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CHAPTER SEVEN

The Rise of the Working Classes: Trade Unions and Socialism, 1871–1914

Radicals in nineteenth-century Europe devoted themselves to more than grand transcontinental enterprises like the First International or radical insurrections like the Commune.¹ They built up organizations of workers, which could both fight for material improvements (higher wages, shorter hours, better working conditions) and prepare proletarians to take power in the future. Although the origins of trade unions can be traced back to the medieval guilds, unionism took on a new importance in the period after 1871. The growth of unionism was made possible by broad developments largely outside the movement's control: 1) the economic cycle, 2) technological and social changes, 3) political developments, and 4) the relative strength of employers and workers both organizationally and ideologically.

During periods of widespread unemployment and economic downturn, trade unions were inevitably taxed to the limits of their strength, often crushed altogether. Having no control over the boom-or-bust nature of the economy, workers often despaired of union activity, strikes especially, feeling their positions hopeless in face of ever-changing providence. As the economy improved and employment rose, so did the prospects for unionism. Likewise, the rapid introduction of technological change could render entire groups of workers powerless. Hand weavers serve as one often cited example, for these workers saw their craft skills replaced by machines in a matter of a few years. Yet, once workers became acclimated to the new technology, their self-confidence returned.

Nor was the political system an impartial spectator standing on the sidelines of industrial conflict. Governments throughout Europe actively helped the bourgeoisie accumulate capital and hence control its workforce. As a result, worker's rights were severely restricted for much of the nineteenth century with unions outlawed or, at a minimum, prohibited from striking. Thus, wherever trade unionism developed in Europe, it always did so with a keen eye cast upon the political system and how it could be altered to level the playing field between the bourgeoisie and the

laborers. In addition, the conflict between laborers and the bourgeoisie was an ideological battle as well. That is, the capitalists sought to convince workers that theirs was the “best of all possible worlds” while radicals created an alternative worldview.

Given these inherent difficulties, trade unions never succeeded in organizing more than a fraction of those who toiled for wages. With the possible exception of Britain, unionism operated on the margins rather than in the heart of large-scale industry. Trade union members were mostly highly skilled workers employed in small to medium enterprises. Given the heterogeneous nature of the working class, union organizations were usually local or, at best, regional. Trade unions often rejected strikes either for ideological reasons or because they had no opportunity of winning a direct confrontation with the bourgeoisie. By the mid-1870s, a recession hit much of Western Europe; the resulting increase in unemployment rendered most unions ineffective or dismantled them completely. Yet by the end of the nineteenth century, the diverse and often hostile segments of the European working class began to come together, often under at least nominally revolutionary leadership.

As industrial capitalism expanded and, in turn, restructured the labor process, it radically altered the lives of average people. One response to the devastating economic and social subordination so many workers experienced was trade unionism. Trade unions offered a pragmatic way of collectively advancing, or at least defending, proletarian interests in a way that individual efforts could not. With the rise of industrial capitalism, a laborer's skills, which traditionally had protected workers' living standards, became less important. Many a worker who once could count on their skill to guarantee both steady employment and a living wage, now turned to collective organization for help.²

Unlike those in the United States, these unions were often socialist in their perspective. Socialism provided a framework that allowed the average person to understand and interpret the tensions of industrial society. Thus, on both the practical and the ideological level, trade unions were to become an indispensable part of organized resistance to capitalist society. This is exemplified by the fact that the majority of trade unions were typically associated with a radical political party. In Germany, the Social Democratic Party had, in fact, created the so-called “Free Trade Unions.” Across the Rhine River in France, the national trade union federation, *Confédération Générale du Travail* (CGT), was associated with the doctrine of revolutionary syndicalism.³ Even in relatively moderate Britain, the unions

were typically socialist in outlook and instrumental in the creation of the Labour Party.⁴

The last two decades of the nineteenth century saw a steady and rapid rise in the number of unionized workers. Britain, France and Germany can be held up as paradigmatic of the unparalleled gains trade unionism made during this period. In Britain, the first nation to have an industrial revolution, there existed 674,000 union members in 1887. A mere five years later, in 1892, union membership had soared to over a million and a half, while by 1905, 1,997,000 people carried union cards. Across the Channel on the Continent, the increases were just as striking. In France, despite the relatively slow pace of industrialization and the continuing preponderance of the peasantry, there were 139,000 trade unionists in 1890. This figure more than doubled in three years, and by 1893, there were 402,000 union members. In 1902, less than a decade later, the total had reached 614,000. Meanwhile, the rapid industrialization of the newly united German Empire would result in even more spectacular growth. From the relatively low number of 95,000 workers enrolled in trade unions in 1887, German union membership had skyrocketed to 294,000 by 1890. This swift expansion continued into the twentieth century with 887,000 workers belonging to unions by 1903.⁵

As always is the case with statistics, these numbers say little in and of themselves. But they are indicative of the growth of a mass base for radical politics among the European working class. Further, growing union membership was accompanied by waves of intensive labor struggles and massive industrial conflicts. Not only did more strikes take place,⁶ the whole character of the trade union movement changed during the last decades of the century. Whereas trade unions had previously been largely passive self-help organizations, members began to see the unions as the best mode to actively challenge the status quo and advocate for improvement in working conditions and standards of living. Increasingly, trade unions were viewed not only as struggling for immediate concessions to improve labor conditions, but as part of a broader revolutionary process for the working class as a whole. While this was a general trend, not all unionists were revolutionary.

