

Anarchism and the General Strike

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It did not take the appearance of anarchists to invent the idea of a general strike. It was the product – like so much of anarchism itself – of the workers themselves. So, in Britain, the popularising of the idea of the general strike is usually attributed to William Benbow (1784–1841) who was involved with the National Union of the Working Classes and proposed a “Grand National Holiday” – a month away from work – in 1832. It was later adopted by the Chartist Congress of 1839 while in 1842 a general strike erupted across Britain.¹

So do not think we are trying to suggest that anarchists invented the general strike. Here, we are simply trying to summarise the birth and development of anarchist perspectives on the general strike and to debunk certain myths or correct certain misunderstandings. We will not present a comprehensive history of general strikes but rather limit ourselves to discussing anarchists and their view of the general strike as a tactic for social change. We will, of course, mention specific strike waves as these informed anarchist advocacy of the tactic as well as confirming the correctness of holding this position.

First, however, we need to clarify what we mean by “general strike” as it varies considerably in both practice and in theory.

In terms of practice, a “general strike” covers a range of possibilities. It can vary in extent, from a town, to a region, to a nation and, potentially, to being international in scope. It can be of a single trade or industry to many and even all. It can be planned (called for a specific day by a union or party, such as the British General Strike of 1926) or spontaneous (such as the Great Strike of 1877 in America) or a combination of both (such as the American Eight-Hour movement of 1886). It can be for reforms (for the Eight-Hour Day or universal suffrage), for solidarity (for releasing prisoners or supporting other workers), for defence against reaction (such as against the Kapp Putsh of 1920) or for social revolution.

Likewise, if the general strike can take many forms, so can the theory associated with it: how it is envisioned can vary from advocate to advocate, from group to group. This means that some (like Industrial Unionists and some revolutionary syndicalists) can see it as simply a case of “folding arms” from an agreed day until the capitalist class agree to the demand to hand over its property. For others (revolutionary anarchists and most syndicalists) it is seen as growing out of partial strikes to become the starting point for a general expropriation and insurrection. Perspectives can also vary overtime, with certain groupings initially supporting one version of the general strike but overtime coming to advocate another (the French revolutionary syndicalist CGT being an example of this). This means that certain critiques of “the general strike” can simply be irrelevant (i.e., they are not addressing the perspective of its advocates) or, at best, out of date (i.e., they address a position formerly held but now rejected for a different one).

As will become clear, anarchists have usually concentrated on discussing what is needed to turn a strike wave into a general strike and then into a social revolution (having quickly abandoned the notion of starting the social revolution by simply calling a general strike). Likewise, anarchists do not see the general strike as an act by which we *demand* the means of production but rather a process by which we *take* them.

With that in mind, we will discuss how the idea of the general strike arose within anarchism and how it changed over the years by drawing lessons from actual general strikes which did take place as well as from debates between anarchists and within the wider labour movement.

¹ Mick Jenkins, *The General Strike of 1842* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1980).

Precursors of Revolutionary Anarchism

First, we must start before revolutionary anarchism developed within the International Workers' Association (subsequently referred to as the "First International").

The first anarchist – or, more correctly, someone later considered an anarchist by others – to raise the idea of a general strike – a general ceasing of work – as a tactic was, somewhat surprising, arch-individualist Marx Stirner who noted its potential in 1844:

The laborers have the most enormous power in their hands, and, if they once became thoroughly conscious of it and used it, nothing would withstand them; they would only have to stop labour, regard the product of labour as theirs, and enjoy it. This is the sense of the labour disturbances which show themselves here and there.²

Of course, the means of production are also "the product of labour" and so his passing comments imply a vision of a general strike as also an act of expropriation by the workers, the seizing of the means of production as well as previously produced goods held in stores and shops. How the producers then managed the seized property was not discussed – presumably Stirner thought that, as unique individuals, they would be the best judges of what they wanted although his comments on the negative impact of the division of labour suggests a wider perspective than that usually attributed to him.

Yet it must be stressed Stirner's work did not have any impact on anarchism – Proudhon never mentioned him while Bakunin mentioned him once, in passing – before his discovery by individualist anarchists in the 1890s. His influence, such as it was, was limited to Marx and Engels. However, the embrace of Stirner by anarcho-syndicalists in Glasgow in the 1940s and 1950s – who took his notion of a "Union of Egoists" literally as "One Big Union" – showed that his ideas were not appreciated by individualist anarchists alone.

The first self-professed anarchist Pierre-Joseph Proudhon was opposed to strikes over economic issues (although the reasons for that opposition are often distorted by Marxists and usually used in an attempt to discredit anarchism *as such*, in spite of Proudhon alone holding that position). Yet during the 1848 Revolution he advocated what was effectively the general strike to secure political change:

One only needs very little knowledge of the people and of governmental machinery to understand what an irresistible force such a system of opposition would have had, if solemnly announced and energetically maintained... If the people, they said, refused to pay its taxes once, it would never pay them again and government would become impossible! If the citizens are taught to split themselves up, if the history of the Roman people on the Sacred Mount is repeated by way of a parliamentary conflict, very soon the departments and provinces will separate from one another: centralisation will be attacked on all sides, we will fall into federalism: there will be no more Authority!³

The reference to Ancient Rome is significant as it was marked by increasing inequality and internal political struggle between the aristocratic patricians and the common people ("plebs").

² Max Stirner, *The Ego and Its Own* (Rebel Press, London, 1993), 116.

³ "Confessions of a Revolutionary", *Property is Theft!* (Edinburgh: AK Press, 2011) 469.

Many of the latter were imprisoned or enslaved when they could not repay their debts. In 494 B.C. the plebs simply walked out of the city to the Sacred Mount leaving the patricians rulers of an empty city. The patricians had no choice but to negotiate and so the tribunes of the plebs were founded to protect the people against oppression.

Proudhon's argument was part of a wider discussion in his *Confessions of a Revolutionary* on civil resistance to the oppressive conservative Assembly and Government produced by the first elections of the Second Republic. Despite his opposition to strikes on the economic terrain, he rightly saw the power of a general strike to tame oppressive governments and impose popular reforms that would push society towards anarchy.

The Federalist-wing of the First International

It is within the International Workers' Association that the general strike truly becomes part of anarchism and it is interwoven with the development of revolutionary anarchism itself within that organisation.

The General Strike was first raised in the International by Belgium delegates at its 1868 Congress when they proposed a resolution which "urge[d] the workers to cease work should war break out in their respective countries" as part of "tak[ing] the most vigorous action to prevent a *war between the peoples, which today could not be considered anything else than a civil war*, seeing that, since it would be waged between the producers, it would only be a struggle between brothers and citizens".⁴ The following year saw its paper, *L'Internationale*, raise the general strike as a means of social transformation:

When strikes spread, they gradually connect, they are very close to turning into a general strike; and with the ideas of emancipation that now prevail in the proletariat, a general strike can only lead to a great cataclysm which would renew society. We are not yet there, no doubt, but everything leads us there...

