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The Revolutionary Forces

Sébastien Faure

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1921

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Translator’s note: *I cut out a portion of this speech. Repetition mostly, and summarized other areas not important to the overall meaning of the text. I also have a question for the reader. What are the forces of the revolution today?*

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undermined their humanity, the revolution will save it. As for us, the anarchists, we do not want to live any more as slaves. We declared a pitiless war against the System, yes, a war with the knife! We know that it is necessary for us to win or die. We have thus decided to battle, battle at every moment against all obstacles and all constraints: Religion, Capital, Government, Militarism, Police, etc.

And we are determined to carry out this battle until victory is complete. We want to not only be free ourselves, but that all men shall be free. As long as there will be chains, even if they would be gilded, even if they would be light, even if they would be slack, nevertheless they would bind us, we will not disarm: we want all the chains broken off, all and forever!

the day of the Revolution, would influence the general movement; such are, for example, the feminist groupings and the birth control movement, the anti-alcohol and antimilitarist groups, and the Republican Association of ex-Servicemen which has the aim of grouping in particular the victims of the last war. Lastly, we have the Socialist Youth, trade unionist and anarchist youth, seedbeds of the active militants of tomorrow. It is this youth which is all our hope and which, will be the abundant harvest of tomorrow!

There is thus, as you see it, a whole legion of groupings full of goodwill and eager to get moving. I spoke this evening only about the large forces because I could not obviously talk about all the forces. The large forces are autonomous and independent; each one of them largely deploys its flag on the ground which is particular to it. The enemy feels this threat, is organized and united: never was repression as severe, never were the employers so firmly organized, never the police so arrogant, never did the courts give so many judgments, never, in a word, was the enemy more valiantly defended. It is thus a question of engaging the battle with all our forces joined together. We do not request any group to sacrifice its principles, its doctrines, its methods, its actions: we wish, on the contrary, that each one, that each grouping keeps and preserves its methods, doctrines, principles, so that all can be used when the hour sounds, because we have a goal to reach, major project to be achieved. All these associated forces will be essential.

The social structure threatens ruin. It is not ready to collapse, I do not mislead you there: there are cracks. However, the social structure is still solid and will need a heavy blow to demolish it. What is necessary, at the present time, is that a powerful breath of revolt rises and passes through all men of goodwill, for the arrogance of our Masters is made of our ignorance, their force is made of our weakness, their courage is made of our failure and their richness is made of our poverty! The spirit of submission degraded their characters, revolt will raise them; the practice of obedience curved their spines, revolt will straighten them; centuries of resignation

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We are thus a minority, but, such is the common fate of all new ideas; such never joined together around them but a negligible minority. When an idea starts to group around it an imposing minority, it is then that the truth is in motion... Today, it is anarchism which joins together this elite. Minority, yes: but it is not necessary to be numerous to do much work; it is even better often, being fewer: quality here overrides quantity. I like better a hundred individuals that one finds everywhere, who go where there is work to do, where intelligence and activity are deployed; I like good hundred individuals who speak, who write, who act, in words delivered with heat, than a thousand who remain quietly on their premises...

The anarchists are and will be thus always very few, but they are everywhere. They are what I will call the leaven which raises the bread. Already, you see them involved everywhere. At side of the few thousand declared anarchists belonging to anarchist groups, we see thousands and thousands in other groups: in the Free-thought Movement, in the Socialist Party, and with C.G.T. I know great numbers of them, in such small cities and the countryside, feeling the need to do something, and desire to mix in the local fights and the propaganda which is done on their region and around them. They adhere to the socialist movement; but they do not give up their anarchistic ideas. They are also in the trade unions, the co-operatives, they are everywhere... There are even those who are unaware of it! Because once one explains to them what is anarchism, they say: "But if it is that, I am anarchistic! I am with you!" Yes, anarchism is everywhere...

