

Syndicalism - Victor Griffuelhes



In this essay published in 1908, Victor Griffuelhes discusses the basic principles of revolutionary syndicalism; advocates the tactic of struggle as opposed to conciliation; summarizes the results of the strike wave of the turn of the century in Germany, France and England; reaffirms the primacy of the old slogan of the International—*The emancipation of the workers must be the task of the workers themselves*—and concludes with a brief review of a contemporary French labor conflict which underscores the importance of *Direct Action*.

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I. The Social Question

The life of the modern worker in capitalist society is hard and painful. In order to live he is compelled to engage in the most arduous labors, without thereby obtaining the least satisfaction. He is the creator of social wealth, yet is barred from its enjoyment. To the contrary, it is the men who do not create wealth who benefit from it.

In other words, this situation can be defined in the following way: on the one side, the producer in a position of being unable to consume; on the other side, the non-producer, in a position of consuming well. The non-producer can therefore consume without restraint, only because the producer cannot do so; the privilege of one is based on the poverty of the other. Or, in even plainer words: the non-producer—that is, the employer, the capitalist—can only prolong the existence of his privileges if he maintains the producer, that is, the worker, in slavery.

II. The Two Methods: Struggle or Conciliation?

The worker, naturally, wants to improve his situation. But, in order to successfully do so, he needs to associate with others for the purpose of securing the necessary concessions from his employer. And since the latter will not willingly make such concessions, the worker is obliged to fight for them. This fight on the part of the worker must be directed against the employer; it must, by increasing the power of the workers, be oriented towards reducing the privileges of the employer. Two enemies come face to face, who fight until the moment when repeated clashes have caused the reason for the struggle—the exploitation and enslavement of the workers—to disappear.

For us, revolutionary syndicalists, the struggle is not based on feelings, but on interests and needs. Such is the conception that guides us in our movement. We distinguish ourselves from

those who, like the reformist trade unionists, want to merge the efforts of the workers and the efforts of the employers in order to guarantee shared benefits, which can only be obtained at the expense of the consumer and, therefore, at the expense of the worker, who is also a consumer. In the current social environment, the worker produces because he needs to consume; that is, in order to satiate his hunger and satisfy his basic needs, the worker has to produce.

We revolutionary syndicalists frame the labor question in the following way: we fight against the employing class in order to obtain from the latter, to its detriment, a constant succession of improvements, as we proceed along the road towards the suppression of exploitation. For the reformist trade unionists, our opponents, the labor question is posed in the following terms: association for the purpose of establishing an alliance with the employing class, an alliance whose goal is to demonstrate the need for the granting of a few concessions, without eroding the privileges of the employers in the least. This latter procedure falls far short of the goal we have set for our movement!

We have seen where the efforts of these comrades lead. The Yellow newspaper teaches us about this.

In a review of a recently published book, entitled *The Worker*, with a prologue written by a prudent cabinet minister, the Yellow newspaper quotes some very suggestive passages with which, naturally, it passionately agrees. This is what this book says, a book recommended by the Minister of Commerce:

“A worker’s career is not limited by the four walls of the workshop where he works. He demands that there should be an exchange of services; he requires good treatment, to be looked after, and self-sacrifice on the part of his employer and his comrades. From him, courage, probity and good will are called for in exchange.”

A little further on we read:

“Take pleasure where it is really to be found, that is, in the sweet philosophy that knows how to judge its present happiness, hoping, if it may be possible, to improve it.”

And further:

“This little book is a friend who wants to see all men busy in manual labor and the country ringing with the sound of axes, hammers, files, and plows, laboring in peace and prosperity for family, city, fatherland and humanity.”

It will be conceded that commentary on these passages would be otiose. These extracts speak for themselves. Now we can understand why the employers feel so secure; why a few of them concede minor reforms and why there is not too much risk in hiring unionized workers! The book we just quoted was written for the purpose of making trade unions more attractive to the youth. The Yellow newspaper is fully aware of the fact that such lessons are completely inoffensive to the interests of the employers, and concludes with a fair assessment:

“The author successfully combined in this small volume the lessons and advice that make his book the catechism of the worker.”

Let us also listen to the last words of a speech by the man who introduced corruption into the working class milieu. In Arras, speaking before the Congress of Public Health, Millerand, the former Minister of Commerce, concluded with the following words:

“At a time when we are besieged by so many reasons for discord, would it not be a noble and meritorious task to attempt to base the peace of France on the improvement of the conditions of human life by means of the merging of hearts and consciences?”

