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Workers' Unions and the Social Revolution

Marie isidine

1931

A review of the book 'Les syndicats ouvriers et la révolution sociale' written by Pierre Besnard, published in 1930.

This book, which, according to its author, is the result of a long preparatory work, answers the most pressing need of our time: to know which spirit must animate the great social change which everyone awaits, and which way must everyone follow in their action who wishes to avoid the next attempt of such change to be a failure or a disillusion. This is a serious personal contribution to setting up a programme of action for today's struggles, and for the constructive work of the "day after" the revolution.

Here is the general plan of this book.

First, the analysis of the current situation and the existing social forces, examining two opposite tendencies: class collaboration and class struggle; a detailed critique of the collaboration policy drives the author to reject it in all the forms and at any scale it may be practised. Then, the fighting methods employed by modern capitalism (collaboration with the opposite class being one of the most dangerous of those) leads to the idea that

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the working class must, also, modernise and “rationalise” its action.

Contrary to a certain tendency which wishes to make the theory and practice of revolutionary syndicalism as obsolete, in order to replace it with the dictatorship of the party (actually a much older tactic and obsolete in many more ways), Besnard shows the inability of political parties to become actor of social change and the fateful character of a dictatorship, even if it were not exerted by a party but by unions. “In order to be the proletariat’s, a dictatorship would have to be exerted through the channels of the class organisations of the proletariat: the unions... Revolutionary syndicalists reject however this kind of dictatorship. They do not see any more need for an economic dictatorship – which would also be political – than for an exclusively political dictatorship.” (page 104–105) Actually, the idea of the constitution of a new state, whatever it might be, is rejected for both current and historical reasons, in which we can strongly sense the influence from Kropotkin’s ideas. In his whole work, Besnard draws on Bakunin, Kropotkin, and J. Guillaume; his ideal is free communism, or anarchy, which is the “great human demand”; the mode of organisation which he considers possible after a successful revolution is some sort of very loose federalist system, intended to open the way to such an ideal. This system is however not presented as a minimum programme for a transition period, since the author thinks that “it is criminal and, to tell the truth, counter-revolutionary, arbitrarily to set the limit to reach, when this or that stage could easily be reached without obstacles.” (page 332)

What he calls a “transition period” is actually not characterised by this or that preset political and economic regime: it is “the period of time between the destruction of the old regime and the stabilisation of the new regime” (page 268).

It is a state which is no longer the capitalist regime and which is not yet libertarian communism; the evolution toward the latter must be allowed to happen, during this period, natu-

rally, without violent struggle. The “stabilisation” of the revolution happens when “the degree of understanding of individuals and the capacity of realisation of existing organisations do not allow to go any further” (page 273).

On this issue, about the way in which this stabilisation can happen, Comrade Besnard seems to be making a terrible mistake in our opinion, unless he did not express his view clearly enough. The stop in the ascending march of the revolution is a natural and unavoidable phenomenon; can it be the result of a decision made beforehand? Yes, if the revolution is seen as a succession of revolutionary measures taken by some dictatorial power which can, , at any given moment, stop or backtrack. No, if we see the revolution as the spontaneous action of all the people. Yet, Besnard supposes that we can stop “having observed unanimously or with a huge majority... that we cannot go beyond the limits reached without danger” (page 273). This is therefore a decision taken by some organisation for the whole society, which presupposes the existence of such an organisation, which has the right (and the power, as it can meet with some opposition) to pull the brake on the movement. Of the men who would endorse this responsibility, Besnard makes superhuman demands: they “will have to be deep psychologists. They will have to measure, as precisely as possible, the efforts to be made during the whole revolutionary process, during the length of the whole transition period. They will have to know its limits, reach it without crossing it” (page 335).

Are there such men with infallible judgement? And the common mortals who would inherit this task, wouldn't they risk to act instead according to their own particular doctrinal and practical beliefs, which they would then impose as a minimum programme to everyone else? The illusion which Besnard seems to have on this issue might be linked to an idea which he expressed several times throughout his book. Not to condemn the revolution to failure, the workers' movement, he says, must direct itself entirely and immediately following a

few great lines; if it does, society will be able to be organised in a loose enough fashion for majority decisions always to be enforced willingly, without violence or resistance, for imposed duties always to be fulfilled, etc. We can however emit some doubts about this issue, because during a revolution, ideas move fast and soon burst out of pre-established frames. And then, which means would the leading organisation have to be obeyed in a stateless society? This point remains unclear, and it is lacking in Besnard's exposé.

Two main ideas – both extremely far-reaching – dominate this book. First of all, a very wide definition of unions and syndicalism. Under the term union, the author really includes any free association created to defend collectively the material and moral interests of its members, from the most primitive human groupings to the different organisations of today. According to him, “federalist syndicalism is a movement of an essentially natural kind, such as packs of wild animals, forests of oak trees, or coal deposits” (page 113); it is the result of the social sentiment which characterises humans.

Current syndicalism is defined as “a movement which groups... the workers from the same town, from the same region, trade, industry, country, from all countries” (page 112). And by “workers”, Besnard does not only mean manual labourers, but also technicians, scientists, and peasants; he insists at length (and rightly so in our opinion) on the need for unity among all these elements, which he calls class synthesis (see the chapter with this title, from page 257 on).

“Any individual which receives wages or payment, any man who does not exploit anyone, belong, in fact, whatever their situation, to the working class” (page 260). Collaboration between manual and intellectual workers must start right now; during the revolution, it will be a *sine qua non* condition for the success of its constructive work.

The second leading idea, is the need to give the syndicalist movement such organisational forms as to make them able to

give, immediately after the revolution, the framework for the new society, in order to reduce to a minimum the unavoidable period of stoppage and prevent the stranglehold of any new form of power.

We are unable to explain here the proposed mode of organisation (which is the one adopted by the C.G.T.S.R. in its constitutive congress) based at the same time along industrial lines and according to locality; one of the most important tasks for these organisations must be the precise knowledge of the functioning and the situation of the industry, and of the economy in general. That is why such an important place must be given among workers' demands to the demand for workers' control. After the revolution, on top of all these economic organisations, from the workshop group of the C.G.T. to the Economic Council of Labour “must be added another symmetrical ensemble, from the town council to the Great Council of Workers” which constitutes the political bone structure of the new society. To both of these are added a series of “social” offices, dealing with exchanges, housing, statistics, hygiene, etc.

Besnard's book, which attempts to encompass all the issues surrounding the fate of workers' struggles and the revolution, still has many more interesting chapters, among which we will highlight the programme of immediate workers' demands (envisioned from the viewpoint of the future) and the analysis of the different possibilities of how the revolution may arise (general strike, political movement from right-wing or left-wing parties).

When we compare Besnard's exposé to the writings from syndicalist propaganda from the early stages of the movement, the distance crossed is striking: despite contrary appearances, we can feel in it the wind of near-future achievements.