Union membership not only increased in numbers but in scope, as the types of workers who joined expanded to different industries. Much of the boost in membership came from the organization of previously non-unionized labor. Proletarians such as dock workers, miners, gas workers and transportation workers joined organized labor. What all these trades had in common, besides their previous non-union status, was that they were in

key sectors of the industrial economy. Therefore, a strike within any one of these industries would have repercussions reaching much further than that sector alone. After all, miners and gas workers provided the energy that drove the industrial economy, while dock workers and other transportation workers were vital to the flow of goods and services.

During this same period, hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of women were forced by economic necessity to work outside of the home. During the 1880s and 1890s, nearly a third of all females over age 10 worked outside their households in Britain and France, nearly 20 percent did so in Germany. Although domestic service accounted for a large number of these female workers (by 1891 there were 2,000,000 domestics in the extreme case of Britain), women workers also labored in textile, clothing and, increasingly, food manufacture. Of course, even these figures understate the extent of female labor, especially since most working-class women worked at least part-time (taking in laundry, for example) and all but a fortunate few were occupied with socially necessary but unpaid work in the home. Although still concentrated in typical “female” industries, women began to play an even more important role in the labor movement as both their number and the diversity of their employment grew.

Moreover, the trade unions themselves tended to change. Both through mergers and the birth of new unions, the labor movement at the end of the century looked quite different from the fragmented, craft-oriented organizations of earlier days. As hitherto unorganized workers poured into the trade union movement, the conventional wisdom, which held that strikes were usually counterproductive, was soon abandoned. While more moderate craft unions still persisted, in the twentieth century, the “new Unionism” would lead to the development of mass industrial unions. In these unions, all members of a plant belonged to the same union, instead of being divided across numerous craft lines. This change within the trade unions was heavily influenced by a number of trendsetting strikes such as the London dock strike of 1889. These strikes aroused workers to the possibility, if not necessity, of both trade union organization and militant actions in the workplace. These battles were not purely a matter of “bread and butter,” although such routine issues were important. In many instances, particularly in certain nations like Germany, strikes helped to satisfy the thirst for action which had been dammed up by years of despotism. Many German workers, for example, failed to differentiate between strikes and unions, on the one side, and the social revolution’s political expression—social democracy—on the other. Even where the root cause of strikes

was most clearly economic, many saw the conflict in terms of a struggle for power.

While struggles intensified in the workplace, workers viewed politics as a means to improve their condition. Pre-existing radical and republican hatreds of the “rich” and the “plutocracy” intensified after 1871. The bitter ordeal of industrialization ultimately convinced many, particularly manual workers, of the injustice of the social order. As workers felt increasingly distant from the world of the bourgeoisie, the idea of class-based political parties gained wider acceptance. Political parties began to represent specific social groups in society rather than claiming to speak for the entire nation. In Britain, the Labour Party, as the name suggests, saw itself as presenting the interest of the working people while Tories, or conservatives, claimed to represent all British men. Segregated in their proletarian districts (ghettos) like Wedding in Berlin or West Ham in London, workers viewed political issues, such as the fight for extension of voting rights, from the perspective of proletarians, not just citizens.

As even the most modest property qualification for voting would disenfranchise many working-class men (few in power yet envisioned giving women the vote), workers overwhelmingly became proponents of universal suffrage—at least for male citizens.⁷ Where universal suffrage was lacking, massive struggles took place. The enormous general strike in Belgium in 1892, which demanded an expansion of the franchise, is just one such example. Since governments were national in scope, any effort to pressure them had to likewise be national if it were to have any hope of success. Thus, the very organization of national states in Europe helped push the working class in each country toward the formation of national, class-based parties. These parties were typically called “socialist” or “social democratic”. In fact, these two words were considered interchangeable in the nineteenth century.⁸

The most powerful of these parties was to be the Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD), formed in 1875 by the combination of two hitherto hostile groupings: the state socialist Lassalleans who attempted to collaborate with the government and the Marxist-oriented Eisenachers.⁹ Despite attempts to destroy this party with a series of repressive laws enacted by the German Reichstag in 1878, the Social Democrats, under the leadership of August Bebel and Wilhelm Liebknecht,¹⁰ were to become an “empire within an empire.” This is certainly true if election results are any indication. Starting with less than 125,000 votes in 1871, the SPD would gather over 500,000 in 1884. Six years later, in 1890, over 1 million German

men cast their ballots for the Social Democrats while this figure doubled to over 2 million votes by 1898.

Not merely an election machine, the German Social Democrats furthermore possessed a press empire. By the end of the nineteenth century, the SPD had 75 papers of which over half were dailies. Besides their theoretical journal *Die Neue Zeit* (The New Age) which advanced Marxist theory, there were a surprising number of non-political publications affiliated with the party. Among the latter were various special-interest publications, many with a circulation over 100,000. Thus, a radical intellectual could spend the evening perusing the pages of *Die Neue Zeit* while less theoretically oriented workers could spend their free time with *Der Arbeiter Radfahrer* (The Worker Cyclist) or the *Arbeiter Turnzeitung* (The Worker Gymnastic) Even socialist innkeepers and stenographers had their own publications.

