

The Fundamental Principle Errors of Syndicalism

(To Serve in the Discussion with Monatte and the Pure Syndicalists in General)

By L. D. Trotsky

When I arrived in France in October 1914, I found the French socialist and trade union movement in a state of the most complete demoralization. In the search for revolutionists, with lantern in hand, I made the acquaintance of Monatte and Rosmer. They had not succumbed to chauvinism. It was thus that our friendship began. Monatte was an anarcho-syndicalist; despite that he was immeasurably closer to me than the French Guesdists who were playing a pitiful and shameful role. At that time, the Cachins were knocking at the servants' entrance to the ministries of the Third Republic and the Allied embassies. In 1915, Monatte left the Central Committee of the C. G. T., slamming the door behind him. His departure from the trade union centre was in essence nothing but a split. At that time, however, Monatte believed—and rightly so—that the fundamental historical tasks of the proletariat stood above unity with chauvinists and lackeys of imperialism. It was precisely in this that Monatte was loyal to the best traditions of revolutionary syndicalism.

Monatte, one of the first friends of the October Revolution, nevertheless, unlike Rosmer had held aloof for a long time. That was well in keeping with the character of Monatte, as I was later convinced, of standing aside, of waiting, of criticizing. At times this is absolutely unavoidable. But as a permanent line of conduct it becomes transformed into sectarianism which has a close affinity with Proudhonism, but nothing in common with Marxism.

Lenin and the Syndicalists

When the Socialist Party of France became the Communist Party, I frequently had occasion to discuss with Lenin the onerous heritage the International had received in the person of leaders like Cachin, Frossard, and other heroes of the League of the Rights of Man, of the Freemasons, of parliamentarians, careerists and babblers. Here is one of these conversations—which I have already published in the press, if I am not mistaken: "It would be good," Lenin said to me, "to drive out all these weathercocks, and to draw into the party the revolutionary syndicalists, the militant workers, people who are really devoted to the cause of the working class. And Monatte?" "Monatte would of course be ten times better than Cachin and those like him", I replied. "But Monatte not only continues to reject parliamentarism, but to this day he has not grasped the significance of the party". Lenin was astounded: "Impossible! Has not grasped the significance of the party after the October Revolution? That's a very dangerous symptom."

I carried on a correspondence with Monatte in which I insisted that he come to Moscow. He was evasive. True to his nature, he preferred, in this case too, to stand aside and wait. And besides the Communist Party did not suit him. In that he was right. But instead of helping to transform it, he waited. During the Fourth Congress we succeeded in taking the first steps towards cleansing the C. P. F. of Freemasons, pacifists and office seekers. Monatte entered the party. But it is not necessary to underline the fact that this did not mean to us that he had adopted a Marxian viewpoint; not at all. On March 23, 1923, I wrote in Pravda: "The entrance of our old friend, Monatte into the party was a great day for us; men of his stamp are necessary to the revolution. But it certainly would be wrong to pay the price of confusion and lack of clarity of ideas for this rapprochement." In this article I criticized the scholasticism of Louzon on the relations between the class, trade unions and the party. In particular, I explained that pre-war syndicalism had been an embryo of the Communist Party, that this embryo had since become a child, and that if this child was suffering from measles and rickets it was necessary to nurse it, but that it would be absurd to imagine that it could be made to return to its mother's womb. I may perhaps be permitted to say in this regard, that the arguments of my 1923 article, in caricature, serve to this day as the main weapons against Monatte in the hands of Monmousseau and the other anti-Trotskyist warriors.

Monatte joined the party; but he hardly had time to turn about and accustom himself to a house far vaster than his little shop on the quai de Jemmapes, when the "Etat" in the International burst upon

him: Lenin was taken ill, the campaign against "Trotskyism" and the Zinovievist "Bolshevization" began. Monatte could not submit to the careerists who, by leaning upon the general staff of epigones at Moscow, and disposing of unlimited resources, carried on by means of intrigue and slander. Monatte was expelled from the party. This episode, important, but still only an episode, was of decisive moment in the political development of Monatte. He decided that his brief experience in the party had fully confirmed his anarcho-syndicalist prejudices against the party in general. Monatte then began insistently to retrace his steps towards abandoned positions. He began to seek again the Amiens Charter. For all that he had to turn his face to the past. The experience of the war, of the Russian Revolution, and of the world trade union movement were lost upon him, leaving hardly a trace. Once again Monatte stood aside and waited. What for? A new Amiens Congress. During these last few years I was unfortunately unable to follow the retrogressive evolution of Monatte: the Russian Opposition lived in a blockaded circle.

