Unit 4:
France 1870-1918
Early revolutionary unions

This Unit aims to:

- Outline the social, economic and political conditions in late 19th France and how they contributed to the growth of anarcho-syndicalism
- Look at the extent to which trade unionism in France was influenced by anarchism
- Outline the rise of the Bourses du Travail and the formation of the Federation des Bourses du Travail (FBT) and examine the practice, theory and organisational structure of the early French unions
- Give a brief history of the development, and politics of the CGT and examine the reasons for the changes in outlook
- Look at the idea of 'political neutrality' and the problems it raised.

Terms and abbreviations

Federation du Parti des Travailleurs Socialiste de France: Formed in 1880, this was the first socialist party in France. It was a Marxist party that believed in the primacy of political action and that by winning seats in parliament they could eventually declare a workers' state. However it soon split into two factions.

Guesdists: The first faction was named after their leader Jules Guesde. They were of Marxist inspiration and had little faith in universal suffrage. The necessity of organisation was emphasised and they formed the Parti Ouvrier Francais in 1887. However later they modified their views and began to enter elections forming the Parti Socialiste de France.

Possibilistes: A second faction led by Paul Brousse. They believed genuine reforms could be achieved within the parliamentary democratic system but that attention should be switched from centralist state intervention to the opportunities afforded by municipal socialism.

Allemanist: Jean Allemane led a break away group from the Possibilistes. They thought that the party was too elitist and more emphasis should be given to the role of unions. Together with the Possibilistes they later formed the loosely organised Independents and by 1898 were the largest socialist grouping in parliament embracing a range of reformists and were later named Parti Socialiste Francais.

Blanquists: The main insurrectionary strand of the socialist movement inspired by Louis Blanqui. They sought to build a conspiratorial elite to prepare itself for the revolution and to form a temporary dictatorship to extinguish any remains of capitalism and imposing a revolutionary programme on the people.

Section Francaise de l'Internationale Ouvriere (SFIO): Formed in 1905 after a motion was passed at the 1904 Amsterdam Congress of the (Marxist) Second International demanding the unification of the French parties along the orthodox Marxist lines of the German SPD. It was made up of the Parti Socialiste de France and the Parti Socialiste Francais Later, without officially changing its position, it was to take on a new consensus based on a commitment to parliamentary action and the defence of the Republic.

Bourses du Travail: Local union organisations organised on anarchist principles. These came together in the Federation des Bourses du Travail (FBT) in 1892.

Confederation Generale du Travail (CGT): Union established in 1895 to organise workers on an industry-wide basis. In 1902 there was full integration between the FBT and the CGT.

Introduction

In Unit 3 we examined how the conflicts within the First International contributed to the development of anarchism. Now we turn our attention to the years after the demise of the First International. This was a period of rapid growth of a new revolutionary movement, as the anarchists put their methods and ideas into practice. Although it would spread across the world, it was in France that this emerging workers' movement first took off. This Unit charts the efforts of the French working class who, during this period, were to take anarchism and fuse its methods and ideas with trade unionism to create revolutionary unionism - a forerunner of anarcho-syndicalism.

The Paris Commune

It was no surprise that France should be the starting point for new revolutionary anarchist movements in the late 19th and early 20th Centuries. Certainly, it was no mere coincidence that French workers were amongst the first to be drawn to the revolutionary methods and ideas of anarchism. The French workers' movement had a long revolutionary tradition, with revolutions in France in 1879, 1830, 1848 and 1871, all of which had influenced and shaped subsequent tactics and ideas.

French workers had come to see revolution as the legitimate goal of working class struggle and advancement. For the their commitment to the revolutionary cause, workers had already paid a high price over the years, against brutal state repression. As a result, for many French workers, the day-to-day struggle was naturally linked to the wider revolutionary aim of establishing an egalitarian society.

Sadly, part of this revolutionary tradition was the tradition of betrayal. Time and again workers had spilled their blood to establish a revolutionary Government, only to find that newly installed Governments were far more interested in re-establishing order through repression than creating a more just society. This tradition of revolution followed by Government repression reached a new peak in 1871 with the bloody suppression of the Paris commune. During a weeklong orgy of violence, Government troops murdered some 16,000 French workers in cold blood. The leader of the moderate Republican Government, Thiers, boasted about the human carnage, saying that, "*the repression had been pitiless, the sight so terrible, it would serve as a lasting lesson to the workers*". Indeed the French workers did learn a bitter lesson from the butchering of the Communards, but it was not to have the intended effect. Instead this slaughter was the final act of class hatred that was to convince many workers that the state and the politicians who administered it were the enemy and could never be trusted to pursue the interest of the workers. For many French working class people, any so-called revolution aimed at replacing one Government with another had come to be seen as merely the substitution of one set of rulers for another.

The bitter experience of the French working class was a key contributory factor in the development of anarchism in practice - just as it had been in the development of anarchist ideas. It was the betrayal of the French workers by the newly installed Government after the 1848 revolution that had led people like Bakunin and Proudhon to turn their back on the idea of workers capturing political power by forming a workers' Government. French anarchists within the international had sought to outline a programme under which workers did not have to rely on politicians and political parties to pursue their aims. Bearing in mind this double-betrayal by the state in a single generation, it is little wonder that French workers, whose bitter experience had contributed so much to the development of anarchism, would look to put anarchism into practice after 1871.