But don't the strikes follow each other so rapidly that the fear is that the cataclysm will arrive before the proletariat is sufficiently organised? We think not, first because strikes already indicate a certain collective strength, a certain agreement amongst the workers; next, each strike becomes the point of departure for new groups. The necessities of the struggle impel workers to support each other across borders and across trades; the more active the struggle becomes, therefore, the more this federation of proletarians has to expand and strengthen.⁵

This was immediately republished by Bakunin in the Swiss Internationalist paper *L'Égalité* a few days later, showing his support for its position on the general strike.⁶ The idea quickly spread and by June 1870 *La Solidarité*, a Swiss "Bakuninist paper edited by James Guillaume, support the general strike as a revolutionary tactic as a successful strike in Neuchatel: "We are not far perhaps from the moment when partial strikes will be transformed into a general strike

⁴ "Resolution on War," *Black Flag Anarchist Review*, vol. 2, no. 2 (Summer 2022), 20.

⁵ "Nouvelles de l'extérieur", *L'Internationale*, 27 March 1869.

⁶ "Organisation et grève Générale", *L'Égalité*, 2 April 1869 – see Michael Bakunin, "Organisation and General Strike", *Black Flag Anarchist Review* Vol. 2 No. 2 (Summer 2022).

which will put the workers in possession of the instruments of labour.”⁷ The article appears to envision the general strike starting on a specific day with a specific demand:

Instead of ruining ourselves by partial strikes, let us organise a general strike.

Let a single cry resound throughout Europe: cessation of work for social reorganisation! And that in factories, mines, factories, workshops, construction sites, quietly, without making much noise, we abandon work. Society, on pain of death, must then submit to the collective will of the workers.⁸

The Belgium federation held a regional Congress in April, 1873, which saw the delegates discuss “the question of the general strike, considered as the means of effecting the expropriation of the capitalist class.”⁹ However, a tendency was expressed to contrast the general strike to the partial strike which was generally not shared elsewhere. In August, another congress of the Belgium Federation was held “immediately prior to the general Congress of the Anti-authoritarian International” and it which “pronounced in favour of the general strike.”¹⁰ In terms of practice, the general strike was utilised, with various degrees of success, during the Cantonal Revolts which swept Spain from July 1873 onwards during the First (Federal) Republic. In some towns – like Alcoy – the general strike turned into a revolution while in others – like Barcelona – it remained a refusal to work.¹¹

As may be expected, the Belgians “raised the question of the general strike at the Congress of the Anti-authoritarian International at Geneva in September 1873. They urged the importance of the general strike as a tactic which could mobilise the workers for revolution: ‘a means of bringing a movement onto the street and leading the workers to the barricades’.”¹² There was a wide range of perspectives raised at the debate. As noted, some Internationalists – particularly in Belgium – had argued for the general strike as an alternative to partial strikes rather than an extension of them, viewing it as starting on a specified day and time with an explicitly revolutionary aim. James Guillaume expressed a different perspective:

Is it essential that every movement breaking out amongst the workers should be simultaneous? Should the ideal of the general strike, given the meaning which is attached to these words, be that it has to break out everywhere at an appointed day and hour? Can the day and hour of the revolution be fixed in this way? No! We do not even need to bring up this question and suppose things could be like this. Such a supposition could lead to fatal mistakes. The revolution has to be contagious. It

⁷ Quoted by Caroline Cahm, *Kropotkin and the Rise of Revolutionary Anarchism 1872–1886* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 336.

⁸ Quoted by Charles Thomann, *Le mouvement anarchiste dans les montagnes neuchâteloises et le jura bernois* (La Chaux-de-Fonds: Thesis, 1947), 183.

⁹ James Guillaume, *L’Internationale, documents et souvenirs* (Paris: Stock, 1909) III: 81.

¹⁰ Cahm, 222–3

¹¹ There appears to be no comprehensive account in English of this movement and many accounts of it utilise Engels’ diatribe “The Bakuninists at work” as if it were an objective work of history rather than a polemic aiming to mock and discredit the opponents of Marxism within the International labour movement utilising articles written by Marxists in Spain who had the same goal in mind. Suffice to say, the “Bakuninists” in Spain did not view the events of 1873 as Engels did and saw no need to reject their politics based on them.

¹² Cahm, 223

would be deplorable if one country did not start a revolution because it was waiting for help from others.¹³

With some notable exceptions, the general strike was supported by most delegates. Paul Brousse (then an anarchist and leading advocate of “propaganda by the deed”¹⁴) and a Spanish delegate opposed the notion based on their experiences in Barcelona (although another Spanish delegate supported it due to the experience in Alcoy), as did the delegate of the British Federation, John Hales, who rejected the notion as he believed it required such a high level of pre-organisation that it was impractical. The Congress decided to issue a somewhat bland resolution after the discussion, which was held in private so as not to alert the powers-that-be of possible revolutionary strategies.

Thus the idea of the general strike grew out of struggles waged by the International across Europe. Indeed, the move towards a general strike was a logical outcome of the necessity of workers’ solidarity with, for example, the Jura Federation arguing in January 1874 during a protracted strike that a wider struggle against capital was needed: “Yes, it has to be recognised: the only method of ensuring the success of the workers’ demands is to generalise the struggle, to oppose the world league of labour to the universal league of capital.”¹⁵

The general strike was again mentioned at the annual congress of the Jura Federation in 1874 in a report delivered by leading militant Adhémar Schwitzguébel:

“the idea of a general strike by the workers, which would put an end to the miseries they suffer, is beginning to be seriously discussed by workers’ associations better organised than ours. It would certainly be a revolutionary act capable of producing a liquidation of the present social order and a reorganisation conforming to the socialist aspirations of the workers. We think that this idea should not be brushed aside as utopian, but on the contrary seriously studied by us too”¹⁶

So by 1873, the general strike had been raised, discussed and applied within the Federalist-wing of the International across Europe. As would be expected, it reflected the experiences of those who discussed it, changed in the light of developments and debates but the idea of a general strike as a means of social revolution was now part of revolutionary anarchism. As Kropotkin later summarised:

The working men at the Congresses of the International... discussed the fundamental question of a revolutionary reconstruction of society, and launched the idea which has since proved so fruitful – the idea of a General Strike. As to the political form which a society reorganised by a social revolution might take, the Latin Federations of the International... pronounced themselves in favour of an organisation based on the federation of free Communes and agricultural territories... The two main principles of modern Syndicalism – “direct action,” as they say now, and the elaboration of new forms of social life based on the federation of the Labour Unions – these two

¹³ Quoted by Cahm, 224.

¹⁴ In the original sense of the term (i.e., trying to spark collective revolts by various means) rather than acts of individual terrorism, as it became synonymous with years later.

¹⁵ Quoted by Cahm, 338.

¹⁶ quoted by Cahm, 225.

principles were at the outset the leading principles of the International Working Men's Association.¹⁷

It was with this perspective that anarchists worked within the labour movements of their respective countries as well as analysing and learning from struggles both near and far.