The party created an entire alternative world for their supporters.¹¹ If a worker wanted to borrow a novel, there were worker libraries.¹² Those who wished to sing could join “red” singing societies. For those who enjoyed beer, there were frequent meetings and dinners in beer halls, while those with a drinking problem could join the German Workers Temperance Federation. These activities served a number of important functions. They created a sense of belonging, that is, group solidarity among socialist workers who otherwise might have been isolated or demoralized. Meanwhile, the party press and the seemingly countless SPD-sponsored activities served to form an information network where issues could be discussed and news exchanged. Thus, a night at the local *biergarten* might allow debate on controversial party proposals, and be a place for a member to find out about possible job openings from comrades, while also offering casual socializing and entertainment.

Not all Social Democrats were content to limit their agitation to only economic or more traditional “worker” issues. Even topics as controversial as sexuality and sexual preference drew the attention of some in the party. Thus, when Oscar Wilde was arrested on a morals charge for homosexual activity in 1895, an article in *Die Neue Zeit* defended the Irish author and decried the “arbitrary moral concepts” which had led to his detention. Of course, most socialists were loath to add gay rights to their already lengthy list of demands. Still, in 1898, from his seat in Parliament, August Bebel openly championed a petition to legalize homosexual relations between consenting adults over 16 years of age.

Yet even in Germany, where not all workers voted for the Social Democrats let alone belonged to the party, there still developed a remarkable

identification of the proletariat with the socialist political parties. So much so that an election analyst in one central German district before World War I expressed amazement that “only” 88 percent of workers voted for the SPD. Germany may have been one of the most extreme cases in regards to worker’s allegiance to socialist parties, but the SPD was far from the only socialist party to be born and grow up in the last decades of the nineteenth century.

Pablo Iglesias, who was to be the first socialist in the Spanish Parliament, helped form the Spanish Social Democratic Party in 1879, and a similar party was born in Denmark in the same year. By 1882, France’s *Parti Ouvrier* was organized by Jules Guesde, and five years thereafter a Norwegian Social Democratic Party began. In 1888, socialist political parties were established in both Switzerland and the Austro-Hungarian Empire, followed the next year by a new party in Sweden. The Social Democratic Federation in the Netherlands was also formed in 1889. Finally in 1893, in the birthplace of industrial capitalism, Britain witnessed the formation of the Independent Labour Party¹³ by Keir Hardie and other socialists.

While other socialist parties could not match the level of electoral success enjoyed by the German party, they were, nonetheless, steadily growing in popularity among the masses. By 1897, the Italian Socialists were to receive 135,000 votes while the Austrian Social Democrats won about 600,000 votes. In 1898, socialists in France saw over 750,000 ballots cast for their candidates while by the end of the century there were 31 socialists in the Belgium Parliament. Even largely rural Finland saw a huge surge of socialist activity by the early twentieth century.¹⁴

Each party was fashioned within the traditions of its nation and heavily influenced by the leaders who gave it direction. Thus, the French or Spanish parties lacked the iron discipline and significant Marxist influence of the Austrian or German parties. The British Labour Party¹⁵ looked as much to the work of Robert Owen, a utopian socialist, or the Chartists, who thought universal suffrage would solve labor problems, as to the *Communist Manifesto*. It was this identification that led them to create a Socialist International in 1889. For all their dissimilarities, these parties held certain fundamental beliefs in common: all believed in working towards a socialist society, based in democracy and equality. In contrast to non-socialist democrats, they believed in economic democracy and equality, which to them meant the socialization of the means of production. That is, socialists believed in the right to vote but also the right to eat. They felt that political democracy was essential but so was a social equality which would ensure that no one lacked the basic human necessities such as food, housing

and health care. As much as their individual notions of socialism diverged, these organizations shared a conviction in the socialist future. Under the careful eye of the scholar, these parties might appear quite different, but to their members such nuances were of little regard.

Socialists knew that this revolutionary process could never succeed if it took place only within one nation. And so they endeavored to coordinate their efforts across national boundaries. On July 14, 1889, the hundredth anniversary of the storming of the Bastille during the French Revolution, two international meetings took place in Paris. In one hall sat representatives of English trade unions and moderate French socialists. In another, sat a gathering of socialists from the European continent who considered themselves Marxists. Many delegates attempted to attend the meetings of both groups while anarchists enthusiastically tried to disrupt them all. Out of this organizational competition and chaos, the Marxist-oriented group emerged the more popular.

Like the IWMA a quarter-century before, this International Workers' Congress held greater symbolic than practical significance. This situation arose because unlike the First International, the Socialist International was to be composed of socialist parties and bona fide trade unions.¹⁶

Accordingly, argument raged over who was and who was not a "genuine" representative from a "bona fide" association. In fact, most of the first two days of the gathering were wasted in squabbles over who was entitled to vote. After this process was completed and various anarchists, who jumped up on tables to denounce meeting organizers as traitors, were expelled, the congress did make progress. For three days, delegates heard reports on the socialist movement in the different countries represented.