Economic Conditions

Economic factors were also influential in making France an ideal place for the early rise of revolutionary unionism, in drawing the embryonic French trade union movement towards anarchism. The industrial revolution in France took a very different form to those in the rest of Europe and the USA. In Britain, Germany and the USA, industrialisation had resulted in economic centralisation, leading to the rapid growth of industrial towns and cities based on particular industries.

By 1911, Britain had over 47 towns with over 100,000 inhabitants while Germany had 45. By contrast, in France, the pace of industrialisation was much slower, dominated by a decentralised system of production based on small to medium scale factories. By 1911, with twice the land area of Britain, France still only had 15 towns with more than 100,000 inhabitants. To confront this more decentralised capitalist system required far greater flexibility on the part of workers and their organisations, facing a much more varied set of conditions. The federalised form of organisation advocated by anarchism allowed for far greater flexibility of action than that offered by the highly centralised forms of organisation put forward by the Marxists and social democrats. Local and regional workers' federations could adopt and tailor the basic ideas and tactics of the union movement to suit their needs, rather than wait for inappropriate orders from the central committee or party.

It was the unique combination of anti-state attitudes born of bitter experience, and the relatively decentralised capitalist economy, which created for the French workers the social and political environment for the development of revolutionary syndicalism (syndicalism is derived from the French and Spanish words for Union).

Early Attempts at Unions

Despite the existence of anarchist ideas in France, the first attempt to organise a national trade union had little to do with the ideas of anarchism, but was instead dominated by the socialists. Unlike in Britain, where trade unions preceded the formation of the socialist parties, in France, it was the socialist parties that came before the advent of mass union organisation. This order of events had a profound effect on French trade unionism.

The first congress of trade unions took place in 1876 and was dominated by the Marxist Guesdist group named after their leader Jules Guesde. The Guesdists argued that the unions should concentrate on the day-to-day struggle, but leave the wider political struggle to the leadership of the party. In 1880, the fourth congress, at Le Havre, adopted a programme drawn by Guesde in consultation with Marx, which stressed the primacy of the political struggle and the need to capture state power.

It also decided to form a new Marxist party, the Federation du Parti des Travailleurs Socialiste de France. This new party was considered by the Marxist leadership to be the main vehicle for workers' emancipation, with the union consigned to a merely supportive role. The new Marxist party was to stand in local and national elections to ensure the passing of progressive legislation and ultimately, to form a workers' Government. The slogan that this new party organised around was*: "You working class! Send half of your deputies to Parliament plus one and the Revolution will be not far off a fait accompli".*

Party unity didn't last long, and one party soon spilt into two. The Guesdists formed 'Parti Ouvrier', while the followers of Paul Brousse, a Marxist who argued that the party should concentrate on immediate reforms only, formed the 'Possibilist'. Over the following 10 years, two further socialist parties sprang up, the 'Allemanist' and the 'Blanquists'. For over a decade, the various socialist parties engaged in a bitter struggle to win control of the (still small) French trade union movement. The sectarian atmosphere this created in the union movement was summed up by Fernand Pelloutier (in Daniel Geurin Book One -see further reading):

> *"..even when agreement had been reached, or dissuasions were wound up, more than a result of weariness than of conviction,*

someone would fan the spark: Guesdists, Blanquist die-hards and Broussists would jump up angrily to their feet to exchange insults and take issue.. ..and this fresh outbreak of fighting would drag on for weeks, only to flare up again when scarcely it had finished".

The sectarianism that the socialist parties brought to the union movement led an increasing number of unions to reject political parties. An increasing number of unions began banning the discussion of electoral politics at their meetings. Pelloutier wrote that an increasing number of unions decided that;

"..from now on the political agitations would be none of their concerns, that all discussion, other than economic, would be ruthlessly excluded from their program of study and that they we would devote themselves wholeheartedly to resisting capital".

Nor was the weariness with faction fighting the only reason for increased disillusionment with political parties. The long French tradition of middle class politicians placing their personal ambition above the interests of the workers they had sworn to represent came to the fore yet again in the early 1890s. Socialist electoral success had been limited at municipal level, yet even where socialist gains were made, the promised benefits for workers turned into the reality of increased strike breaking by newly elected socialist deputies and town councils, as they tried to establish their power bases.

At national level, the socialist campaign was meeting with more success. By 1893, there were some fifty socialist deputies from the various socialist parties. In 1899, the unofficial leader of the socialist deputies in parliament was offered a post in Government, which he readily accepted. But this was not the victory the workers had hoped for. The fact that Millerand had been prepared to accept office and take his place in a Government that contained General Gallifet, the 'butcherer' of the Paris Communards, caused widespread disgust among many workers. In 1900, a number of strikers were shot and killed at Chalon-sur- Saone. Far from Millerand resigning, he actually endorsed the use of troops to break strikes. Such sharp reality rapidly reinforced the already deep suspicion that much of the French working class had for politicians.

Anarchist unions get organised

The growing disgust with the socialist parties, and the latent anti-state attitudes of the French working class, were not in themselves strong enough reasons to open the eyes of large numbers of French workers to anarchism. Though increasingly distrusted, at least the socialists had a clearly defined strategy as to how they would bring about change. Though they had first raised the idea of using the unions as vehicles for change within the First International, the anarchists remained unorganised and with no clear idea of how their new libertarian society was to be brought about.