From 1877 to 1886 – Developments on two Continents

The spontaneous strike wave and popular revolt of July-September 1877 in America was recognised by anarchists in Europe as an example of the potential of the general strike. Starting in response to a wage-cut, the strike spread along the railway lines and in many places turned into a general insurrection, with pitched battles with the armed forces of the State.¹⁸

Kropotkin penned two articles on the events, the first argued that the movement “did not proclaim any of those principles which have become so familiar in Europe through international propaganda: the abolition of wage labour, the establishment of collective property, the abolition of the State. The uprising had no flag, laid no principle, planted no marker.” What was needed was “to have anarchist sections of the International... in the places which had seen the momentarily triumphant of the popular insurrection” so that “the people master of capital, of factories, of workshops, would have organised work for their own benefit; as master of the palaces, of bourgeois houses, they would have installed the families of workers in them; they would have created, in a word, a ‘Commune’ as we understand it”.¹⁹ The second bemoaned that the socialists in America were focused on elections while the trade unions were limited to wage issues, arguing for a socialist labour movement which both organised in the workplace and raised socialist ideas and goals.²⁰

Elisée Reclus also commented upon this revolt and like Kropotkin argued for the need to turn a movement based on the refusal to work into one aiming for workers' control:

Masters of the railroads as they were in some states for more than a week, the strikers... would have had time to expropriate the companies by virtue of their collective authority and to manage, for the benefit of all, the lines of railways of which they had temporarily become owners. It was then that the real revolution would have started... First of all, the sympathy of the people supported the strikers... but as soon as commodity prices increased, as soon as general circulation was partially interrupted to the detriment of the ordinary advantages of civilisation, they ceased... The big question is still that of bread: the hunger of the producers caused the strike; that of consumers put an end to it.²¹

As can be seen, the general strike was now intrinsically linked with expropriation. This was reflected in resolutions passed in August 1877 at a conference of delegates from the French sections in Chaux-de-Fonds:

¹⁷ “Syndicalism and Anarchism”, *Direct Struggle Against Capital: A Peter Kropotkin Anthology* (Edinburgh: AK Press, 2014), 405.

¹⁸ Jeremy Brecher, *Strike!* (Boston: South End Press, 1972), 1–24.

¹⁹ “Affaires d’Amérique”, *Bulletin de la Fédération Jurassienne*, 5 August 1877.

²⁰ “Bulletin international”, *L’Avant-garde*, 11 August 1877.

²¹ Elisée Reclus, “La Grève d’Amérique”, *Le travailleur: revue socialiste révolutionnaire*, September 1877, 13–14.

5th resolution – The French Federation resolves that it will take advantage of all popular movements to develop as far as possible its collectivist and anarchist programme, but it calls upon the groups that make it up not to compromise their forces for the benefit of a victory for a bourgeois party.

6th resolution – In the event that strikes break out in places where the French sections have influence, the sections of the French Federation should take advantage of the circumstance to give the strike a revolutionary socialist character, by urging the strikers to end their position as wage-workers by taking possession of the instruments of work by force.²²

It is easy to see how an assembly of striking workers and their strike committee can be turned into a workplace assembly and committee for managing their labour without the need for bosses or owners. Likewise, how the federation of strikers assemblies into councils could be the means by which social decision-making can be taken away from the state and its bureaucracy and placed into the hands of those subjected to it, namely the working class.

The final Congress of the International took place at Verviers (Belgium) in September 1877 but the end of the International did not stop anarchists applying the ideas generated within it in their respective countries. In France, for example, the Lyons workers' Congress in early 1878 saw them raise a four-point programme: "the complete separation from all bourgeois politics; the organization of trades unions for revolutionary ends; the creation of propaganda and study groups; and the federation of these trades unions and study groups in order to exploit areas of popular agitation and direct them to revolutionary ends."²³ While the resolutions – Kropotkin, amongst others, helped to prepare them²⁴ – were not passed (parliamentarianism held sway), the anarchist who raised them (Ballivet) ended his speech with a proto-sindicalist perspective which is worth quoting:

I shall try to say, in a few words, what tactics we would like to see adopted by our fellow workers:

Stay as far as possible outside any expression of bourgeois society;

On the terrain of trade associations, definitively pursue the formation of unions; these unions, however, should not only propose the defence of wages, but the abolition of wage labour, by the collective appropriation of all means of production;

Create everywhere mixed circles of social studies for the propaganda of our principles;

To federate from the bottom up these unions and these circles to extend as far as possible their internal and external means of action to try to immerse us in what is the product of popular activity, attempting to give to its efforts a broad and human goal.

²² James Guillaume, *L'Internationale, documents et souvenirs* (Paris: Stock, 1910) IV, 248–9.

²³ David Stafford, *From Anarchism to Reformism* (London School of Economics: London, 1971), 112.

²⁴ Cahm, 245

In a word, to produce, in the very heart of today's society, the organisation of the free society of the future; so that on the day when social development brings about the death of bourgeois society, the new society will be ready to replace it.²⁵

The following year saw Kropotkin argue that anarchists sought "to bring about on a vast scale the transformation of the property system by the expropriation pure and simple of the present holders of the large landed estates, of the instruments of labour, and of capital of every kind, and by the seizure of all such capital by the cultivators, the workers' organisations, and the agricultural and municipal communes. The task of expropriation must be carried out by the workers themselves in the towns and the countryside."²⁶ He pointed to the Spanish Anarchists as an example to follow, "to build this force that will crush capital on the day of revolution: the revolutionary trades union. Trades sections, federations of all the workers in the same trade, federations of all the trades of the locality, of the region" would "seize the soil, the instruments of labour, all social wealth" while "overthrow[ing] the State, proclaim[ing] the free Commune."²⁷ He linked the need to build a fighting union movement with the social revolution:

The goal of the revolution being the expropriation of the holders of society's wealth, it is against these holders that we must organise. We must make every effort to create a vast workers' organisation that pursues this goal. The organisation of resistance to and war on capital must be the principal objective of the workers' organisation... the strike being an excellent means of organisation and one of the most powerful weapons in this struggle.²⁸

This perspective was taken up, expanded upon and taken to its logical conclusion in December 1882 when Kropotkin commented upon the Great Strike of 1877 in his discussion of Expropriation as a key feature of any successful social revolution. This article was included in his first anarchist book *Words of a Rebel* in 1885 and is worth quoting:

Well, when these days come – and it is for you to hasten their coming – when a whole region, when great towns with their suburbs have got rid of their rulers, our work is marked out, it is necessary that all machinery be returned to the community, that social assets held by individuals be returned to its true master, everyone, so that each can have their full share of consumption, that production of all that is necessary and useful can continue, and that social life, far from being interrupted, can resume with the greatest energy. Without the gardens and fields that give us produce essential for life, without the granaries, the warehouses, the shops that contain the accumulated products of work, without the factories and workshops that supply the fabrics, the metalwork, the thousand objects of industry and craft, as well as the means of defence, without the railways and other means of communication that allow us to exchange our products with the free communes of the surrounding

²⁵ Ballivet, "La représentation du Prolétariat au Parlement", *La Vie Ouvrière*, 5 May 1910, 533. James Guillaume later linked this speech to "The Ideas of the International" in the article "A propos du discours de Ballivet" published in the leading syndicalist journal *La Vie ouvrière* (5 July 1910).

²⁶ "The Anarchist Idea from the Point of View of Its Practical Realisation", *Direct Struggle Against Capital*, 221.

²⁷ "The Workers' Movement in Spain", *Words of a Rebel* (Oakland: PM Press, 2022), 239.