Such are the forces of revolution of which it was essential to spend this evening in review. I finish, because we have been nearly two hours in attendance. One could have had the whole conference to study each of these forces and we would not have even exhausted the subject. I devoted myself this evening to a simple description of each current, of each organization, a fast and short description. I neglected a certain number of other currents, other forces, other groupings which are not without value and who, on

sanctions against them, they condemned themselves voluntarily to isolation and it is there their punishment lies; they are surrounded today only with their loneliness and their abandonment...

Of all the forces of revolution which I quoted, anarchism is perhaps the smallest. We do not have illusions about our numerical power, we know that we do not have the compact battalions, like the Socialist Party, trade unions and the co-operatives: the anarchists were always a minority and, — to point out what I say to you, — they will always remain a minority. This is inevitable.

Ah! we too would like to recruit, but recruitment is not easy for us. Initially, our ideal is so high and so broad! Moreover, it is to some extent an unlimited ideal which develops each day, with events, higher and broader, so that, to embrace this ideal, to follow it and propagate it, we are needed so to speak, to be more developed men.

It is rather immodest of me to say this, I know, however, I must say it because it is the truth and that is my feeling; and then, there is no vanity to speak about oneself and its comrades, when it is done frankly and honestly. Yes, it is necessary to form part of the elite, it is necessary to be a more developed man, to rise to such altitudes, to where flies the anarchistic idea. What makes anarchistic recruitment especially difficult, is that there is nothing to gain with us; nothing to gain and much to lose... We have, indeed, neither offices, nor functionaries, nothing... not even notoriety to be offered to our followers.

I am mistaken: there is, on the contrary, much to gain among us; but these profits of which I want to speak undoubtedly allure only a minority, which is this elite about which I spoke. There is nothing to gain like a situation nor money, but there is too much to gain, if one wants to be satisfied, by way of compensation, of the pure and noble joys of a satisfied heart, of the spirit, of a high conscience. And, indeed, the anarchist finds joys incomparable and worth infinitely more in his eyes than the material advantages that rattle the vanity.

Comrades, I explained — quickly, but in a sufficient way — the first part of libertarian Communism, the critical, negative part and, I hope that I managed to convince you that misery, ignorance, hatred, repression, suffering in all its forms, is the fatal result of the social background in which we live.

If, as I hope, you arrived at this conviction, you must also be convinced of the need and the urgency to put an end to a social system which generates such pains. It is precisely what we will begin to study this evening. It is necessary to destroy the established social order since it is generating sufferings, inequalities, injustices and miseries. It should be destroyed at all costs; it should be destroyed as soon as possible; it should be destroyed root and branch.

Here are terms of the problem that it is necessary for us to solve: since the current social forms are in formal contradiction with the needs of the hour and the aspirations of the present generation, these social forms must disappear. Which are the forces we can put in line and oppose to the social forces which maintain the current situation? What spirit must animate the militants who constitute these vast organizations that I call the forces of revolution? Which is the goal of each one of these organizations, of each one of these forces? Is it possible, whereas each one is independent, autonomous, having its doctrines, principles, methods, tactics, to join them together in a common block to constitute the block of the Revolution? Such is the problem that we will be posed and that we have to solve. It is clear.

Therefore, on which forces can we support our action? These forces are as follows: Free-thought, the Socialist Party, Trade Unionism, the Cooperatives, Anarchism. I speak obviously only about the large currents, the powerful organizations. I am obliged to somewhat neglect a crowd of groups which however have their very great utility in a mass movement. I will then examine them all...

Free-thought

Initially, it could appear unusual that I regard as a force of Revolution the free-thought. Indeed, I am very saddened by it. The movement has been prostituted so much for the last twenty-five years! It fell into this mess from the electoral game playing. It was used as springboard with quantity of profiteers who thought only of making political fortune on the back of free-thought. And noble aspirations were thus confiscated by go-getters and conspirators. The weakness, I will say even the impotence of freethinking, comes from the fundamental error into which it fell. It reduced the fight which it proposed to pettiness and meanness. One saw in the free-thought only one assertion especially anti-clerical and anti-Catholic. I recognize that this weakness was contained a little in the nature of the things opposed. The free-thinker always finds opposite him the representative of the Church. The one who is Master, who makes the law, who is listened to, it is him which, every Sunday goes up to the pulpit and teaches his flock what they must think, that which they must do. It was natural to counter this smothering power.