However, around 1900 this situation began to change. Groups of anarchists also active in the trade union movement began to put forward the idea of creating local union federations, called 'Bourse du Travail', which were to be organised along anarchist aims and principles. They were to be avidly anti-parliamentarian, remaining independent of all political parties and sects. As an alternative to party politics, they were to organise around daily economic issues, linking these to the wider struggle for social revolution. Their method of struggle at all times was to be direct action.

The anti-state emphasis and the argument that workers should confront capitalism directly, as opposed to placing their faith in politicians, proved an immediate success. The first Bourse du Travail was established in Paris in 1886. By 1892, fifteen were in existence and by 1908 there were some 157 Bourses spreading right across France.

Federation des Bourses du Travail

In 1892, the 15 Bourses met to form a national federation, the Federation des Bourses du Travail (FBT). The influence of anarchism was clear from the outset. The FBT stated among its tasks;

"..the instruction of the people regarding the pointlessness of a revolution that would make do with the substitution of one state for another, even should this state be a socialist state".

The revolutionary aims and the form that this revolution should take were also quite clearly stated. It;

"..should strive to prepare an organisation which, in the event of a transformation of society, may see the operation of the economy through the free grouping and render any political institutions superfluous".

The Bourse completely rejected the idea of capturing state power as means to bring about revolutionary change. It opted unequivocally for the anarchist approach, that workers should take over the running of industry directly.

During the 1890s, the Bourses rapidly grew to become the centres of working class resistance. They provided and co-ordinated strike action and strike support across the whole of the working class community. Outside the workplace, they involved themselves in a wide range of community struggles, such as the fight for better health and housing. The Bourse also placed great emphasis on the role of self-education, often building up local libraries and providing courses for workers on a wide range of subjects. They also provided limited strike and unemployment benefit, acting as an unofficial employment agency, and notifying unemployed workers of vacancies that existed both locally and in other areas.

Within the Bourse, the need to see the daily struggle as part of the wider aim of overthrowing capitalism was constantly stressed. Through this process of the daily struggle, it was expected that workers would gain the administrative and organisational skills necessary to run the future libertarian communist society. Furthermore, they would also develop an ever-stronger culture of solidarity and mutual aid, leading to the development and reality of non-hierarchical structures and practices.

The Bourses were the place where workers would develop the, *"moral and technical skills that would enable them to run the future society":* They were the, *"nuclei, the cells around which the future society would be created".* They were the social mechanism through which *"to constitute within the bourgeois state a socialist alternative".*

In their role as the link between the old and the new society, it was expected that the Bourse would act as the administrative body in each locality, in the immediate aftermath of the revolution. During this period, they would be "*co-ordinating production, and circulating information on productive capacity and consumer needs*". Unfortunately, they never got to this stage! (However, a variation of the Bourse du Travail did briefly put similar plans into practice during the Spanish Revolution, as we shall see later in the course).

Direct Action

As we have already seen, direct action was the chosen method of struggle that was to lead to the new society. This concept was briefly introduced in Unit 3, and deserves further mention here. For the FBT movement, the immediate application of direct action was to win partial and gradual improvements, which, as it made clear;

"far from constituting a goal in themselves, can only be considered as a means of stepping up demands and wresting further improvements from capitalism, until the point is reached where workers will expropriate capitalism by way of the general strike".

Indeed, direct action was more than simply the chosen method of struggle, it was recognised as a method of ensuring democracy, since;

"any attempt at revolution that did not really call upon the direct action of the workers themselves would inevitably lead to the re-establishment of hierarchical and authoritarian structures that would in turn once again enslave the proletariat".

Through direct action, workers were accountable for their own actions. Only by getting involved directly with the local Bourse and its actions could they ensure the democracy of the organisation. Without the involvement of all, the Bourse would drift away from democratic involvement, as fewer people made all the decisions. With direct action came direct democracy. Workers came together to decide their needs and pursue those needs without relying on others to act on their behalf.

Direct action amounted to *"the putting into operation, directly without intervention from outside forces, of the strength which lies within the working class".* With no *"outside interference",* workers could pursue their own struggle without *"middle class politicians".*

The Bourse also saw direct action as a method of education in itself. Through the practice of direct action, workers would learn from each other "to reflect, to decide, to act". The specific form of direct action varied according to circumstances, ranging from consumer boycotts and street demonstrations to strike action and the use of sabotage. Through direct action, the idea that the emancipation of the working class must be the task of the working class could be achieved.

The early practice of the FBT movement laid important

foundations that defined the meaning and role of direct action – foundations that remain central to anarcho-syndicalism today. The importance of direct action is multi-faceted. It is both a method of struggle and the basis of a system of direct democracy - itself the opposite of the representative democracy of party politics. It is also the principal means of empowering people, enabling them to act on their own behalf. Direct action remains also a means by which people can build their own collective culture inside the capitalist culture of narrow self-interest, in practising direct action, people in struggle learn to give and receive solidarity and trust.

Marxists and Socialists

The direct action methods and growing success of the Bourses du Travail attracted fierce criticism from the Marxist and socialist parties. In response, the FBT organised a national congress of the whole movement in 1894, which turned into a battle between those who favoured direct action and the advocates of political action. The conference overwhelmingly adopted the idea of direct action and the general strike approach, and rejected electoral politics. The Guesdists immediately walked out of the conference. The Bourses du Travail were now firmly established as the main union organisation in France.