²⁸ "Workers' Organisation", *Words of a Rebel*, 250.

area and to combine our efforts for resistance and for attack, we are condemned in advance to perish, we will suffocate like a fish out of water which can no longer breathe although bathed entirely in the vast ocean of air.

Let us recall the great strike of railway engineers that took place a few years ago in America. The great mass of public recognised that their cause was just; everyone was tired with the insolence of the companies, and they were glad to see them diminished at the mercy of their crews. But when they, masters of the tracks and locomotives, neglected to use them, when all the flow of trade was interrupted, when food and goods of all kinds had doubled in price, public opinion changed sides. "Rather the companies that rob us and who break our arms and legs than those idiot strikers who leave us to starve to death!" Do not forget it! All the interests of the crowd must be safeguarded and its needs, along with its instincts for justice, must be fully satisfied.²⁹

This showed both the power of a general strike and the need to turn it as soon as possible into a general expropriation in order to *restart* production and distribution under workers' control – not to mention to allow the coordination for the defence of the revolution and other essential functions.

The 1886 Eight Hour Day strikes in America also showed the power and potential of a general strike. Initially called by the Federation of Organized Trades and Labor Unions in 1884, the organisation proclaimed that on the 1st of May 1886 the working day would be eight-hours, enforced not by feeble laws but by the workers themselves. By 1886, the idea had caught on with, for example, the rank-and-file of the Knights of Labor joining the movement in opposition to its leadership.³⁰ While initially dismissing the movement as doomed to failure (thanks, in part, to residual views from when they were followers of Marx and Lassalle), the anarchist International Working People's Association (IWPA) joined the agitation and the strikes which erupted on May 1st. On May 4th, the police attacked a peaceful rally near the Haymarket, a bomb exploded and the State had the perfect excuse to crush the anarchists: as Emma Goldman later put it, "five men had to pay with their lives because they advocated Syndicalist methods as the most effective, in the struggle of labor against capital."³¹

Interestingly, Kropotkin's article on "Expropriation" was translated for *The Alarm* (the English-language newspaper of the IWPA) and appeared in a few weeks before the strikes for the eight-hour day.³² Given that many members of the IWPA had either seen or participated in the 1877 strike wave, its arguments clearly resonated with them.

²⁹ "Expropriation", *Words of a Rebel*, 199–200.

³⁰ Brecher, 37–9.

³¹ "Syndicalism: The Modern Menace to Capitalism", *Red Emma Speaks: An Emma Goldman Reader* (New York: Humanity Books, 1998), 87. Initially published in "Syndicalism: Its Theory and Practice" in two parts in *Mother Earth* (January and February 1913), before being revised as a pamphlet the same year, 1913. It should also be noted that Goldman regularly lectured on syndicalism, direct action and the general strike.

³² "Expropriation", *The Alarm*, 20 March 1886.

The London Dock Strike of 1889 and after

By the early 1880s, leading anarchists had realised the potential of the general strike as a means of starting a revolution but also the dangers inherent in it if it did not become a general expropriation. Without this, the general strike would fail simply because the working class would suffer due to the lack of necessary supplies. However, the rest of the 1880s saw far too many anarchists become infatuated by dynamite bluster and abstract revolutionary rhetoric rather than the practical work within the labour movement which marked the late 1860s to the late 1870s.

However, the period was not without progress for anarchists “played an important part in the Tailors Union, securing a declaration in favour of the general strike at a meeting of members in 1885” while a “more successful anarchist attempt to radicalise trade unions developed when a leading trade union militant, Joseph Tortelier, joined the anarchist movement in 1884 and eventually succeeded in persuading the Builders’ *chambres syndicales* of Paris to declare for the general strike at a large meeting in November 1887.”³³

These tendencies were reinforced by the practical example of the 1889 London Dock Strike which inspired the likes of Kropotkin and Malatesta to write more on the need for anarchist involvement in the labour movement.³⁴ As the former summarised many years later:

The strike was a wonderful lesson in many respects. It demonstrated to us the practical possibility of a General Strike.

Once the life of the Port of London had been paralysed, the strike spread wider and wider, bringing all sorts of industries to a standstill, and threatening to paralyse the whole life of the five millions of Londoners.

Another lesson of this strike was – in showing the powers of the working men for organising the supply and distribution of food for a large population of strikers. The demonstration was quite conclusive.”³⁵

Kropotkin wrote two articles for French anarchists on the strike.³⁶ The first argued that the Great Dock Strike was “the picture of a people organising itself during the Revolution” and had “demonstrated in a way that brought a shiver down the back of the bourgeois to what extent a great city is at the mercy of two or three hundred thousand workers.” It was “the general strike” which “has proven the strength of the workers” even if it did not need “all workers [to] cease work on the same day” and showed the necessity of anarchists to “work amongst the workers... to prepare for the social, economic, Revolution.”³⁷ The strike had shown millions of workers “the *uselessness* of the employers, whose harmfulness they have known about for a long time” and had confirmed anarchist theory – on the ability of workers to organise themselves, federalism and the possibility of agreeable work, “the work of the society that has achieved Expropriation,

³³ Cahm, 259.

³⁴ For more details, see Iain McKay, “The London Dock Strike of 1889”, *Anarcho-Syndicalist Review* No. 63 (Winter 2015).

³⁵ “1886–1907: Glimpses into the Labour Movement in this Country”, *Direct Struggle Against Capital*, 395.

³⁶ In 1897, these articles were included in a pamphlet with a four page preface and an article by John Burns, one of the strike leaders, entitled *La Grande Grève des Docks* (*The Great Dock Strike*).

³⁷ “Ce que c’est qu’une grève”, *La Révolte*, 7 September 1889.

followed by Anarchist-Communism.”³⁸ Similarly with Malatesta, who used the strike as evidence to support his labour-orientated anarchist-communism.³⁹

The following year – 1890 – saw an anonymous article entitled “General Strike” in *Le Révolté* end with the words: “We want free agreement of labour, without masters, without laws, but simply grouped by affinities. Since the general strike is the cornerstone of our liberation, cry out long live the general strike.”⁴⁰ Louise Michel was also regularly lecturing on the general strike and issued a pamphlet which proclaimed that “Power is dead... capital is a fiction, since without work it cannot exist, and it is not suffering for the Republic that is necessary; but creating the Social Republic... for all, a free humanity upon a free world.”⁴¹ This would be achieved by an expropriatory general strike:

Taking possession is more accurate than expropriation, since expropriation implies an exclusion of one or the other, which cannot exist, the whole world belongs to everyone, each will then take what he needs... Individual property persists in living despite its anti-social results, the crimes it causes on every side... A single general strike could finish it off, it is coming with no other leaders than the instinct of life – revolt or die [there is] no other alternative... No one can believe that the transformations of societies stops with us and that this most illusory of republics is the end of progress. It is communist anarchy which is on the horizon on every side⁴²

The stirrings of the general strike were being felt across the globe, in Germany, Brazil, the United States in Britain and Belgium (in the latter two countries, “it is by a hundred thousand that the strikers are rising up, soon it will be more”⁴³).