To push for the eight-hour day, it was decided that May 1 should be the occasion for worldwide workers' protests, which would demonstrate the power of the new International. This day had become symbolic for radicals since 1886 when labor protests in Chicago led to a deadly confrontation with the police during which an unknown individual threw a bomb into the crowd. Eight police officers and an unknown number of workers were killed by the explosion and in the resulting police crossfire. In an atmosphere of hysteria whipped up by the press against the "scum of Europe," eight anarchist labor organizers were prosecuted for conspiracy to commit murder. All defendants were found guilty and four were sent to the gallows.

Despite endless disagreements over implementation, the European left almost universally welcomed the idea of May Day protests. When May 1, 1890 came, even the most pessimistic were overwhelmed by the size and

spirit of the demonstrations. While it was not astonishing that there were widespread work stoppages in France, strikes also broke out in Austria, Hungary, Belgium, the Netherlands and the Scandinavian nations, as well as in Italy and Spain. By way of contrast, the British trade unions avoided strikes and held their mass meeting on May 4. Even so, the rally held in London's Hyde Park attracted well over 250,000 people, ranging from dockers in their rough clothes to working women dressed in their finest apparel. Likewise, the German SPD thought it unwise to provoke the government and tried to avoid work stoppages. Despite pleas from party officials against "an undue show of spirit," 40,000 workers in the port city of Hamburg stayed away from work.

The next gathering was held in Brussels in August 1891 with 337 delegates in attendance and representing 15 different countries. Immensely heartened by the success of May Day in 1890 and 1891, this congress resolved to make it an annual event while adding the demand for continued peace between nations to the official list of demands. This time the International took the opportunity to call for a labor standstill on May 1. Although this resolution was to apply to supporters throughout the world, there remained an escape hatch for the more timid or vulnerable. Thus, the final resolution called for strikes on May Day "everywhere except where it is impracticable." These varied approaches to May Day foreshadowed differences within the International that would later escalate and finally lead to its destruction in 1914.

Since the socialists had no wish to alienate the unions which were such a critical part of their overall revolutionary strategy, they had no choice but to suffer the occasional anarchist from Italy or even some English unionists who remained wedded to the Liberal Party. Members of the Second International regarded the organization as the overall framework in which radical parties could unite the entire working class. The working class was greatly diverse, with varying levels of consciousness and differing political beliefs, and the socialist parties and their International made every attempt to accommodate these differences. If the Communist motto in the twentieth century was to be, in Lenin's words, "Better fewer but better," the nineteenth-century socialists felt, despite their exasperation with the anarchists, "The more, the merrier."

Throughout Europe, different strata of society increasingly came forward with demands that women be granted equal rights and opportunities. While socialists agreed with the moral arguments made by middle-class feminists that the suppression of females was unjust, they had a distinctive theory on the question of women. For the left, in the words

of Clara Zetkin, “the question of women’s emancipation is, in the end, the question of women’s work.”

That is, leftists argued, that the oppression of women was rooted within the needs of a class-stratified economic system. If the institution of private property had dictated the domination of women by men, then women working outside of the home would be a precondition for women gaining equal rights. In the writings of socialist feminists like Zetkin and men like August Bebel and Frederick Engels, there was a common theme: the working-class man cannot be free if he continues to oppress the working-class woman. By the closing decades of the nineteenth century, the Marxist prediction of growing female participation in the labor force seemed to be coming true. Ever greater numbers of women were seeking work outside the home in all the industrialized nations of Europe. However, once in the factory or workshop, the woman worker was exploited even more intensely than her male counterpart. Female laborers commonly received only half (or less than half) of the wages a man was paid for the same work. In addition, unlike men, women had no political rights. They could neither run for public office nor vote. In some countries, there were even prohibitions on women attending political meetings.

As more lower-class women entered the industrial workforce, they frequently found neither their male co-workers nor middle-class feminist “ladies” of much help. The former saw them as unwanted competition for jobs and a downward pressure on wages, while the latter were preoccupied with achieving equality within the existing order. Workers seldom followed the high-minded words of Bebel in *Women Under Socialism* where he stressed female equality, while middle-class women’s issues, like female admittance to medical schools, were not a burning concern for factory females. Therefore, working women struggled to build their own unions and organizations—but typically under the general guidance of the socialist movement.

If this failure to build exclusively feminist organizations seems strange, bear in mind that the socialist movement offered one of the few places in a male-dominated society where women could develop their abilities. Further, for all the sexism which remained among male workers, the socialists promised a revolutionary transformation of society which would require a new equality among the sexes. The primary choice was between revolutionary politics and religion. Fighting against the rising tide of secularism, the churches, particularly the Roman Catholic Church, sought to maintain, if not expand, their female base. The Roman Catholic Church postured as the defender of traditional women’s rights and attempted to

pit pious wife against atheistic husband. The dramatic growth in full-time female church personnel, the papacy's encouragement of the cult of the Virgin Mary, and the creation of additional female saints were all attempts to incorporate women into "Holy Mother Church."