For the next 20 years, the significant Marxist and socialist parties concentrated entirely on electoral politics and the need for political unity. In so doing, they rejected the unions and lost touch entirely with the workers they claimed to represent. Meanwhile, the French trade union movement grew in size and in the strength of its anti-political revolutionary syndicalism. After a number of bitter failures, the Guesdist Allermanist and the rump of the Broussists came together to form the Section Francaise de l'Internationale Ouvriere (SFIO). This comprised the French section of the Second International, formed by the Marxists after the collapse of the First International. It required all its members to endorse political action and was almost totally made up of political parties.

Formation of the CGT

Freed from the influence of the political parties, the union movement began to strive to build greater internal organisation. In 1895, a further congress took place, at which the Confederation Generale du Travail (CGT) was formed. The CGT strove to organise workers within industrial sectors (in contrast to the local basis of organisation of the FBT). At first, the FBT insisted on maintaining its autonomy from this new national organisation. As a result, the CGT remained relatively weak, while the FBT continued to grow and remained the main national organisation with the French union movement.

However, growing industrialisation resulted in more industrial integration and it became increasingly clear that there was a growing need for workers to organise in industrial federations. In 1902, the CGT and FBT agreed to full integration, with the FBT continuing to organise workers on the basis of locality, while the CGT organised workers industrially.

The new organisation reaffirmed the primacy of the economic struggle and the rejection of political parties in favour of direct action and the general strike. The majority of the new CGT national officers elected by the founding congress were anarchist, or anarcho-syndicalist, as they were increasingly being called. However, even at this early stage, behind the unity of purpose in the economic struggle, there were already divisions emerging within the CGT.

With hindsight, the problem lay with the confusion between rejection of party politics and political neutrality. Neutrality masked divisions between reformist syndicalists and revolutionary syndicalists. The reformist syndicalists took the idea of political neutrality literally, arguing that the CGT should remain independent of both political parties and the wider political struggle, and concentrate entirely on improving workers' conditions.

The revolutionary syndicalist majority of the CGT interpreted political neutrality very differently. They meant that the CGT should remain opposed to all political parties and state control. Critically, they argued that the economic struggle must not be separated from the political struggle. In other words, the struggle for better conditions was not an argument, but a power struggle between workers and capitalists. Every action formed part of the wider class struggle - and these parts could not be separated without losing revolutionary potential. A complex but crucial element of anarcho-syndicalism was

thus established. People had to organise as a class in an economic organisation that would use its economic strength to bring about both political and economic equality, in a society based on libertarian communism. These anarcho-syndicalists within the CGT were far from being politically neutral (and neither are anarcho-syndicalists today).

In 1902, the reformist element in the CGT remained a minority. The majority was united around the principles based on anarchism, and furthermore, they were soon to put these principles into practice. A vigorous campaign launched by the CGT almost immediately met with growing success, and led rapidly to growing industrial unrest.

By 1904, there was some 1026 stoppages taking place and almost 4 million days were lost in strikes during the year. Meanwhile, CGT membership topped 100,000.

As part of the campaign for the 8-hour day, the CGT raised the issue of the inequality of women. It adopted a progressive position, arguing for equal pay and rights, in preparation for a future non-authoritarian society in which women, relieved of the full burden of care and in possession of a liberated mind, would be treated equally to men. Increasingly, propaganda aimed specifically at women was produced, and women were encouraged to run strike offices and attend picket lines. Women began joining the CGT in equal numbers to men.

The CGT also became increasingly involved in anti-military campaigns. In 1900, the FBT had launched an anti-military campaign centred on the anarchist aversion to authority and the idea that army life brutalised people. However, with the CGT's growing militancy, there was rapidly increasing use of the army by the state to put down strikes. The CGT's anti-military stance took on an increasingly militant tone, encouraging soldiers to desert and mutiny. Later on, as the spectre of the First World War grew, the CGT anti-military also argued for the general strike against capitalist wars. The CGT's anti-military campaign was to result in numerous CGT activists being arrested and imprisoned.

Another area where the CGT sought to have an impact was over the 'peasant question'. Within the First International, the anarchists had rejected the Marxist idea that the peasantry were *'petty bourgeoisie'* and innately reactionary. They had predicted that the emphasis Marxists placed on the historical role of the industrial

workers as the revolutionary class would lead to division between the city and countryside. The CGT developed this position and argued that a non-authoritarian society could not be achieved without the involvement of the peasantry. They therefore set out to organise agricultural unions within the CGT. However, problems persisted with the CGT emphasis on collectivisation. The French activist peasantry was heavily influenced by the ideas of Proudhon, who had argued for wage slavery to be replaced by a system of individual ownership. They were suspicious of collectivism.

Nor did the CGT campaign for better working conditions have much immediate attraction for the peasantry, since it was centred on the fight for the eight-hour day and so was more relevant to the industrial workplace. However, the anti-military campaign had an immediate attraction, since the peasantry had an enduring hatred of military recruitment, and so it was through the anti-military campaign that the CGT was able to begin to attract the peasantry to its ideas and begin the task of making the CGT an organisation of both town and country.

Although it clearly led to growing influence, the increasing militancy of the CGT did not meet with the universal approval of all its members. The various reformist and socialist elements within the CGT were growing steadily more vocal and better organised, although it remained in total a small minority. In 1906, over 30% of all strikes were organised in support of the 8-hour day, including a one-day general strike organised by the CGT on May Day. This latter action was a major success, with public services being paralysed, and it remains a testament to the boundless confidence of the CGT at the time.