But there is more: The *Bulletin de l'Office du travail* of December 1903, summarizing the labors of the *Superior Council of Labor*, contains a proposal made by Fontaine and Keufer regarding the practice of giving notice before termination of employment, which was adopted unanimously:

“Whereas it has been ascertained, both by the inquiry carried out by the Minister of Commerce as well as from individual observation, that the practice of giving notice prior to dismissal is a general and traditional custom with respect to the termination of a contract affecting service provision or labor of indeterminate duration, it is proclaimed: that this custom is based on the reciprocal interests of the contracting parties, the collective interest of professional groups and the general interests of industry and trade, and that it responds to a need for public order and social peace.”

We have before us the documentation that is supplied to us by a teacher, a *socialist* Cabinet Minister and an Assembly that includes representatives of workers organizations. These various texts are directed towards the same goal: to reconcile and unite contrary elements. The denial of the *rights of labor* is their logical result.

In opposition to this *labor in common* and this alliance, we opt for the struggle, which is perhaps somewhat less *profitable*, and which certainly offers fewer palpable advantages. In opposition to the permanent and regular contact between labor and employers, we opt for autonomous association. In a word, we recognize that the organization bears a character that is imposed not by our efforts, but by the conditions that the capitalist regime imposes on the workers.

These conditions, dictated by the employing class, have the support of Power, which is that class's representative. It is in those conditions where you shall find the facts that prove that the State favors the exploiters. And since the facts are indisputable and universally known, all we need to do is to assert the independent character that we seek to confer upon workers activities. Once separated from the employing class and set in opposition to it, outside and against the government, the trade union movement must act and develop without constraints.

III. The Autonomous Organization of the Working Class

The growing strength of the movement will necessarily have the effect of provoking pacts and maneuvers for the purpose of attenuating the impact of our revolutionary action.

The current strike wave, in which conflicts are becoming more numerous and are multiplying in contradiction of all the expectations of the employers and the government, has led to a pile of proposals which, under a liberal disguise, are useless and dangerous. To reduce the number of conflicts and to domesticate them, the implementation of complicated and tedious procedures is proposed. In these schemes, periodic strikes, following a slow and steady mechanical pace, will first lose their severity, in order to disappear later. These plans reflect the hope of extracting from a social organism full of irregularities, incoherence and clashes, certain manifestations that unfold in accordance within a narrowly defined framework. Their advocates have the illusion that they can mold the facts that are contrary to the interests of the workers, by making them pass through formal procedures, so that they will become endurable for the worker, and work in favor of *social peace*.

Those who reason in this way just show how ignorant they are regarding the labor question. The life of the worker, which reflects the life of the workshop, is too complex and diverse to be susceptible to arbitrary regimentation. The sufferings, as well as the punishments, of the worker cannot be measured in order to make them less onerous under a pile of red tape, modeled on parliamentary forms.

The bourgeoisie imposes its will and its whims by force and it is by force that its exploitation is maintained. The social world rests exclusively on force, it lives on force and bears force within itself. It therefore needs to create force and compel those it enslaves to use that force. The authority of the employers is based on violence, and only force can overcome it. Not because force is something nice, but because it is imposed by the conditions that prevail in the labor struggle.

In support of this view, we shall quote the opinion of a member of the Institute. To justify the Yellow movement he writes:

“We only need to point out that, in view of the increasing number and more violent character of strikes, the vast majority of sane people regard with satisfaction the formation of the elements of a moderate workers party. At the same time, the entire world recognizes that the social question, which has been somewhat violently put on the table, is in the public limelight, and that, for now, it is more pressing than all the others. And it is no longer possible either to ignore it or to avoid it, as has been done for so long.”

Jaurés wrote, with respect to the incidents at Cluses, after having attempted to prove the need for regulation to create the *mechanical life*:

“It would be advisable to institute by means of legislation, a system of guarantees, without which the class struggle, instead of being resolved in socialist harmony via a series of agreements, will become so desperate that it will result in the frenzy of employer criminality, as at Cluses, or bloody reprisals on the part of the workers.”

The article containing these lines, if we strip it of its simplistic phraseology and the dreams it displays, asserts the need for force. The regulation proposed would undoubtedly tend to prevent, according to the author, its use; but since everyone is opposed to this regulation, our original claim stands.