As the number of working women increased, so did their self-confidence. A strike by "match girls" at London match factories in 1888 resulted in a modest pay increase, for instance. More and more women became members of trade unions, although these women remained a minority of the female labor force. Though female membership was still a small percentage, the growth was symbolically quite significant, given that only a generation before trade unionism had been almost an exclusively male institution. By 1913, most industrial countries could boast women within the organized labor movement. Their percentage of trade union membership ranged from a modest number in some countries (5 percent in Sweden) to a somewhat more substantial figure in others (9 percent in Germany, 10.5 percent in Britain, and 12.3 percent in Finland.) Statistics aside, trade unionism was poised for an explosive influx of female members that would occur soon after the beginning of World War I.

It is fitting to address another element inside the movement. Anarchism, like socialism, democracy, freedom, or any other abstract concept, is a doctrine which defies simple definition. This is particularly true for anarchism, as it placed an extreme emphasis on the individual. In general, however, anarchism in the nineteenth century rejected all political authority and, thereby, any participation in elections. Furthermore, anarchists had as their goal the elimination of any state or government, hoping to replace such structures with a self-regulated society of individuals.¹⁷

While all anarchist theory rests on the intellectual basis of nineteenth-century liberalism, there was a clear dividing line between those anarchists who believed in private property (in the twentieth-first century, these people call themselves "libertarians") and those who rejected private ownership as a source of social inequality. It was the latter—alternatively called "libertarian socialists," "anarcho-communists," or "socialist anarchists"—that were to be important in the European revolutionary movement and in giving the socialists so many headaches.

Although few actually practiced it, anarchists believed in, or at a minimum defended, "propaganda of the deed," a doctrine which held that talking about oppression, organizing protest meetings, or voting in elections all wasted time. What was needed, argued the anarchists, was an illustration to the downtrodden of the weakness of the system. What better demonstration than the assassination of prominent members of the state like czars,

kings and presidents? By employing terrorism against the bourgeoisie and their representatives, “propaganda of the deed” was intended to spark popular insurrections. However, while there were a number of political killings and even more unsuccessful assassination attempts, there were no mass uprisings.

After 1878, anarchist “propaganda of the deed,” which had previously been limited to Russia, Italy and Spain, spread throughout Europe. Two unsuccessful attempts were made on the life of Kaiser Wilhelm I of Germany which gave Bismarck a long-sought excuse to outlaw the socialist movement. That neither of the men who attempted to kill Wilhelm I were Social Democrats nor the fact that the party repeatedly condemned individual acts of terror was of any help to the soon-outlawed SPD. This incident nicely illustrates one motivation socialists had for hating anarchism. The Social Democrats, not only in Germany, viewed anarchists as frustrated petty bourgeois (or small businessmen) and lumpenproletarian (or habitually unemployed) adventurers who provided the police with the justification they sought to repress the left. That is, the socialists saw anarchists as frivolous, and often unstable, individuals who rejected the hard labor necessary to build a revolutionary movement. In the eyes of socialists, the anarchists opted instead for the emotionally satisfying, but inherently counterproductive, path of violence.

Although the vast majority of anarchists personally rejected homicide as a political procedure, few would criticize assassinations. Indeed, “propaganda of the deed” was approved in principle by an Anarchist Congress held in Switzerland in 1879. That the bulk of those attending did so either as a response to the extreme repression existing in czarist Russia, or out of abstract principle, made little difference to European socialists or, for that matter, the general public. Anarchism’s identification with murder made it easy to brand every lunatic who killed a prominent person with the labels “anarchist” and “revolutionary.” Based upon an essentially individualistic worldview, many anarchists simply did not believe in democracy. After all, majority rule and representative democracy of necessity limited the liberty of the individual. In essence, political freedom was not the goal for anarchists, but rather freedom from politics altogether.

As a result of their tactics, anarchist groups suffered major repression, and the public’s rejection of violence left a limited base for their groups to find support. In response, anarchists began to develop an alternative revolutionary strategy. This new doctrine was known as syndicalism. The word “syndicalism” is the English translation of the French term for trade unionism. Syndicalism’s goal was to turn unions into revolutionary

instruments which would form the basis of the new society. Rather than promoting “propaganda of the deed,” syndicalists believed that a general strike could paralyze society and thus spark revolution. During this general strike, the workers would take over the means of production and abolish the state, replacing it with a new society based on workers’ organizations. Thus, syndicalism remedied anarchism’s glaring organizational problem with a reliance on union structures.

Like anarchism, syndicalism was never a coherent theory, as the emphasis was on deeds not words. Among key themes, however, was the importance of militancy in the workplace, including sabotage as a means of struggle, and the centrality of rank-and-file initiative. To prepare for the revolution, syndicalists proclaimed the necessity of organizing unskilled workers while arguing that contracts signed with capitalists need not be honored. By promoting direct action, they felt the class consciousness of workers would be enhanced and the bourgeoisie weakened until the day the general strike signaled the beginning of the revolution. The only field of action that mattered was the industrial battlefield. All other campaigns and political activities were at best, to the syndicalists, mere distractions for the working class.