Anarchists took a keen interest in the 1st of May movement which arose after the Second International passed a resolution making it International Workers’ Day. Like other anarchists, Kropotkin rejected the idea of the day being a simply one for marches and urged that it be marked as a general strike – for winning the 8 Hour Day and, potentially, as a means of creating a revolutionary situation.⁴⁴ So while anarchists in 1890 and 1891 saw as an opportunity for the workers to show their strength across the world on the same day, German Social Democracy like the trade union bureaucrats in Britain pushed celebrating International Workers’ Day to the first Sunday after May 1st.⁴⁵ The prestige of the German Marxists within the Second International proved decisive in which vision dominated how the 1st of May was marked, as Kropotkin lamented:

As in the International, the idea of the general strike emerged and its implementation seemed imminent, as the various trades banded together, federated and took to the streets on May 1st. These were stirrings that had to be halted at all costs.

The Marxists took charge of that.⁴⁶

³⁸ “La grève de Londres”, *La Révolte*, 27 September 1889.

³⁹ “A proposito di uno sciopero”, *L’Associazione*, 6 October 1889.

⁴⁰ “Grève Générale”, *Le Révolté*, 8 March 1890.

⁴¹ Louise Michel, *Prise de possession* (Paris: Saint-Denis, 1890), 5.

⁴² Michel, 12–14.

⁴³ Michel, 14.

⁴⁴ “Allez-Vous En !”, *La Révolte*, 4 October 1890.

⁴⁵ See, for example, Peter Kropotkin, “1st May 1891” in *Direct Struggle Against Capital* (this three-part article originally appeared in *La Révolte* on 18 and 25 October and 1 November 1890).

⁴⁶ “The Death of the New International”, *Direct Struggle Against Capital*, 338.

“What should have been the tangible sign of the solidarity pact between the oppressed of every country,” Malatesta bemoaned a few years later, “what should have been a review of the proletarian forces, what should have helped prepare the people for today’s great revolutionary means – the general strike – has turned into the *feast* of labour – and a feast day little observed!”⁴⁷

This disappointment did not stop anarchists working within the unions. With the movement towards renewed and strengthened anarchist participation in the labour movement underway, Malatesta raised some concerns:

The general strike is preached and this is all to the good; but, as I see it, imagining or announcing that the general strike is the revolution is plain wrong. It would only be a splendid opportunity for making the Revolution, but nothing more. It might be transformed into revolution, but only if the revolutionaries wielded enough influence, enough strength and enough enterprise to drag the workers down the road to expropriation and armed attack, before the effects of hunger, the impact of massacre or concessions from the bosses come along to erode the strikers’ morale... No longer should the strike be the warfare of folded arms.⁴⁸

The Belgium General Strike of 1893 saw Malatesta in the country.⁴⁹ He shared his views of the events with Kropotkin who penned an article for *La Révolte* noting its importance in terms of how it presaged the early days of what could become a social revolution and the inability of Belgium anarchists to push it further than its limited initial goal to secure universal suffrage. This article was considered important enough for its arguments on anarchist activity to be summarised in *Freedom* which concluded:

The lost opportunity in Belgium last April should be a useful lesson to all Anarchists. There is little doubt that if our comrades had devoted as much energy to an active propaganda in the labour movement as to talking bombs and dynamite, the result, when the opportunity for action came, would have been very different. What might have been the beginning of a social revolution in Belgium has ended in a miserable fiasco.... When every trade union, every co-operative society, every club, every voluntary association of workers has amongst its members several convinced Anarchists... then a true Social Revolution will be an immediate practical possibility. Then there will be men in every district ready to seize the opportunity offered by a great strike... But let us take warning by Belgium and avoid the fatal mistake of standing aloof from the daily practical interests of the mass of our fellow workmen. A true Social Revolution can never be brought about by a few enthusiasts. It is a change wrought throughout the inmost depths of the people; a change of heart and mind and spirit in enormous masses of men.⁵⁰

Again, the importance of organised anarchists within popular movements – like a general strike – is seen as key, the means of transforming a protest or revolt into a social revolution. A

⁴⁷ “The 1st of May”, *Complete Works of Malatesta* (Edinburgh: AK Press, 2016) III: 63.

⁴⁸ “Matters Revolutionary”, *The Method of Freedom: An Errico Malatesta Reader* (Edinburgh: AK Press, 2014), 106–7.

⁴⁹ Davide Turcato, *Making Sense of Anarchism: Errico Malatesta’s Experiments with Revolution, 1889–1900* (Edinburgh: AK Press, 2015), 104–8.

⁵⁰ “A Word in Season”, *Freedom*, June 1893.

strike, no matter how large, in-and-of-itself would not become a revolution automatically. The role of anarchists – the militant minority – was crucial. Malatesta, likewise, explained other lessons to be learned from these events and their aftermath:

Let us now ask the parliamentary socialists: if the people, denied so-called political rights, were able, by virtue of the strength of their organisation, to impose their wishes upon the government, why do you say that nothing can be achieved unless deputies are appointed? And why, having managed to win universal suffrage with admirable vigour, have they not managed to win anything worthwhile since then? Might it be because, whenever the people vote, they grow accustomed to looking to Parliament for everything and cease doing things for themselves?

Then again, all the effort put into securing the vote – for the right to appoint the people to whom they look for certain reforms – might that not have been effort better invested in going after the desired reforms directly?⁵¹

Unsurprisingly, when Anarchists sought to secure their right as socialists to participate in the Second International at the London Congress of 1896,⁵² Kropotkin also urged that they “must also show solidarity with the idea of the general strike, in contrast to the politicians who are using every means at their disposal to suppress it until the next Congress.”⁵³ After the anarchists were expelled from the Congress, they held a counter-meeting at which “Louise Michel advocated the general strike. Partial strikes fail and partial revolts fail and lead to hecatombs of victims of the best of the workers. A general strike would mean a general revolt which could not be put down by massacres. Their duty was to organise the miserable and down-trodden for this last great effort for freedom.”⁵⁴ A resolution saw the definition of “political action” widen beyond the electioneering insisted upon by the Marxists:

all Anarchist-Socialists agree that the emancipation of the labouring masses by organised struggle against Capital by means of a general strike is absolutely impossible without systematic struggle against the monopolised State... organise all who are already fighting against Capital for a general *Political Strike* against the State, monopolised by the capitalist class⁵⁵

Anarchists helped ensure the general strike made its way into the French trade union movement, becoming part of revolutionary syndicalism and from there spread internationally – helped by anarchists across the globe who had been raising it since the late 1860s. It even started to permeate into the Marxist movement, with Social Democratic parties developing within them advocates of the idea who would not be put off by appeals to the authority of Marx and Engels.

⁵¹ “How to Get... What You Want”, *Complete Works of Malatesta* III:71.

⁵² For more details, see Davide Turcato’s “Socialists and Workers: The 1896 London Congress”, *Black Flag Anarchist Review* Volume 1 Number 3 (Autumn 2021) and *Making Sense of Anarchism*, 136–141.

⁵³ “The Workers’ Congress of 1896”, *Direct Struggle Against Capital*, 348.

⁵⁴ *Proceedings of the International Worker’s Congress, London, July-August, 1896* (Glasgow: The Labour Leader, 1896), 65.

⁵⁵ *Proceedings*, 65–6.