In 1907, the level of direct action increased further. Strikes were organised on the docks, the railways and in the postal services. Another strike, by electricians, plunged Paris into darkness. For the second year running, a general strike was organised on May Day. This time, it attracted even more widespread support among the whole of the French working class. Membership continued to grow, reaching over 300,000, and the CGT was beginning to exert an influence on working class life that far outsized even this level of membership.

However, along with this startling success, new problems were beginning to develop. Alarmed by the growing militancy, reformist

elements attempted to gain some control at the CGT congress in Amiens in 1906. Auguste Keufer, a prominent voice of reformism, attempted to steer the union away from militancy and towards reformism. He had increasingly argued that that the CGT should model itself on the British trade union movement and concentrate on gaining reform. At the congress, he proposed that in all *"philosophical, political and religious matters*" the CGT should observe *"strict neutrality*". Furthermore, everyone should be free to *"propagate these views but outside the syndicates".*

He made no attempt to define just which political viewpoint he was attempting to neutralise. However, he did argue that the "*anarchist doctrines of anti-militarism and anti-patriotism"* should be abandoned by the union and pleaded with the delegates to take the union out of the *"control of the anarchist*". A motion was also raised at the congress that the CGT should affiliate to the newly formed SFIO and therefore join the Second International.

The reformist attempt to gain control failed completely. Arguments were put forward by the anarcho-syndicalists echoing the arguments of the anarchists within the First International. They pointed out that the state was not neutral and so it could not be used for the workers' cause. Furthermore, they argued that the capture of state power, whether through parliamentary or revolutionary means, would not lead to workers' emancipation, but the establishment of a new elite based on their own control of state power.

The Charter of Amiens

Instead of moving towards reformism, the CGT moved further towards anarchism. The delegates voted by 834 to 8 in favour of what became known as the Charter of Amiens. This reaffirmed its commitment to anti-statism, clearly stating that the union should remain independent of the purely political struggle centred on the political party. The CGT was to remain an independent economic organisation, whose aim was social revolution to be achieved by the general strike.

The Charter also declared that the CGT;

"..brings together, outside every political school of thought, all those workers conscious of the struggle necessary to obtain the disappearance of wage earners and employers".

The CGT was to be the organisation that united all workers with the common aim of overthrowing capitalism. In passing the Charter, the CGT had taken a significant step towards becoming a recognisable anarcho-syndicalist organisation.

Unfortunately, the Charter of Amiens was to prove a high point in the development of anarcho-syndicalism inside the CGT. From 1906 on, the CGT faced a massive wave of state repression vociferously targeted on its militant anti-state tactics of direct action.

The State Response

In the years leading up to 1906, the increasing militancy of the CGT had already brought down Government repression on it. In 1905, the Paris Bourse had been evicted from its premises by Government forces. However, it was the May Day general strike that created abject alarm amongst the ruling classes. Even in France, historically the scene of so much revolutionary activity, the idea had always dominated that the mass of the working class had no real appetite for the revolutionary cause. Popular wisdom dictated that revolutions were due to a small conscious minority steering up the otherwise passive majority. Within this popular wisdom, the ruling class had become increasingly confident that superior state forces could put down any attempt by a small minority aimed at insurrection. The state was confident that it could prevent armed insurrection as, since 1871, the state had made use of advancing military technology to reorganise and improve communications in the army. City centres had even been rebuilt to make street fighting easier to control.

The general strike turned the confidence of the ruling class in its defences into alarm, as its popular wisdom began increasingly to be shown to be false. The ideas that were bound up in anarcho-syndicalism, such as self-education, direct mass action, the raising of consciousness about the role of the state and the ruling class; all showed the state that this was a new path to revolution to that of previous insurrections. The anarcho-syndicalists openly rejected the idea that the spontaneity of the revolutionary act would steer the majority of the workers out of their passivity. They were arguing instead that day to day struggle would help develop the class-consciousness that would prepare them for the coming revolution. Instead of people being awakened by revolution, the anarcho-syndicalists were preparing for a revolution that would be made by the conscious majority. Furthermore, the main revolutionary weapon would be economic power rather than physical force.

The ruling class, whose whole strategy for defeating attempts at revolutionary change was that the workers would remain passive, began to recognise that this would no longer be true for the movement of the CGT. Also, they started to question their assumption that the troops would always be able to 'outgun' the workers and secure the continued running of the economy. The general strike, which was aimed at paralysing the economy, provoked real fear amongst capitalism.

Before May Day 1906, the ruling class had remained relatively unconcerned. While it remained an anarchist notion, they felt that workers would be both unable and unwilling to organise such a strike. When the prospect of it became a reality, and the date drew near, the ruling class panicked. On the day, some 75,000 troops were dispatched to Paris. The strike also caused panic among the middle class, as many fled to the countryside or across the channel to England. After the strike, a new Government was formed under the leadership of Clemenceau, a former socialist, with the aim of eradicating the growing threat of anarcho-syndicalism.

Over the next three years, the new socialist Government

unleashed a wave of state repression. CGT members faced constant harassment and imprisonment. Troops were routinely used to attack strikers resulting in rising death and injury tolls among workers. In 1907 alone, strikers were murdered at Nsarbonne, Nantes and Roan l'Etape. The brutality of the state was such that an attempt to put down agrarian unrest in Midi lead to the 17th Infantry mutinying.