This movement reached its greatest heights in France where the syndicalist *Confédération Générale du Travail* (CGT), founded by an anarchist named Fernand Pelloutier, was to become one of the major trade union federations. Refraining from the more normal union activities like saving funds for pensions, this collection of pugnacious unions devoted itself to direct action. Before World War I, the CGT was to play a prominent role in many militant labor struggles, including strikes among railroad workers and civil servants. The CGT even attempted to organize soldiers within the French Army. Although syndicalism went on to have influence in other countries, notably in Spain and Italy, nowhere else did it achieve such victories.

In the last decades of the nineteenth century, governments looked upon the expanding left-wing movement with alarm. While governments made occasional concessions to improve the life of the average worker, the stick of repression was used at least as much as the carrot of compromise. Even liberal Britain massively expanded her repressive apparatus in the years before World War I, with the number of police increasing 20 percent in the last pre-war years. This enlargement of the British police force did not occur solely to fight common criminals, but rather, in the words of one police inspector, to combat general unrest “too great for its normal strength.”

Repression took many different forms and varied in intensity from place to place. Britain, for instance, shied away from the outright use of force, save for exceptional situations. In contrast, czarist Russia elevated the whip and Siberian exile to almost a state religious ritual in its drive to curb revolutionaries. Although few European countries were as tolerant as Britain or as brutal as Russia, all practiced some form of suppression to control those who challenged the status quo. Though their methods varied, their goals did not. One universal method of control was the infiltration of radical groups by police spies. This snooping went beyond national borders. Imperial Germany, for example, went so far as to keep tabs on radicals in the United States. In addition, governments would often trade information on revolutionaries. Thus, details of a Russian exile's speech in New York City could wind up in St. Petersburg via Berlin. Likewise, the usually broad-minded British government was always anxious for information concerning anyone of Irish descent—and other nation's agents gladly provided it.

The best-known and most comprehensive attempt to crush revolutionaries in the nineteenth century was perhaps the anti-socialist law employed by Bismarck in Germany. The law was passed by the Reichstag in 1878, after a press campaign which tried to link the Social Democratic Party with the assassination attempts on Kaiser Wilhelm I. It was, in its time, the most far-reaching attempt to crush a radical party. Lasting until 1890, the law forbade all organizations or publications that attempted to subvert the social system or displayed socialist sympathies. The police had the right to arrest, interrogate and expel suspected socialists. The SPD and the affiliated free trade unions were thus dealt a terrible blow, as many SPD leaders were jailed or forced to flee the country while the socialist press was outlawed and public meetings banned. The only right the SPD retained was the ability to enter elections.¹⁸

Yet, twelve years later, the party and unions emerged stronger than ever because the socialists refused to give up, and utilized every means at their disposal to continue their fight. Election campaigns took on added significance as the only legal avenue for radical activity. Free to campaign publicly, German socialists used elections (and, when elected, their parliamentary seats) to crusade for their beliefs. In fact, it was said that the SPD speeches in the Reichstag were given “out the window.” That is, they were not intended for other Parliament members but for the general public, who might be able to read about them in the mainstream press or the parliamentary record.

Further, SPD members built up a clandestine organization that illegally distributed various party publications including the central newspaper

Sozialdemokrat. Printing their publications in Switzerland or Britain, the Social Democrats would then smuggle them into Germany and distribute them among their supporters. This system of distribution was so efficient and successful that it became known as the “red postal service.” At the same time, a network of secret agents was organized to hinder government spies. This network ultimately unmasked hundreds of police agents. Later, secret print shops were created within Germany and only the printing plates were smuggled in from abroad. In 1880, the *Sozialdemokrat* could boast of the thousands of copies distributed door to door, at factories, in the streets and squares, in omnibuses, and even in churches. Local party branches were gradually rebuilt under the guise of being apolitical organizations such as choral societies or smokers’ clubs. Frequently, these “non-political” organizations would even have public meetings where lectures were given on some harmless-sounding topic like “The wild birds of central Europe.” In reality, the talk would be a coded socialist discourse. (This speaks to the average policeman’s lack of imagination for it usually took them some time to see through such transparent ruses.) The workplace was not ignored, as every large factory had trusted men who would secretly collect dues and pass on information.¹⁹

Hence, the anti-socialist laws were an abject failure. The German Social Democrats and their counterparts in other nations which suffered repression emerged stronger than ever before. Therefore, as the European left moved towards the twentieth century, an overwhelming sense of optimism prevailed among the revolutionary faithful. This optimism blinded many to the critical contradictions developing within their movement.

The movement’s talk of revolution and stress on the proletariat made it difficult to win support from other social strata such as the peasantry or the small businessmen. Speeches about the coming socialization of agriculture may have warmed the hearts of many workers, but did little to endear the socialists to peasant farmers, who continued to represent a significant portion of the population. Middle-class progressives may have agreed with socialism’s immediate reform goals, but hesitated to back a movement which sought to totally transform society. Some solid, pragmatic trade unionists felt that revolutionary rhetoric needlessly alarmed employers.