Monatte's Fetishisms

Out of the whole treasure of the theory and practice of the world struggle of the proletariat Monatte has extracted but two ideas: trade union autonomy and trade union unity. He has placed these two pure principles above sinful reality. It is on trade union unity that he has based his newspaper and the Syndicalist League. Unfortunately, these two ideas are empty and each one of them resembles the hole in a ring. Whether the ring be made of iron, silver or gold, Monatte does not care in the least. The ring, you know, always hampers the trade union's activity. Monatte is interested only in the hole of autonomy.

No less empty is the other sacred principle: unity. In its name Monatte even stood up against the rupture of the Anglo-Russian committee, even though the General Council of the British Trade Unions had betrayed the general strike. The fact that Stalin, Bucharin, Cachin, Monmousseau and others supported the bloc with the strike-breakers until the latter gave them a kick does not lessen in the least Monatte's mistake. After my arrival abroad I made an attempt to explain to the readers of the *Revolution Proletarienne* the criminal character of this bloc, the consequences of which are still being felt by the worker's movement. Monatte did not want to publish my article. And how could it have been otherwise, since I had made an assault upon the sacred trade union unity, which solves all questions and reconciles all contradictions?

When strikers run up against a group of strikebreakers in their path, they throw them from their midst without sparing blows. If the strike-breakers are union men they throw them out immediately, without worrying over the sacred principles of trade union unity. Monatte surely has no objections to this. But the matter is entirely different when it is a question of the trade union bureaucracy and its leaders. The General Council is not composed of starving and backward strikebreakers, no, these are quite experienced and well-known traitors, who found it necessary at a certain moment to stand at the head of the general strike in order to decapitate it all the more quickly and surely. They worked hand in hand with the government, the bosses and the princes of the church. It would seem that the leaders of the Russian trade unions, who were in a political bloc with the General Council, should have immediately, openly and relentlessly broken with it at that very moment, before the masses it deceived and betrayed. But Monatte rises up fiercely: It is forbidden to disturb trade union unity. In an astonishing manner, he forgets that he himself upset this unity in 1915 by leaving the chauvinist "General Council" of the C.G.T. (General Confederation of Labor).

It must be said squarely: Between the Monatte of 1915 and the Monatte of 1923,

there is an abyss. To Monatte it must seem that he is remaining entirely faithful to himself. Formally, this is true, up to a certain point. Monatte repeats a few old formulae, but he ignores entirely the experience of the last fifteen years, richer in lessons than all the preceding history of humanity. In the attempt to return to his former positions, Monatte simply fails to notice that they have disappeared a long time ago. No matter what question is raised, Monatte looks backward. This may be seen most clearly in the question of the party and the state.

The Dangers of State-ism

Some time ago, Monatte accused me of underestimating "the dangers of state-ism" (*Revolution Proletarienne*, No. 79, May 1, 1923, page 2). This reproach is not a new one; it has its origin in the struggle of Bakunin against Marx and it shows a false, contradictory and essentially non-proletarian conception of the state.

With the exception of one country, state power throughout the world is in the hands of the bourgeoisie. It is in this, and only in this, that lies the state danger from the point of view of the proletariat. Its historical task is to wrest this most powerful instrument of oppression from the hands of the bourgeoisie. The Communists do not deny the difficulties, the dangers that are connected with the dictatorship of the proletariat. But can this lessen by one iota the necessity to seize power? If the whole proletariat were carried by an irresistible force to the conquest of power or if it had already conquered it, one could, strictly speaking, understand this or that warning of the syndicalists. Lenin, as is known, warned in his testament against abuse of revolutionary power. The struggle against the distortions of the dictatorship of the proletariat has been conducted by the Opposition since it existed, and without the need of borrowing from the arsenals of the anarchists.

But in the bourgeois countries, the misfortune lies in the fact that the overwhelming majority of the proletariat does not understand as it should the dangers of the bourgeois state. By the manner in which they treat the question, the syndicalists, naturally against their intention, contribute to the passive conciliation of the workers with the state of capital. When the syndicalists chant to the workers oppressed by the bourgeois power their admonitions against the dangers of the state for the proletariat, they play a purely reactionary role. The bourgeois will readily repeat to the workers: "Do not touch the state because it is a snare full of dangers for you." The Communist will say to the workers: "The difficulties and dangers with which the proletariat is confronted the day after the conquest of power—we will learn to overcome them on the basis of experience. But at the present time, the most menacing dangers lie in the fact that our class enemy holds the rein of power in its hands and directs it against us."