But this force that we concentrate in the organization of struggle, must be manifested under the control of the interested parties. It is the duty of the workers to manage their own activities, since it is the goal of these activities to defend and secure their own interests. With regard to this point as well, we differ with our opponents. We say that since the organization is provoked by the miserable situation of the worker and must not include anyone but wage workers, it must be managed solely by the workers for specifically working class ends. All considerations that are foreign to these ends must remain foreign to us; in short, the labor question must prevail over all others. For this purpose, the militants will never subordinate workers action to the social forces which agitate in and around its milieu. And this result can only be obtained if the working class constitutes an organization that originates only in the concerns of the labor question and whose exclusive mission consists in fighting for their interests. This organism, in our view, must not be subjected to any foreign influence, either that of the employers or that of State Power; it must encompass the institutions and services that respond to all the worker's needs; it must be self-sufficient, in order to dispense with any need for anything but the elements of which it is composed, with regard to its force for action and to impose its will.

We are not the only people who subscribe to this idea. Others share it as well. Lagardelle wrote in 1902, in *Pages libres*:

“State socialism tends, instead, to extend the domination of the existing administrative institutions, and to expand the field of activity of the mechanism of present society, rather than to replace the latter with new institutions of a purely working class composition.”

From this point of view, ministerialism distorts the spirit of the masses. It displaces the center of gravity from the action of the masses; it deprives the proletariat of all self-confidence, it

leads it to expect everything from the providential action of the State, and causes it to devote its attention exclusively to the re-election or electoral defeat of government personnel. Just as revolutionary socialism is a doctrine of combat and energy that relies on nothing but the conscious efforts of the proletariat itself, State socialism is a principle of abdication and weakness, which fosters trust in obtaining from the external intervention of power what personal action cannot achieve. The former must develop in countries with advanced industrial life; the latter is the product of nations in economic decline, and of peoples who are anemic and superannuated.

The motto of all socialists concerned with keeping the revolutionary virtue of the autonomous institutions of the proletariat inviolate, remains the old maxim of the International: *The emancipation of the workers must be the task of the workers themselves.*

Louche, an engineer, writes in the *La Voix du Peuple*, regarding the attitude of the government to the proposal for a law mandating workers pensions:

“The trade unions repel all dissolving elements and will continue to follow their road forward, without political or governmental concerns of any kind.”

It is this need for autonomy and independence that causes us to reject all the institutions that the governments have created, because they have a suspect goal. These institutions divert our action by putting it under the tutelage of Power. With them, the workers organization would become a State institution, while we want to create in opposition to the bourgeois State an organization whose purpose is to fight against the State and the forces that it represents.

IV. Strikes

For many years, in working class milieus, strikes have been viewed as harmful. We do not share that view. For us, strikes are necessary. First, because they train the workers and prepare them for struggle, because they accustom the working class to action and the defense of its interests. Furthermore, strikes get results, of a relative kind, no doubt, but which are nonetheless no less real.

Discussing the strikes in Germany, *L'Humanité* recently related that in the year 1903 the German trade unions spent 5,600,000 francs on strike support; but this newspaper omitted the really important point by not telling us what kind of results were obtained in that country by these strikes. The scale of strike support distributed can by no means dissimulate the paucity of results. The purpose of the strike is not to distribute strike support, but to obtain improvements for the workers.

In France, far lesser amounts of strike support payments were distributed, but the results were nonetheless superior to those obtained in Germany. The proof of this is provided by *Le Temps*, a newspaper that can hardly be suspected of sympathizing with us.

The English workers were victorious in about 31% of their strikes, and 21% ended in a mutually agreed settlement; the German workers were successful in 22% of their strikes, and 32% ended in agreements to go back to work on new terms; the Austrian workers were successful in 19% of their strikes and 30% resulted in settlements; the Belgians were victorious in 8 out of 76 strikes; we are successful, on average, in 25% of our strikes and reach settlements in 30%.

Thus, France is behind England and ahead of Germany. There is no point in focusing on how many millions of francs are distributed!

The statistical breakdown of strikes provided by the French Office of Labor, lists, between 1890 and 1901, a total of 5,625 strikes, classified as follows:

1,330 victorious strikes;

1,867 strikes that ended in a mutually agreed settlement;
2,428 defeats.

Of these 5,625 strikes, fewer than half of them were complete failures: 2,428 strikes ended in results unfavorable to the workers, as against 3,197 strikes that ended favorably for the workers—because every mutually agreed settlement indisputably results in some benefits for the workers.