Thus within each European society, there developed a group of reformists who desired to jettison radical theories and shift class-based socialism into a more inclusive “people’s party.” In other words, they thought both the old class-based party model and revolutionary theories were obsolete. These pragmatic politicians argued that the days of revolution were over and that the true goals of socialism could be won gradually through reform

legislation and stronger unions. These reformists saw the rising standard of living and increased social welfare laws as evidence against orthodox Marxism, which they felt held back change by needlessly alienating the urban middle class and the peasantry. As socialists expanded their representation in the various parliamentary bodies across Europe, more seats could be theirs if only non-working class and non-revolutionary voters could be reassured. In fact, many legislative seats then held by socialists were only achieved by a small, but vital, crossover by non-proletarian voters.

Further, the growing wealth of working-class institutions like unions, combined with relatively high wages for at least some sections of the working populace (the so-called "labor aristocracy"), produced a material basis for reformist theories. That is, the revolutionary slogan "we shall be all" lost much of its power since many no longer felt "we now are nought." While the economic base for reformism can be overestimated (some groups of highly paid workers remained devoted to revolutionary sentiments), it is important to consider that reformism as a theory only made sense during a period of material advancement. In addition, reformism was strongest in areas where socialists were less concentrated and under heavy pressure from non-socialists, such as in smaller towns or rural areas. The large concentration of workers in cities like Copenhagen, Turin, Berlin, or Paris would force such urban areas, in spite of middle-class residents, to remain radical "red," while smaller towns might turn reformist "pink."

Not surprisingly, the anarchists greeted splits within European socialist movement with glee. For the orthodox anarchist, the growth of reformism within the mainstream revolutionary movement was proof that they had been right all along. For the anarchists, all manifestations of "revisionism" were merely the logical conclusion to socialism's emphasis on electoral politics. While reformists sought to brand their radical socialist opponents as semi-anarchist, European anarchists saw these charges as further evidence that they, not the socialists, were the true revolutionaries. Unfortunately for the anarchists, they were in no position to capitalize on the difficulties confronting their socialist rivals.

In most northern European countries like Germany and Sweden, anarchism flourished among a few cafe intellectuals but lacked any mass influence. Even in nations like Italy and Spain where anarchism could truly be termed a movement, it suffered massive setbacks due to its association with "propaganda of the deed." The cycle of anarchist violence, followed by massive governmental repression, continued throughout the twentieth century. The immediate loser in this political battle was the anarchist movement, which saw its leaders jailed or exiled, and all manifestations

of public activity severely attacked. Yet in the early twentieth century, a revived anarchist tendency became instrumental in the birth of a powerful syndicalist union—the *Confederacion Nacional del Trabajo* (CNT).

As with the French CGT, the CNT viewed trade union struggles as the most meaningful method of class struggle. On a day-to-day basis, the CNT promoted strikes and industrial sabotage as weapons to improve the condition of their members. Members of the CNT believed that the first step was the establishment of anarcho-syndicalist organizations across Spain. Then when this structure was robust enough to uphold a new society, a general strike would be called which would sweep away the old institutions. The organization believed that if the overwhelming majority of workers failed to report to their place of employment the economy would collapse along with all the bourgeois political structures.

As events in France would show, this was an illusion. True, the French CGT went on record during its Amiens Congress of 1906 as rejecting all political alliances in favor of complete trade union independence. Rather, the CGT argued, a federation of unions would bring together “all workers who are conscious of the need to struggle for the abolition of the wage system” and not concern themselves with electoral politics or parties. But the most solemn proclamations cannot preclude political pressures in the real world.

Although formed by an anarchist, the *Confédération Générale du Travail* was never of one mind when it came to political ideology. In addition to anarchists, there were “pure” syndicalists and socialists in the ranks of the CGT. There existed a minority reformist current within the organization that wished to avoid not only political affiliations but wanted to concentrate solely on economic activities. Although the revolutionaries had a clear majority, this reformist minority was by no means insignificant. Reformism was so strong in the last years of the nineteenth century that the leaders of the CGT’s left wing saw “domestication” or taming of the workers’ movement from within as a greater danger than outright repression by outside forces. For the time being, the revolutionaries within the trade unions maintained the upper hand.

The actions of certain socialists confirmed in the minds of many CGT members the folly of hoping for change through the political process. This alienation from politics was increased by the legal status of trade unions. The Act of 1884, which gave workers the right of association, did not apply to government workers. While informal associations of public employees were tolerated, the government reserved the right to dissolve as unlawful any group that sought to act like a trade union. As the CGT organizing

efforts began to make headway among elementary school teachers and postal workers, conflict became inevitable. In March 1909, French postal workers went out on strike in hopes of removing the generally detested minister who presided over them. Taken unprepared, the government convinced the postal workers to call off the strike with a number of implied promises. When the unpopular head of the post office stayed in his position, while other promises remained unfulfilled, the workers resumed their work stoppage. But this second strike was less solid and there was little support from other unions, despite the CGT's organizing attempts. Seeing the postal workers' weakness, the government crushed the postal worker union, firing en masse the most militant union members. The CGT was helpless in the face of this governmental onslaught. This defeat created a deep sense of bitterness and betrayal within the CGT who saw politicians, now more than ever, as a plague to be hated and avoided.