In contemporary society there are only two classes capable of holding power in their hands: the capitalist bourgeoisie and the revolutionary proletariat. For the petty bourgeoisie has long ago lost the economic possibility of directing the destinies of modern society. Now and then, in fits of desperation it rises for the conquest of power, even with arms in hand, as has happened in Italy, in Poland and other countries. But the Fascist insurrections only end in this result: the new power becomes the instrument of finance capital under an even more naked and brutal form. That is why the most representative ideologists of the petty bourgeoisie are afraid of state power as such. The petty bourgeoisie fears power when it is in the hands of the big bourgeoisie, because the latter expresses and ruins it. It also fears it when it is in the hands of the proletariat, for the latter undermines all the conditions of its habitual existence. Finally, it fears power when it falls into its own hands because it must inevitably pass out of its powerless hands into those of finance capital or the proletariat. That is why the anarchists do not see the revolutionary problems of state

power, its historical role, that is why they see only the "dangers of state-ism". The anti-state anarchists are consequently the most logical, and for that reason, the most hopeless representatives of the petty bourgeoisie in its historical blind alley.

Yes, the "dangers of state-ism" exist under the regime of the dictatorship of the proletariat as well, but the substance of these dangers consists precisely in the fact that power can actually return to the hands of the bourgeoisie. The best known and most obvious state danger is **bureaucratism**. But what is its character? If the enlightened workers' bureaucracy could lead society to socialism, that is, to the liquidation of the state, we would be reconciled with such bureaucracy. But it has an entirely opposite character: by separating itself from the proletariat, by raising itself above it, the bureaucracy falls under the influence of the petty bourgeois classes and can by that very fact facilitate the return of power into the hands of the bourgeoisie. In other words, the state dangers for the workers under the dictatorship of the proletariat, are in the final analysis nothing but the danger of restoring the power to the bourgeoisie.

The question of the source of this bureaucratic danger is no less important. It would be radically wrong to think, to imagine that bureaucratism rises exclusively from the fact of the conquest of power by the proletariat. No, that is not the case. In the capitalist states, the most monstrous forms of bureaucratism are to be observed precisely in the trade unions. It is enough to cast a glance at America, England and Germany. Amsterdam is the most powerful international organization of the trade union bureaucracy. It is thanks to it that the whole structure of capitalism now stands upright, above all in Europe and especially in England. If there were not a bureaucracy of the trade unions, then the police, the army, the courts, the lords, the monarchy would appear before the proletarian masses as nothing but pitiful and ridiculous playthings. The bureaucracy of the trade unions is the backbone of British imperialism. It is by means of this bureaucracy that the bourgeoisie exists, not only in the metropolis, but in India, in Egypt and in the other colonies. One would have to be completely blind to say to the English workers: "Be on guard against the conquest of power and always remember that your trade unions are the antidote to bureaucratic dangers." The Marxist will say to the English workers: "The trade union bureaucracy is the most powerful instrument for your oppression by the bourgeois state. Power must be wrested from the hands of the bourgeoisie and for that its principal agent, the trade union bureaucracy, must be overthrown." Parenthetically, it is especially for this reason that the bloc of Stalin with the strikebreakers was so criminal.

From the example of England, one sees very clearly how absurd it is to oppose as two different principles trade union organization and state organization. In England more than anywhere else, the state rests upon the back of the working class which constitutes the overwhelming majority of the population of the country. The mechanism is such that the bureaucracy is based directly on the workers, and the state indirectly, by the intermediary of the trade union bureaucracy.

Up to now we have not mentioned the Labour Party which, in England, in this class country of trade union, is the simple transposition of the same trade union bureaucracy. The same leaders guide the trade unions, betray the general strike, lead the electoral campaign and later on sit in the ministries. The Labour Party, the trade unions—these are not two principles, they are only a technical division of labor. Together they are the fundamental support of the domination of the English bourgeoisie. This latter cannot be overthrown without overthrowing the Labourite bureaucracy. And that cannot be attained by opposing the trade union as such to the state as such, but by the active opposition of the Communist Party to the Labourite bureaucracy in all fields of social life: in the trade unions, in strikes, in the electoral campaign, in parliament and in power. The principal task of a real party of the proletariat consists in putting itself at the head of the working masses, organized in trade unions and unorganized, to wrest power from the bourgeoisie and striking a death blow to the "dangers of state-ism".