1905 and after

By the dawn of the new century, the general strike was international and spreading – both in terms of advocates and practice. In 1902, the German anarchist-syndicalist Arnold Roller published his pamphlet *Der Generalstreik und die Soziale Revolution* (*The General Strike and the Social Revolution*) in London which summarised its nature and history. This was translated in 1905 as *The Social General Strike* and Max Baginski and others circulated it at the founding conference of the Industrial Workers of the World in June of that year, where the veteran anarchist Lucy Parsons spoke about it to the assembled delegates:

I wish to say that my conception of the future method of taking possession of this Earth is that of the general strike; that is my conception of it. The trouble with all the strikes in the past has been this: the workingmen... strike and go out and starve. Their children starve. Their wives get discouraged... My conception of the strike of the future is not to strike and go out and starve, but to strike and remain in and take possession of the necessary property of production. If anyone is to starve – I do not say it is necessary – let it be the capitalist class.⁵⁶

With the Russian Revolution of 1905, its power and potential became obvious. Kropotkin rightly noted the emergence of both the soviets and the use of the general strike:

Another prominent feature of the Russian revolution is the ascendancy which labour has taken in it. It is not social democrats, or revolutionary socialists, or anarchists, who take the lead in the present revolution. It is labour – the workingmen. Already during the first general strike, the St. Petersburg workingmen had nominated 132 delegates, who constituted a “Council [Soviet] of the Union of Workingmen,” and these delegates had nominated an executive of eight members... Similar organizations most probably have sprung up at Moscow and elsewhere, and at this moment the workingmen of St. Petersburg are systematically arming themselves in order to resist the absolutist “black gangs”...

Many years ago the general strike was advocated by the Latin workingmen as a weapon which would be irresistible in the hands of labour for imposing its will. The Russian revolution has demonstrated that they were right. Moreover, there is not the slightest doubt that if the general strike has been capable of forcing the centuries-old institution of autocracy to capitulate, it will be capable also of imposing the will of the labourers upon capital, and that the workingmen, with the common sense of which they have given such striking proof, will find also the means of solving the labour problem, so as to make industry the means not of personal enrichment but of satisfying the needs of the community.⁵⁷

In the anarchist press, he noted that the Soviet “very much reminds us of the Central Committee which preceded the Paris Commune of 1871, and it is certain that workers across the country should organise on this model. In any case, these councils represent the revolutionary strength

⁵⁶ “Speeches at the I.W.W.’s founding Convention”, *Black Flag Anarchist Review* vol. 2 no. 1 (Spring 2022), 126.

⁵⁷ Peter Kropotkin, “The Revolution in Russia”, *The Nineteenth Century and After* (December 1905), 880–1.

of the working class.” When the workers and peasants “understand the strength conferred by direct action added to the general strike” and get “their hands on all that is necessary to live and produce”, then they can lay “the initial foundations of the communist commune.”⁵⁸ Kropotkin stressed how it validated anarchist advocacy of the general strike:

A general strike was declared. “Nonsense! A general strike is impossible!” the fools said, even then. But the workingmen set earnestly to stop all work in the great city, and fully succeeded. In a few days the strike became general. What the workingmen must have suffered during these two or three weeks, when all work was suspended and provisions became extremely scarce, one can easily imagine; but they held out... Once the heart of Russia, Moscow, had struck, all the other towns followed. St. Petersburg soon joined the strike, and the workingmen displayed the most admirable organizing capacities... A whole country had struck against its government, all but the troops... In a few days the strike had spread over all the main cities of the empire, including Poland and Finland... All life in the towns had come to a standstill. And what exasperated the rulers most was that the workers offered no opportunity for shooting at them and re-establishing “order” by massacres. A new weapon, more terrible than street warfare, had thus been tested and proved to work admirably.⁵⁹

This was reflected in the conclusions of a Russian Anarchist congress held in 1906:

The social-democrats consider the workers’ unions as an *aid* in their political fight; the anarchists, on the other hand, consider them as *natural organs for the direct struggle with capital and for the organisation of the future order* — organs that are *inherently necessary* to achieve the workers’ own goals...

We could all appreciate the importance of the general strike for Russia last October, when even the unbelievers had to admit its revolutionary potential... we can boldly declare that the general strike, proclaimed by our Western European comrades as a means of producing a revolution, has proved to be a powerful weapon in the struggle... however, we have to remember that the general strike is not an instrument that can be used by the will of central committees and that can simply be decreed by an order of the majority of workers’ delegates... a strike can only be successful when it is willed by a large majority of the workers...

We want to add that although a general strike is a good method of struggle, it does not free the people that use it from the necessity of an armed struggle against the dominating order... we also want to point to the necessity of not losing sight of the necessary preparatory work amongst the peasants and the workers to the end of *using immediately the first fruits of the victories that were gained through the general strike*, and... starting the expropriation of lands and means of production and consumption immediately... wherever this seems possible.⁶⁰

⁵⁸ “L’Action directe et la Grève générale en Russie”, *Les Temps Nouveaux*, 2 December 1905.

⁵⁹ “The Revolution in Russia”, 874–5.

⁶⁰ “The Russian Revolution and Anarchism”, *Direct Struggle Against Capital*, 476–7.

This resolution summarised the lessons gained from the International onwards – unions as means of combating and replacing capitalism, the key role of the general strike as starting a social revolution and the recognition that it needed to be extended to both expropriation and insurrection. Similar viewpoints were expressed in the resolutions passed on syndicalism and the general strike at the International Anarchist Congress held the following year.⁶¹ Malatesta made the point explicitly in his speech at it:

As far as I am concerned, I accept the principle [of the general strike] and promote it as much as I can, and have done so for several years. The general strike has always struck me as an excellent means to set off the social revolution. However, let us take care to avoid falling under the dangerous illusion that the general strike can make the revolution superfluous.

We are expected to believe that by suddenly halting production the workers will starve the bourgeoisie into submission within a few days.⁶² Personally speaking, I can think of nothing more absurd. The first to starve to death during a general strike will not be the bourgeoisie who have all the accumulated produce at their disposal, but the workers, who only have their labour to live on.

The general strike as it is described to us is a pure utopia. Either the workers, starving after three days of striking, will go back to work with his tail between his legs... or he will decide to take the products into his own hands by force.... let us prepare for this inevitable insurrection instead of limiting ourselves to exalting the general strike as if it were a panacea for all evils...

Rather than inviting the workers to stop working, what we should be doing is asking them to go on working, but for their own benefit. Unless that happens, the general strike will soon become a general famine, even if we were strong enough to commandeer all the produce in the warehouses straight away.⁶³

The importance of the general strike as a means of creating a revolutionary situation was shared by the likes of Emma Goldman, so often slandered by Marxists and others as some kind of “lifestyle” anarchist. Thus, we see her and her comrades urge the creation of a revolutionary weekly paper to supplement *Mother Earth* “to deal entirely with labor, its battles, hopes and aspirations” as the monthly “cannot devote itself exclusively to one particular phase”. The proposed paper would expand upon the articles on the class war in *Mother Earth* and would be “a fighting champion of revolutionary labor. We must carry our ideas to the men that toil” particularly given “how all important is the propaganda of direct action and the general strike” and called on anarchists to work with them:

It is for us, as Anarchists, to point out to the workingman the real cause of his dissatisfaction, misery and oppression; to impress upon him the inefficiency of trades

⁶¹ *The International Anarchist Congress: Held at the Plancius Hall, Amsterdam, on August 26th-31st, 1907* (London: Freedom Press, 1907), 21–2

⁶² Malatesta had in mind statements like the general strike “probably be[ing] the first time that the ruling classes will understand and feel what it means to be hungry” and “[l]et us stop working for them and they will starve in spite of their money.” (Arnold Roller, *The Social General Strike* [Chicago: Debating Club No. 1, 1905], 8, 17).