In addition to physical force and victimisation, the state also began to increasingly use the tactic of mass dismissals to break strikes. A postal strike collapsed in 1909 when postal workers were sacked *en masse*. The Government also attempted to specifically identify and undermine the anarcho-syndicalist elements within the CGT. The press launched a hate campaign against prominent anarcho-syndicalists and in 1908, the Government ordered the arrest of the elected anarcho-syndicalist CGT officials Yvetot, Pouget and Griffuelhes. The reformists in the CGT attempted to take advantage of this situation, by arguing that it was the revolutionary aspirations of anarcho-syndicalism that were to blame for the Government repression, not the Government itself. The attacks from both inside the CGT and by the state and its press and army had a considerable impact. The mixture of threats and punishments began to cause elements of the CGT membership to waver in their commitment to anarcho-syndicalism. On their release from prison, the anarcho-syndicalist officials failed to get re-elected to their former positions. Those who remained anarcho-syndicalist became increasingly contemptuous of the reformists, and the arguments between them became increasingly bitter.

However, despite the state oppression and the resultant divisions, the CGT was able to maintain its organisational unity. Membership continued to grow, reaching some 600,000 by 1912. The various CGT newspapers were read by hundreds of thousands of people, and massive public meetings were regularly held. Nor did the influence of anarcho-syndicalism decline as the reformists hoped. In fact, as the threat of war loomed, the CGT anti-militarist campaign was stepped up. As part of this, a successful 24-hour strike for peace was organised by the CGT in 1912.

The First World War and after

While Government repression had had a weakening effect, it had failed to crush anarcho-syndicalism within the CGT. However, the outbreak of war was to deliver a hammer blow from which it would not recover easily.

In the first days after war was declared, the CGT called for demonstrations against it. However, a wave of patriotism swept across France and, in the face of widespread war fervour, they were soon to come out in favour of the war. Within days, they agreed to join the "*Sacred Union*", an alliance of all political parties aimed at unifying France for the war effort. A new Government of unity was formed, in which the Marxist SFIO took a number of cabinet positions. A majority of the Bourses soon ratified the national committee decision to join the *Sacred Union.*

Behind the war hysteria, there remained those within the CGT who opposed the war. A general strike was called in Lyon, only to be called off after Government threats and the intervention of the CGT's national committee. Pierre Monattee resigned from the CGT's national committee in protest at the decision to join the *Sacred Union*. A number of demonstrations were called, but were prevented from taking place by the state.

Though the opposition to the war may appear to have largely evaporated as war broke out, this is in some ways understandable. The Government had in place a well-organised strategy to overcome opposition to the war. Martial Law was declared, with papers closed and strikes and demonstrations banned. An extensive list of CGT activists had been compiled in order to ensure that '*trouble makers'* were amongst the first to be called up. As a result, many militants found themselves on the way to the front within days of war being declared - or forced underground.

Despite the Government's efforts, however, the CGT slowly recovered its composure, and soon members were reconsidering the wisdom of accepting the war and joining the Sacred Union. They began to organise. A large pacifist group began to develop, centred on the powerful metalworkers federation. Anarcho-syndicalism began to re-assert an influence. Within a year, anti-war propaganda produced by these groups within the CGT began to appear, including a pamphlet entitled "*This War*", written by Monatte, which argued that the cause of the war was routed in the economic struggle between British and German capitalism.

As the opposition grew within the CGT to its pro-war stance, an anti-war group called 'Comitee de Defense Sydicaliste' established itself. As the war progressed, this group was able to organise growing support against the war within the CGT. By the closing stages of the war in 1918, inspired by news of the Bolshevik revolution, an attempt to launch a general strike against the war was launched by a minority of militant syndicates centred in the anarcho-syndicalist stronghold of the Loire. The strike was only a partial success, but it confirmed the growing strength of militancy within the CGT once again.

With the end of the war, Monatte launched a new weekly paper. Its first issue carried extracts from pre-war writings of a number of prominent anarcho-syndicalists. It also announced:

"We were revolutionary syndicalist before the war and we remain so. The trial of the war has only hardened our convictions.."

The anarcho-syndicalist minority now set about changing the reformist post-war CGT. In 1919, at the congress in Lyons, the CGT reformist leader came under sustained attack for his class collaboration and the CGT's failure to support an outbreak of strikes that had occurred across France earlier in the year. Immediately after the congress, the Comites de Sydicalistes Revolutionnaires (CRS) was formed, with the aim overcoming reformism and returning the CGT to its revolutionary roots. Over the next 2-3 years, the CRS grew steadily. Before long, motions put to CGT congress by the CRS were only narrowly defeated by the reformist majority. Fearful of almost certain loss of control, the CGT's national committee attempted to stifle internal opposition and voted to expel the CRS.

The expelled CRS went on to form the Confederation Generale du Travail Unitaire (CGTU). This new organisation broadly reflected the revolutionary politics of the pre-war CGT. However, it was not about to mark the rebirth of anarcho-syndicalism in France. The reason was not that the French people had been won over to reformism during the course of the First World War - indeed, a large section of the working class remained revolutionary and opposed to parliamentary means. The primary reason why the CGTU was dogged with problems from day one was the events in Russia the year before.

