organization. They also believed that the syndicalists were trying to ally themselves too much with the new industrial working classes. The anarchists still believed that revolution had to come from the artisan and craft workers of France.

At the end of the 1890s, syndicalists did try to gain influence over industrial workers, but these actions did not change their own views. The CGT and other revolutionary syndicalist unions did not discriminate between the types of work laborers performed. Unlike the socialist and business unions, they accepted all classes and genders into their movement because they believed in strength in numbers over any specific ideology. In any case, the makeup of French labor remained largely agrarian and small-producer-oriented at this time despite industrial growth. Industrial labor made up just a fraction of the movement, and the syndicalists believed that these workers could be persuaded to fight for the type of society they envisioned for the future. Also, the large “modern industries” in France (such as chemicals, steel, and textiles) continued to employ high numbers of specialized workers attracted to the ideology of revolutionary syndicalism.

The syndicates and their general strikes adopted the anarchist aversion to organization in that they were structured for “guerilla war” and did not carry the

\textsuperscript{23} Tucker, 17-21.
\textsuperscript{24} Jean Graves quoted in Richard Sonn, Anarchism and Cultural Politics in Fin-de-Siècle France (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1989), 14.
bureaucratic baggage of the socialist and business unions. Most of the strikes performed by the syndicalists were not the result of long-range planning or careful organization, but were instead direct acts that could emerge at any time. No central authority strategized or dictated when a specific union could go on strike. The general strikes usually contained some coordination, but no group in the federation was obligated to follow. Also, few benefits and funds went to pay officials or into union bank accounts; the syndicalist leadership usually had other means for personal income. Many contemporaries charged the syndicalists with being reckless and irresponsible in conducting strikes without adequate planning and funds. Samuel Gompers, an American, observed, “the General Confederation of Labor in France is the furthest possible removed from the American Federation of Labor in both organization and methods...outside the domain of serious expectations in regard to constructive work.”

Syndicalist workers in France at the end of the nineteenth century did not believe they needed strict organization to be effective on the picket lines. During the mid-1890s, only half of French strikes were organized by unions. It was not until the heyday of revolutionary syndicalism that workers increasingly began to use unions to lead their protests, reaching a high point in 1904 with seventy-four percent of strikes. The leadership and supporters of the syndicalist movement agreed with the workers. The journalist Emile Pouget credited the growing strike success rates in 1900 to the rising membership of the CGT, “the spread of the revolutionary ideal among the French workers, and not to the power of their union reserves.”

The small amount of money gained through dues went into maximizing the effectiveness of the general strike by recruiting. This strategy went hand-in-hand with the “inclusive” policies mentioned above. The syndicates were flexible and dynamic enough to avoid the organizational problems that plagued other unions. They benefited from their opposition to strict organizational structures and planning, and always maintained that workers and officials were free to leave or come back, which made the movement all the more appealing.

In the realm of culture, anarchist and libertarian critics also worried that bohemian individualism might be replaced by ideas of solidarité. Anarchists remained committed to avant-garde artists and bohemian individualists. They saw syndicalism moving towards a worker-specific movement that increasingly devalued the intellectuals and artists that had been such key contributors to the birth of syndicalist ideology. In fact, syndicalist leaders did seek artists to be a part

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27. Emile Pouget quoted in Friedman, 174.
of their activism. In 1896, Fernand Pelloutier made an appeal to the anarchist Group de l’Art Social that art could be more than just aesthetics or utility; it could be a vital weapon in creating a new consciousness by opening the eyes of workers to the bourgeois ideology that restrained them. He believed that the concepts of gradualist and automatic art social could be shaped into a more militant activism. Artists could expose the degradations in workers’ lives through socially driven art. In the CGT’s newspaper La Voix du peuple, Pelloutier emphasized that “With a return to propaganda by art, I estimate that the intellectual transformation of the proletariat will march in step with its economic transformation…A purely revolutionary view of art, in all its forms, will see it in the first place as a weapon of combat.”

The artist Paul Signac thought that neo-impressionists and gradualists should harness the spontaneity and naturalness of their art into some sort of organizational framework, but his libertarian ideas of a political and aesthetic “rebel art” never reached the specificity Pelloutier had in mind.

Pelloutier, Pouget, and others stressed that for revolutionary syndicalism to succeed it must strive for the total transformation of society. Culture, economics, and politics all had to change while at the same time avoiding the mistakes of the old society. They idealized the mystique of artisanship and craftsmanship, but realized that these trades had to be configured in new ways to fit the present situation. Revolutionary syndicalists wanted to increase the power and influence of their members while maintaining the core values of the movement. Like the anarchists, syndicalists wanted their direct actions to be consistent with what they viewed as moral goals. Often their efforts involved violence and illegality, yet for anarchists and syndicalists, these methods were justified by the inherently noble nature of their goals. Morally corrupt acts were the deeds done by state and capitalist agents in order to oppress society. The revolutionary syndicalists believed they were performing moral acts to liberate society and bring about a better world.

In the end, revolutionary syndicalism failed to overturn capitalism and the French government. Despite low revenues and relatively small numbers, syndicalism continued to be effective until the First World War. However, the change in direction and leadership of the CGT in 1910 marked a steady deradicalization in policy for the organization. The new leadership of Léon Jouhaux led to the CGT’s alliance with reformist socialists. Under his leadership, industrial unions began to play a more important role than the artisan unions who became

29 Frenand Pelloutier quoted in Hutton, 217.
30 Sonn, 151.
almost completely marginalized. Other syndicalists were influenced by Georges Sorel and moved to the nationalist right. Nationalism throughout Europe became an appealing trend that changed syndicalism immensely. The syndicates became increasingly more politically organized and bureaucratically centralized. Union leaders started demanding syndicalist rights while insisting on the nationalization of the railway, electrical, and mining industries. The moral and ideological philosophy of revolution changed into a more practical attitude of improving the existing system through the rationalization of the economy. At least until 1910, workers were becoming poorer as industrial profits continued to soar to new heights. Utopian ideals of creating a new society disappeared as progressive groups started to bargain and assimilate into the corporate industrial society made up of large, scientifically managed, industrial firms. Consumerism and reformist welfare helped to ease workers – communist, syndicalist, and capitalist – into the new labor process.

The shared moral and participatory unity of workers in a society of free association envisioned by the revolutionary syndicalists in France never materialized, but the problems raised by syndicalists have not necessarily vanished from modern society. The legacy of the anarchist form of revolutionary syndicalism has provided an adaptable and potent critique of modern capitalism throughout the twentieth century and into the present. It has inspired revolutionaries in Spain in the 1930s, American cultural critics like C. Wright Mills and Paul Goodman in the 1950s and 1960s, and the New Orthodoxy labor history of the 1980s, which continues to find radical promise in artisanal culture and small-scale production. Pelloutier’s description of anarchism as “the art of cultivating oneself and of sufficiently cultivating others so that [people] can govern and enjoy themselves,” is an idea that still resonates. For the historian, the flexibility of French revolutionary syndicalism between ideas of the individual and community, the state and anarchy, and morality and efficiency, complicate and enrich our view of the Belle Époque. For many French men and women during this period, the ideas of decadence and prosperity meant less than ideas of economic equality and cultural authenticity.

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31 Stearns, 18.
32 Pelloutier quoted in Tucker, 217.