⁶³ *The International Anarchist Congress of Amsterdam (1907)* (Edmonton: Black Cat Press, 2008), 124–5.

unionism, pure and simple; to convince him of the dangerous uselessness of parliamentary methods. We must discover to him his natural weapons and the powerful means at hand to make himself free; we must point out to him the methods so successfully being used by his European brothers: the revolutionary tactics whose final destiny it is to free labor from all exploitation and oppression, and usher in a free society; the modern, efficient weapons of direct action and general strike..⁶⁴

The journal hoped that “the terrible fear with which the solidarity of labor and the General Strike movement inspire the masters will teach the disinherited the world over to make common cause and to appreciate to the fullest extent the powerful weapon in their hands” and stressed that “the solidaric General Strike [is] labor’s great emancipator.”⁶⁵ An example of *Mother Earth*’s engagement with the class struggle can be seen in relation to the general strike in Philadelphia, which saw Voltairine de Cleyre raising the need to turn a general strike into a general expropriation in its April 1910 issue:

there is no doubt that the enemy recognises that the weapon of industrial warfare in the future will be the general strike, – and dreads it... do the workers perceive, that it must be the strike which will stay in the factory, not go out? which will guard the machines, and allow no scab to touch them? which will organise, not to inflict deprivation on itself, but on the enemy? which will take over industry and operate it for the workers, not for franchise holders, stockholders, and office-holders? Do they? Or will it take a few thousand more clubbings to knock it into their heads?⁶⁶

Another article insisted that “labor possesses the power, by means of united and direct action, forever to put a stop to the wholesale slaughter of capitalist greed... Let us act for ourselves, on the spot: the control of the factories should be in the hands of those who work in them; the means: direct action and the general strike, and *sabotage* which has accomplished such splendid results in the syndicalist movement of France and Italy... All too long the toilers have felt themselves mere ‘hands’ and subjects. It is time to remember their rights as human beings and to realize their strength to assert these.”⁶⁷ Goldman summarised the paper’s perspective on the general strike:

By the General Strike, Syndicalism means a stoppage of work, the cessation of labor. Nor need such a strike be postponed until all the workers of a particular place or country are ready for it... the General Strike may be started by one industry and exert a tremendous force... The General Strike, initiated by one determined organization, by one industry or by a small, conscious minority among the workers, is... soon taken up by many other industries, spreading like wildfire... Syndicalism recognizes the right of the producers to the things which they have created; namely, the right of the workers to help themselves if the strike does not meet with speedy settlement... the General Strike will become a fact the moment labor understands its full value – its destructive as well as constructive value, as indeed many workers all over the world are beginning to realize.⁶⁸

⁶⁴ “To Our Comrades”, *Mother Earth*, September 1907.

⁶⁵ “Observations and Comments”, *Mother Earth*, August 1908.

⁶⁶ “A Study of the General Strike in Philadelphia”, *Black Flag Anarchist Review* vol. 2 no. 1 (Spring 2022), 60.

⁶⁷ M.B., “Everlasting Murder”, *Mother Earth*, April 1911.

⁶⁸ Emma Goldman, “Syndicalism”, 95–6.

The seeds planted in the International in the late 1860s had blossomed by the 1910s, as the anarchist perspective on the general strike had become well-defined – primarily spontaneous, spreading, expropriatory and a means to create a social revolution rather than the revolution itself. It was recognised that the general strike could take many forms and anarchists sought the tactics needed to both promote general strikes and to push the ones which occurred towards revolutionary ends, based on an analysis of strike waves which had happened and the implications of previous conceptions.

Developments within Revolutionary Syndicalism

Anarchist involvement in the French labour movement was one of the key factors in the rise of revolutionary syndicalism in that country. The anarchists raised many of their ideas within the movement – rejection of electioneering, direct struggle against capital, workers' combat organisations taking over workplaces, and the general strike. It is fair to say, given the ignorance and distortion about anarchism, many consider these notions as syndicalist rather than anarchist – including the general strike.⁶⁹ Indeed, it is often proclaimed as *the* syndicalist strategy.

With these ideas now associated with the main French union federation, the CGT, they became more respectable and were discussed within Marxist parties, particularly by those on their left who could see the limitations of parliamentarianism. In 1904, leading French syndicalist Émile Pouget contributed a history of the general strike to a special issue of a leading French Marxist journal which discussed its various aspects and its evolution in syndicalist ranks.⁷⁰ He noted how many assertions by the enemies of the general strike failed to take into account how the idea had changed within syndicalist ranks, from a “folded arms” strike called on a specific day in the 1890s to a spontaneous, spreading strike which moved quickly to expropriation and workers' control (as regards the latter, similar perspectives were expressed by British syndicalists in the 1910s⁷¹).

This is reflected in the syndicalist novel *How We Shall Bring About the Revolution* (1909) which Pouget wrote with Émile Pataud. In it the revolution was not a passive folding of arms but rather an active, insurrectionary and expropriatory movement which spread from a union dispute rather than being called for a specific day. The general strike “very soon changed into an insurrectional strike” and “the General Strikers occupied the centres of Government action, and expelled the representative of the State.” The unions “in the provision trade constituted themselves into commissions for provisioning” communities while others, “which, under Capitalism, had been societies for combat, changed into societies for production; and each in its sphere set itself to the reorganisation of its work”. They also saw the necessity for the “organisation of defence, with a Trade Union and Federal basis.” These “Syndicalist battalions were not a force external to the people. They were the people themselves” who “had the common-sense to arm themselves in order to protect their conquered liberty.”⁷²

⁶⁹ Space precludes discussing the differences between revolutionary anarchism and syndicalism but this is addressed here: Iain McKay, “Precursors of Syndicalism IV: The Anarchist-Communist Critique”, *Anarcho-Syndicalist Review* 78 (Winter 2020).

⁷⁰ “La Grève Générale et Le Socialisme”, *Le Mouvement socialiste : revue bi-mensuelle internationale*, June and July 1904.

⁷¹ Iain McKay, “Tom Mann and British Syndicalism”, *Black Flag Anarchist Review* vol. 1 no. 3 (Autumn 2021).

⁷² Émile Pataud and Émile Pouget, *How we shall bring about the Revolution: Syndicalism and the Co-operative Commonwealth* (London: Pluto Press, 1990), 94, 63, 121–2, 158. Kropotkin, it should be noted, suggested in his preface

This vision of the general strike was repeated in 1930 by Pierre Besnard. The general strike, he explained, was “a *specifically syndicalist* weapon” which can deal “in a *decisive* manner with all revolutionary situations whatever the initial factors of the movements set in motion”⁷³ and contrasted it with action by political parties:

It is directly opposed to *insurrection*, the only weapon of the political parties.