Revolutionaries across France were unable to resist the apparent success of the Bolshevik revolution. It is hard to imagine now the shear size of the impact the events in 1917 Russia must have had on revolutionary movements across the world at the time. Little matter that the events were of an insurrectionary nature, and that the Bolsheviks were quick to adopt Marxist power structures, and to crush any opposition from other workers' movements throughout Russia. Revolutionaries only tended to get the good news delivered from Russia by the Bolshevik supporters, and they understandably rushed to support what appeared to be the creation of the first communist society. Since this communist society had been achieved through the Marxist idea of capturing state power, many who in the past had argued for direct workers' control through direct action, abandoned anarchism and embraced Marxist communism, on the basis of this apparent success. The CGTU was no exception to this delusion, and it voted overwhelmingly in favour of joining the Bolshevik-organised Red Trade Union International, despite the fact that this organisation demanded the union strictly adhered to the dictates of the communist party leadership.

In 1921, the Red International launched an attack on the limited trade union independence that the CGTU had managed to retain. This caused a relatively small number of surviving anarcho-syndicalists to leave the CGTU. They set up the Confederation du Travail Syndicalist-Revolutionnaire, which reaffirmed its commitment to the Charter of Amiens and formed an independent anarcho-syndicalist organisation. However, this was the exception to the rule. Even after the reality of the Bolshevik state became known, the revolutionary movement in France was to remain in the grip of Marxism for the next 40 years.

Conclusion

The influence of anarchism on the French workers' movement of the turn of the 20th Century was significant, but unfortunately short-lived. Although the main militant French trade union federation of the period was the Confederation Generale du Travail (CGT) and it was the first such organisation to be heavily influenced by the emerging ideas of anarcho-syndicalism, it was not entirely composed of anarcho-syndicalists. Indeed, there was a large reformist element within the CGT, which grew to dominate during the First World War, helped along by state repression and socialist opposition to the anarcho-syndicalist revolutionary aims and tactics. Certainly, the CGT was a mass workers' organisation, within which the majority of workers were initially drawn towards anarchism because it's ideas reflected their own experience, and offered practical solutions based on that experience.

The development of anarcho-syndicalism within the CGT was nevertheless a sign of great solidarity within the French working class, in the face of what became overwhelming adversity. The lessons learned were not lost and the experience of the CGT was sufficient to inspire other anarchist movements around the world. Unit 5 will look at the initial spread of anarcho-syndicalist ideas in working class movements outside France, starting with Britain.

Key points

- The workers' movement in France had a long revolutionary tradition and, especially after the suppression of the Paris Commune, many workers had developed an inbuilt distrust of the state and politicians
- The industrial revolution in France took a different form to those in Britain, Germany and the USA
- The high degree of sectarianism evident in the socialist parties led to the early unions in France rejecting electoral politics
- Direct action was adopted as the means to achieve short-term improvements but also ultimately to bring about the destruction of capitalism through the social general strike
- The French anarcho-syndicalists saw the Federation des Bourses du Travail (FBT) and the Confederation Generale du Travail (CGT) as the social mechanisms with which to build an alternative to the capitalist state
- The concept of political neutrality masked divisions between the reformist and revolutionary syndicalists in the CGT
- Increasing state repression, especially after the outbreak of war, combined with the effects of the Russian Revolution weakened and eventually destroyed the anarcho-syndicalist influence on the French trade union movement.

Checklist

1. What were the main contributory factors that drew the French workers towards the ideas and methods of anarchism?

2. Why did the trade union movement come to reject electoral politics and any interference from the socialist parties?

3. What was the role of the Bourses du Travail?

4. How did the FBT define the meaning and role of direct action?

5. How did the role of the CGT differ from that of the FBT?

6. What were the main factors in the decline of anarcho-syndicalist influence in the French workers' movement?

Answer suggestions

1. *What were the main contributory factors that drew the French workers towards the ideas and methods of anarchism?*
   Firstly there was the revolutionary tradition in the French workers' movement that led them to see revolution as a legitimate goal of working class struggle and advancement. They linked the day-to-day struggle to the wider aim of establishing an egalitarian society. Secondly the repression after the Paris Commune convinced the workers that the state and politicians could not be trusted to act in the interests of the workers. Finally the industrialisation of France took a different form to that of Britain and Germany. It was much slower and dominated by a decentralised system of production based on smaller factories. To confront this it required a greater flexibility on the part of the workers and the federal form of organisation advocated by the anarchists was best suited to these conditions.

2. *Why did the trade union movement come to reject electoral politics and any interference from the socialist parties?*
   Unlike Britain, the formation of socialist parties preceded the advent of mass workers' organisations. There were many differences and splits in these parties and they battled constantly to gain control of the French union movement. The sectarianism and faction fighting that this brought into the unions meant that increasing numbers of unions began banning discussion of electoral politics at their meetings. In addition, when the socialists did have electoral success at municipal level the promised benefits to workers never materialised. The reality was increased strike breaking by the elected socialist deputies and town councils eager to build their own power base.

3. *What was the role of the Bourses du Travail?*
   They were local union federations, organised along anarchist aims and principles. The *Bourses du Travail* organised around daily economic issues and seen as an alternative to party politics linking the day-to-day struggle to the wider aim of social revolution. They were also seen as future administrative bodies co-ordinating production and consumption in the immediate aftermath of revolution.