So far, this discussion has focused on the social forces that gave rise to these new organizations and the prominent individuals who played key roles in their formation and downfall. What, however, did the average European make of all these political events, proclamations and infighting? In this realm, official political pronouncements, theoretical tomes, and the speeches of famous revolutionaries are of little value. Since there existed few of the modern techniques we now have for discovering public opinion, any investigation into the attitudes of the ordinary European at that time remains speculative. What we can look at, however, is evidence that suggests how the common people reacted to European radicalism.

Also, information can be gleaned from election results from those nations which had more or less free elections (excluding czarist Russia, of course). In addition, since membership figures exist for the various organizations associated with the revolutionary movement, these numbers suggest a certain minimum base of support. Finally, there are some evidence in the form of diaries, memoirs and police spy reports, which help round out the overall picture of everyday perceptions.²⁰

Looking at vote totals, it would seem that the left grew stronger with each passing generation well into the twentieth century. This is not only true for the well-known case of Germany where the Social Democrats were the single largest party by World War I,²¹ but also for other nations as well. In the Kingdom of Sweden, to cite only one example, the Social Democratic Labor Party (SDLP) garnered 28.5 percent of the votes cast in the 1911 balloting, a percentage that rose to 36.4 percent by 1914. Sweden, which was the scene of alternately bitter strikes and lockouts up until the 1930s, was home to a mere 3,194 SDLP members in 1889, the year the Second Inter-

national was established. By 1914, this puny number had grown to 84,410 dues-paying party members in a country of under 6 million inhabitants.

Similar numbers could be provided throughout Western Europe to show that the official socialist movement had wide support in terms of both voter support and membership participation. Of course, the movement was stronger in some areas (particularly in the more industrialized nations) than others and support vacillated from year to year. All in all, however, the trend was clearly upward. Likewise, trade unions,²² considered an integral part of the movement, enjoyed a momentous surge in membership. By 1912, there were 1,064,000 trade unionists in France and 2,553,000 union members in Germany. Meanwhile, the trendsetter in labor organizing, Britain, had 4,135,000 organized workers by 1913.²³

A careful study of proletarian attitudes indicates that workers were neither the stereotypical revolutionary machines betrayed by corrupt leaders nor the vile racist and sexist creatures of bourgeois caricature. The true picture of workers is far more complex than the one-dimensional views often put forth. Most workers who identified with socialism appear to have considered themselves people of science who rejected religion. That is, they saw the revolution as unfolding according to what they held to be the laws of historical development. Thus, they saw little contradiction between reforms today and revolution tomorrow. Belief in revolution gave them dignity and the promise of a better life. Most importantly, all the available reports from government agents and workers' diaries indicate that it was their hard everyday life with its miserable economic conditions that made revolution appear to them not only desirable, but also inevitable.

Naturally, sentiments among workers were volatile and people would change their mind from one day to the next, as is true today. In one context, a worker would embrace revolution while in another circumstance the same individual would support reform. Yet then, as now, most people's attitudes were conditional not absolute. Although prejudice, racism and bigotry did exist among members of the left, on the whole, the movement was characterized by acceptance. Being oppressed themselves, most workers tended to sympathize with the "underdogs," whether they were colonial subjects or oppressed national minorities. All the same, political viewpoints varied widely.

Where is the transition to this? German police reports on conversations held in proletarian taverns in Hamburg show the response of many workers to the revisionist controversy. Most seem to have rejected Bernstein and his revision of Marxism. This disapproval appears to be based not on hostility to new ideas, but because reformist theory did not correspond to their

everyday reality. Huddled over beer after a hard day of labor, these workers thought that the revisionists were “from the bourgeois camp,” who wished to destroy Social Democracy as a worker’s party. Feelings such as these are not particularly strange, for the progressive changes that Bernstein had suggested were occurring in capitalism made only a slight difference for the average worker. Harassed by police, bullied at work and often short of money, the proletarian radical was far less likely to see compromise or cooperation as viable strategies.²⁴ Still, other workers, and middle-class socialists, did support a reform strategy.

Of course, not all workers were revolutionary. The story of how one socialist woman attempted to convert her traditionally minded mother illustrates this reality. In her autobiography, Adelheid Popp describes the objections her widowed mother raised to her involvement with the socialist movement. Thinking that her long-suffering mother rejected her logical arguments in favor of socialism because they came from her child, Adelheid was thrilled when Frederick Engels and August Bebel agreed to visit her home. After an evening of explaining to the mother why she should be proud of her daughter, these two famous socialists departed. When mother and daughter were alone, Adelheid’s mother asked, “Why do you bring old men here?” Ironically, Popp’s mother had focused on the unsuitability of either man as a potential husband for her daughter.²⁵

In the end, many workers, like Popp’s mother, were too bound up in older traditions of religion and family to consider the socialist movement to be of interest. Perhaps the best way to view the outlook of common people towards social revolution is to emphasize its constantly evolving nature. A once-conservative peasant could quickly become radicalized when forced by economic change to become an urban worker. The revolutionary often looked more to immediate reforms during periods of improvement in the standard of living. Workers could demonstrate for peace one week and support war as self-defense the next. As the revolutionary Rosa Luxemburg remarked, the masses were like the sea: calm and peaceful one moment, rough and stormy the next. The ebbs and flows of the workers’ movement in the next decades would confirm this standpoint.