It is, by far, more complete than that. In fact, whereas the latter only makes it possible to take power, the general strike not only provides the possibility of destroying that power, of getting rid of those who enjoy it, of preventing any party from capturing it, it deprives capitalism and the State of all means of defence, while at the same time *abolishing* individual property, replacing it by collective property.

In a word, the general strike has a power of *immediate* transformation, and this power is exercised for the sole benefit of the proletariat, to whom the possession of the apparatus of production and exchange offers the means of *radically* transforming the social order.

The expropriatory general strike, with violence which the proletariat will invariably be obliged to use, will be, moreover, clearly *insurrectional*.

Its effect will be felt at the same time politically and economically, whereas insurrection permits a party to act only in the political field.⁷⁴

This was the “*insurrectionary and expropriatory general strike*” and “[o]n the duration of this [work] stoppage will depend the future of the revolutionary movement,” Besnard stressed.⁷⁵ The need was to restart production under workers’ management:

Let us, now, examine what are the characteristics of the general strike. I have said that it signified in the first place and above all, the cessation of production, and work, under capitalism.

This means that workers, then the peasants, must simultaneously stop work. Does this mean they must quit their place of work and abandon the means of production to the bosses? No. Unlike what happens during a strike, workers will have to at the same time *stop* work, *occupy* the place of production, *get rid* of the boss, *expropriate* him, and *get ready* to get production moving again, but in the interests of the revolution.

The cessation of work and production will mark the end of a regime, the expropriation of the possessors of the means of production and exchange and at the same time the overthrow of State power.⁷⁶

The similarities to the ideas expounded by the likes of Kropotkin and Malatesta are clear.

that the authors “have considerably attenuated the resistance that the Social Revolution will probably meet with on its way.” (xxxvi)

⁷³ Pierre Besnard, *Les Syndicats Ouvriers et la Revolution Sociale* (Paris: CGT-SR, 1930), 249.

⁷⁴ Besnard, 249.

⁷⁵ Besnard, 252.

⁷⁶ Besnard, 251.

Just as the anarchists had refined their position over the years, so had syndicalists. This means that certain critiques raised by, say, the Bolsheviks were addressing a position which had long been discarded by leading syndicalists, reflecting the early years of the movement or held by similar, but by no means identical, movements such as Industrial Unionism (the IWW). This is to be expected – syndicalists, like anarchists, sought to learn the lessons of the strikes they were involved in as well as address the critiques raised against them by others in the wider socialist and labour movements.

Conclusions

More, much more, could be written. The activities of anarchists and syndicalists during the 1917 Russian Revolution (which saw workers start to apply the ideas raised by libertarians twelve years before), in the near-revolutions which erupted across the world towards the end of the First World War and immediately after, the occupation of the factories in Italy in 1920, France 1936 and 1968 – the list is long.

However, the role of the general strike in anarchist theory, its birth and development, have been indicated from the First International to 1914 as well as changes sketched within syndicalism. As can be seen, many of the characteristics of what was latter associated with revolutionary syndicalism had been developed within the Federalist-wing of the International and the anarchist movement which emerged from it. The anarchists in the 1870s saw the need to organise unions which would both fight for gains within capitalism and be the means of replacing it, using strikes and other forms of direct struggle against capital with the aim of turning these into a general strike and the seizing of the means of life by the workers themselves.

Anarchist support for a general strike is long-standing and is intimately linked to the rise of revolutionary anarchism within First International. However, this advocacy was not uncritical and it quickly recognised – driven by analysing actual mass strikes – the limitations of a simple “folded arms” general strike. Rather, the need to turn the strike into a revolution, to move beyond the ceasing of work to the seizing of workplaces was stressed. In short, the general strike was seen as a possible start of a social revolution but it had to go beyond this into expropriation and insurrection for it to achieve its potential. As Kropotkin summarised in 1904: “Expropriation as an end, and the general strike as a means of paralysing the bourgeois world in all countries at once.”⁷⁷

Likewise within revolutionary syndicalism itself, with initial hopes of the general strike being a case of ceasing work with the demand for the capitalists to handover their property replaced with a recognition that such a vision was utopian and that the general strike, as anarchists had argued, had to swiftly move towards expropriation and insurrection.

Unsurprisingly, then, Alexander Berkman summarised this position in his classic 1929 introduction to revolutionary anarchism:

the social revolution can take place only by means of the *General Strike*. The General Strike, rightly understood and thoroughly carried out, is the social revolution.... its real meaning is revolution, that it is the only practical way to it. It is time for us to learn this, and when we do so the social revolution will cease to be a vague, unknown

⁷⁷ “Preface to the 1904 Italian Edition”, *Words of a Rebel*, lii.

quantity. It will become an actuality, a definite method and aim, a program whose first step is the taking over of the industries by organized labor.... There is no man nor any body of men that can manage it except the *workers themselves*, for it takes the workers to operate the industries... the taking over of the industries... means... the running of them by labor. As concerns the taking over, you must consider that the workers are actually now *in* the industries. The taking over consists in the workers *remaining* where they are, yet remaining not as employees but as the rightful collective possessions.... The expropriation of the capitalist class during the social revolution-the taking over of the industries-requires tactics directly the reverse of those you now use in a strike. In the latter you quit work and leave the boss in full possession of the mill, factory, or mine. It is an idiotic proceeding, of course, for you give the master the entire advantage: he can put scabs in your place, and you remain out in the cold.

In expropriating, on the contrary, you *stay* on the job and you put the boss out... [the workers] take possession (by means of their revolutionary shop committees) of the workshop, factory, or other establishment... the factory becomes public property in charge of the union of workers engaged in the industry, all equal partners in the general undertaking.⁷⁸

Whether it should be existing unions or some new body created during the struggle (such as factory committees) is subject to debate by anarchists and syndicalists, but if both are organised in a libertarian fashion then it is of little importance (particularly as no union will have complete coverage and so any revolutionary situation will inevitably see new organisations being formed, regardless). Suffice to say, in areas dominated by reformist unions then federations of factory committees would likely be the preferred option (as was the case with Russian syndicalists in 1917, for example). These differences should not be used to hide the similarities between both positions just as differences between communist-anarchists and revolutionary syndicalists should not obscure what they have in common, not least support for the general strike.

What is past is prologue. The key is to know the events and arguments of the past to understand, learn and apply their lessons in new circumstances and in ways which avoid repeating the mistakes made. Yes, undoubtedly new mistakes will be made but knowing the past can ensure we, firstly, know when we are being lied to by those interested in discrediting libertarian ideas and, secondly and far more importantly, build upon the activity and theory of previous generations of libertarians.

⁷⁸ Alexander Berkman, *What is Anarchism?* (Edinburgh: AK Press, 2003), 197–8, 207–8.

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An account of the General Strike in Anarchism as expressed in both theory and practice as well as the interaction between the two. It appeared in *Black Flag Anarchist Review* Vol. 3. No. 1 (Spring 2023) and long with articles by leading anarchists on both the theory and the practice of the General Strike from 1873 to 1935.

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