4. *How did the FBT define the meaning and role of direct action?*
   The FBT was a federation of all the local Bourses and was

dedicated to the idea of workers taking over the running of industry directly rather than capturing state power. It co-ordinated strike action and strike support and saw direct action as integral in attaining immediate improvements that would culminate in the social general strike. Direct action was also seen as a method to ensure direct democracy and that the workers were accountable for their own actions. In doing this the FBT saw direct action as a method of education whereby workers would learn, through practice, how to take decisions and act on their own behalf.

5. *How did the role of the CGT differ from that of the FBT?*

The CGT was established to organise workers within industrial sectors. The FBT continued to organise workers on the basis of locality even after full integration.

6. *What were the main factors in the decline of anarcho-syndicalist influence in the French workers' movement?*

There was confusion between the rejection of party politics and political neutrality. Reformists argued that the CGT should only concentrate on economic issues, concentrating on improving workers' conditions and staying independent of any wider political struggles. The revolutionary syndicalists however, saw the economic struggle and the political struggle as inseparable. Every action formed part of a wider class struggle and could not be separated without losing revolutionary potential. The reformists argued that the revolutionary aspirations of the anarcho-syndicalists were to blame for the increase in state repression, including the government's use of troops and arrests. With the advent of the First World War the reformists were able to win control of the CGT. The anarcho-syndicalist were eventually expelled and formed their own organisation, the CGTU, but the Russian revolution had the effect of persuading many of them to abandon direct action after seeing the Bolsheviks gain power. By 1921 those staying loyal to anarcho-syndicalist principles were few and, even after the reality of Bolshevik Russia became known, the revolutionary movement in France was to remain in Marxist hands.

Some discussion points

- What do you see as the main differences between the concepts of a 'General Strike' and a 'Social General Strike' and what is its relevance today?
- How could the ideas of 'Direct Action' be put into practice today?
- What could anarcho-syndicalists do to prevent a drift to reformism in a revolutionary union now?
- If an anarcho-syndicalist union was formed in Britain today how could it resist attacks via capitalist propaganda, government legislation and probable state repression?

Further Reading

J. Jennings. Syndicalism in France. MacMillan 1990. ISBN 0333 421884. -LI-

Left, sympathetic approach gives a fairly good insight into the thinking of some key activists in the CGT, both reformists and revolutionaries. Details the splits and argues that the revolutionary influence in the CGT had gone by 1908 (which is not borne out by contemporary accounts).

F. F. Ridley. Revolutionary Syndicalism in France. Cambridge Univ Pr. 1970. ISBN 0521 079071 -LI-

Liberal academic approach largely dismissive of the CGT. Nevertheless accessible with some useful background commentary.

R. D. Anderson. France 1870-1914. Routledge, Keegan, Paul, 1977. ISBN 0710 085753. -LI-

Concentrates on political events rather than the workers' movements of the CGT, but gives some useful background.

P. Kropotkin. The Great French Revolution. Elephant Editions 2 volumes - £4.95 each. -AK-

Though not covering the period of this unit, Kropotkin's seminal work is an excellent account of this earlier period in French history.

L. Gambone. Revolution or Reformism. Red Lion Press pamphlet. £1.50. -AK-

Centres on the CGT and argues that it retained its own brand of revolutionary syndicalism after World War 1.

K. E. Amdur - Syndicalist Legacy. Univ. Illinois Press, 1986. ISBN 0252 012380. -LI—SF-

Academic, very detailed account centred on the CGT in two French cities during World War 1. Argues that revolutionary influence in the CGT extended even beyond 1918, contrary to many contemporary writers and other historians.

Daniel Guerin (ed), No Gods No Masters Book One, AK Press. ISBN 1873176643. £11.95. -AK-

Excellent new anthology which collects contemporary material from the period, including lots of previously unpublished works. Also, of particular relevance to this Unit, J-L Pindy, C.de Paepe & A.Schwitzguébel - 'Direct Action and Libertarian Construction Foreshadowed'

Daniel Guerin (ed), No Gods No Masters Book Two, AK Press. ISBN 1873176694. £11.95. -AK-

Part 2 of Guerin's mammoth anthology, mostly dealing with the early 20th Century. Contains valuable extracts from contemporary accounts of CGT activists F.Pelloutier, E.Pouget, & P.Delesalle - 'The French Anarchists in the Trade Unions'). Anarcho-syndicalist politics and strategy as it happened - highly recommended.

E. Pataud & E. Pouget. How Shall We Bring About The Revolution. Pluto Press. ISBN 1853050172. £3.95. -AK—BS-

Utopian fiction of the 'how it might have been' type. Revolutionary romance by 2 French anarcho-syndicalists written in 1909 and based on real events in France and the CGT.

Notes: The further reading outlined is not designed to be an exhaustive bibliography or a prescriptive list. It is designed to provide some pointers for the reader who is interested in taking the topics raised in this Unit further. In addition to the above, it is always worth consulting your local library for general history texts which do cover the period, although they invariably understate the level of working class organisation and activity. To assist Course Members, an indication is given alongside each reference as to how best to obtain it. The codes are as follows: -LI- try libraries (from local to university), -AK- available from AK Distribution (Course Member discount scheme applies if you order through SelfEd, PO Box 29, SW PDO, Manchester M15 5HW), -BS- try good bookshops, -SE- ask SelfEd about loans or offprints).