If we consider the gains and losses in terms of wages, we find—according to Fontaine—with regard to strikes and arbitration proceedings, taking 1895 as an average year for strikes, and based on a calculation of the gains and losses in wages as a result of strike activity that assumes 300 days of labor per year, the following figures:

In case of victorious strikes: Loss of wages (in France)—120,000 francs. Gain in wages (in France)—700,000 francs.

In case of arbitrated settlement: Loss of wages (in France)—600,000 francs. Gain in wages (in France)—1,300,000 francs.

In the case of strikes that were complete failures: Loss of wages (in France)—600,000 francs. Which gives us a total of 1,320,000 francs in lost wages, and 2,000,000 francs in gains.

Here are some figures that prove that in France the struggle gets results, despite the poverty of the trade union strike funds. They also prove that it takes more than money to achieve victory! What is required for victory is precisely the fighting spirit that is developing in our country and which is almost totally lacking in other countries.

We say that money is not everything, because these numbers prove it and also because we know of strikes that were defeated despite the fact that each worker received between three and four francs per day in strike funds.

As can be seen, despite the deficiencies that accompany our condition, we know how to fight. More proof regarding this issue is provided by the growth of the trade union movement, nourished by conflict and propaganda; this is why we think that strikes are necessary.

This necessity compels us, furthermore, to engage in anti-militarist propaganda, which we conduct not only because we are deniers of the fatherland, but also because it is the soldier's duty to defend the employer against the worker. By converting the youth to anti-militarism, we are winning the sympathy of those who shall wield the bayonets of tomorrow.

The growth in trade union membership referred to above is also demonstrated by the fact that new trades are entering the fray. Bakers, restaurant workers, all the workers in the food industry, and even peasants, who have been refractory to organization until now, are in motion and have been capable of mobilizing to prevail upon public opinion and their employers. This is yet another sign of the development of the workers struggle.

Such progressive development of the struggle calls for our intervention to accelerate its pace, and we can do so by opposing all reforms that do not have the result of increasing the power of the workers action. We fight any reform that tends to diminish the spirit of struggle.

And by seeking to provide a yardstick for choosing between the reforms that can be offered to the workers, we do not by any means demonstrate that we are supporters of the *all or nothing* strategy, as some have claimed. There are certain modifications of the existing state of affairs that we reject only because, given their utter insufficiency, they amount to no more than *sucker-bait*, and a complete farce. In this regard, we are less rigid than those who seek to tar us with the brush of *all or nothing*. The tobacco workers, for example, who are demanding a pension of 720 francs per year for men and 530 for women up to the age of fifty accuse us

of being advocates of *all or nothing* because we will not accept a promise of a pension of 360 francs per year, after thirty years of work. The municipal workers of the City of Paris are demanding a pension equal to half their yearly wage (which varies from 900 to 1,200 francs or more), after a minimum of twenty-five years of service, including military and administrative service.

If these comrades, who call themselves our contradictors, are acting logically when they ask for the pension terms referred to above, then why are we such supporters of an *all or nothing* tactic? Why are we not satisfied with the promised pension of 360 francs?

We also know of a trade union militant who says that the eight hour day is legitimate for civil service workers, but that the industrial workers should be content with a ten hour day!

One could conclude that it is particularly strange to be called supporters of the *all or nothing* tactic by the comrades who formulated the preceding points, and that their accusation, launched with such furor and raining down on our heads like an anathema, loses much of its effect and is turned, if such a critique has any justification at all, against its own authors.

V. Direct Action

Direct action is a term that arouses much dispute. These disputes have generally defined it in a fallacious manner and have turned it into a kind of boogeyman. Direct action has undergone, in the mouths of our contradictors, an exaggerated distortion, which should be put to right. For it would be advisable to define this term as it was employed by the first people to use it.

Direct action means the action of the workers themselves, that is, action that is directly exercised by the interested parties. It describes a situation where it is the worker himself who directs his efforts and personally exercises them against the Powers that rule over him, in order to obtain from the latter the benefits he demands. By means of direct action, the worker creates and leads his struggle, resolved not to grant to another person the responsibility for his own emancipation.

But since theoretical definitions are not enough to show what we mean by *direct action*, we shall refer to the example provided by the movement to free captain Dreyfus in France. If everyone were to have waited the legal system to free him, then we can state unequivocally that nothing would have ever happened. Public opinion was won over and its sympathies firmly attached to the cause of the prisoner, thanks to public campaigns, journalism, meetings, rallies, and demonstrations that occasionally resulted in casualties. It was the insurgent multitude that put pressure on the authorities, and the complicated judicial machinery, once set in motion, released the captain. The whole world was so fascinated by this movement that it is unnecessary for us to say any more about it.

Also as a result of a campaign that was somewhat less intense, but of an identical nature, the authorities attacked the property rights of the employment agents, allowing for the suppression of the privileges they had enjoyed.

The position taken by the Senate against the extension of the jurisdiction of the arbitration committees to all categories of wage workers also demonstrates the value of direct action. We shall summarize this event, one that is too seldom cited.

In July of 1903, the organizations of the office workers distributed throughout Paris an appeal to the members of their trade unions, which said:

“Have faith!”

“The office workers are asking for judges! The Assembly has been inspired by their desires; it has adopted, almost unanimously, a proposed law that concedes to the office workers jurisdiction under arbitration.”

“This proposed law is currently being submitted to the Senate. The Minister of Commerce has supported it in a published speech....”

“It is inconceivable that such words should not win the approval of the republican Senate.”

“Have faith!”

“Refuse to take part in disorderly demonstrations, which would only work to the advantage of the parties of reaction and harm our cause. With our prudence, we must appeal to the prudence of the Senate.”

In response to such prudent and such ... republican words, the Senate acted democratically ... and in a republican manner. At the end of October, it denied these wage workers the right to participate in the arbitration committees. And this refusal was proclaimed at the very moment that the Assembly was voting in favor of suppressing the employment agencies. We must repeat, however, that this suppression was an attack, although a blunt one, against property, and the question of arbitration committees involved nothing but an extension of a previously established jurisdiction.

Three months later, the Senate reiterated its refusal, and on this occasion by a much greater majority than on the first occasion. In response to such stubbornness, the office workers issued the following manifesto:

“By denying the office workers of commerce and industry the jurisdiction of the arbitration committees, the Senate has forfeited the confidence that the proletariat of the offices and warehouses had expressed in its republican spirit. Protest against its reactionary vote is imposed on us as a duty.”

“But such protest, which all of your trade organizations must participate in, would be vain, if it is not followed by energetic action.”

“You must invite all our working class comrades to participate in this action with a display of solidarity. It was not just our rights that were disregarded; it was also those rights that are threatened by the attacks led by the reactionaries of Luxemburg whose target is the very institution of arbitration.”

“They dared to invoke the principles of the Revolution against us and against all the workers. What audacity and impudence! Do they really believe that you have forgotten the history of the struggles fought in defense of our rights? And who else but the men of 1789 and 1793 proclaimed most energetically the right of the citizens to be judged by their peers, the principle of the election of magistrates?”

“The National Federation of Office Workers invites you to participate in any energetic campaign of protest and action. Victory is possible: it depends on your determination and your tenacity. Violence would be dangerous to our cause, but passivity and silence would be fatal. By every means at your disposal and on all terrains of propaganda, display how you feel about this, assert your rights.”

“Office workers in commerce and industry:”

“By denying the jurisdiction of arbiters the Senate has committed against us an act of injustice. Your National Federation will not allow itself to be discouraged by any obstacle, or to be disarmed by any tricks. Reinforced by your help, it will not desist from its fight until you have been assured of justice by the complete victory of your demands.”

There is a difference between the two manifestos. The second declares that energetic action is indispensable and that is what is meant by *direct action*.

In conclusion, we present a commentary on a transcript of a speech by Sembat in the legislature about *direct action*, concerning which he provides a cursory summary; the commentary is by Pouget:

“Very well. That is *direct action*.... It is a manifestation of the will and the consciousness of the working class; it can assume benevolent and quite peaceful forms, as well as vigorous and violent outbursts.... This depends on the circumstances.”

“But, in both cases, it is revolutionary action, because it is not concerned with bourgeois legality and because of its orientation towards obtaining improvements that imply a diminution of bourgeois privileges.”

VI. Conclusions

Working class action is therefore in our view nothing but a continuous manifestation of our efforts. We say that the struggle must be an everyday struggle and that its exercise is the prerogative of the interested parties. We therefore have before our very eyes a daily practice, which is growing from one minute to the next, until the time when, having reached a higher degree of power, it becomes a conflagration that we call the general strike, and this will be the social revolution.

Victor Griffuelhes

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French original available online at:

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