But the sphere of activity of free-thought should have widened and developed... The free-thinkers did not understand that thought can be free only in the condition which the man himself is free. They did not understand that one can apply the word of Latin here: *Lie sanatorium in corpore sano*, — a healthy spirit in a healthy body. One can apply it here with a light modification in the following way: Free thought in a free body. It is this ignorance of the truth which caused weakness and impotence of the free-thought movement.

With this old formula “free-thought”, (*libre pensée* ed.) I oppose the formula — which is new only of its opposition to the preceding one — “free thinking” (*pensée libre* ed.) ... Thus understood, the current of the free thinking, being attached to the social problem, could be a force of revolution of great value.

One could hope that such a developed philosophy, as pure a doctrine would be saved from the harmful influence of the War. Alas! it was if nothing. I say this in shame! Among the most notorious anarchists, among those whom we regarded as spiritual advisers, — not leaders, there are none on our premises, but you know as well as me as there are voices who are listened to more than others and of the consciences which seem to reflect the conscience of the other anarchists, — we were in pain to see some of these, whom we regarded as our elder brothers, like our spiritual advisers, undergoing a cursed failure!¹ They believed this war was not like others, that France had been attacked and needed defending vigorously; they became the collaborators of the “Union Sacree” and made a pact with the defenders of the nation, they were warriors right to the end...

And misfortune is that, since that time, they have not recognized their error; they remain trapped there. Just ask somebody who believes himself to have the bearing of a leader to repudiate itself! Ask somebody who hitherto had proclaimed truths which we believed almost without discussion, to ask this man to recognize that he made an error! This man, who believed himself anarchistic, will look you top to bottom and will never admit he could be mistaken.²

Like all the chiefs and the leaders of people, like all the drivers of crowd, the anarchist-warriors were victims of their stupid pride, and they placed their personal vanity above all. And yet, I imagine that when an error is made, it is suitable and worthy to recognize it honestly and that the only means of repairing it is to proclaim it publicly. We did not have need, we anarchists, to exclude these anarchist-warriors, to drive out them: they understood well that they did not have anything in common with us, that it was necessary to exclude themselves... After having betrayed, after having disavowed their past, these men are alone today. Without taking

¹refers to Emile Pouget, Jean Grave and Peter Kropotkin who supported WW1

²refers to Jean Grave who lead a faction of pro-war anarchists in the 1920's.

towards this splendid ideal that, whatever the school to which you belong, must direct your thoughts and your desires for its realization.

We believe that it is necessary to go there immediately; we think that it is not necessary to take a diverted road and that we go straight towards the goal, and I have the certainty that, all of you admire the grandeur, nobility and beauty of this marvelous ideal. Anarchism is, indeed, the meeting of all the forces about which I spoke this evening, it is, I said, the synthesis: anarchism is with free-thought in the fight it carries out against religion and all forms of intellectual and moral oppression; anarchism is with the Socialist Party in the fight which it continues against capitalism; anarchism is with trade unionism in the fight which it carries out for the workers against employers and exploiters of work; anarchism is with the co-operatives in their fight against commercial parasitism and the intermediaries which profit from this parasitism. Was I not right to say that anarchism is like the synthesis, like the summary of all the other forces of revolution; what condenses them, crowns and joins them all together? Yes, it is the summary and crowning!

Anarchism rejects any form of the domination of the man by man, and no form of the exploitation of man by man, since it tackles all forms of authority:

Political authority: the State. Economic authority: Property. Moral authority: Fatherland, Religion, Family. Legal authority: Courts, Laws and Police Force.

All the (authoritarian) social forces receive the vigorous and incisive blows that the anarchists attack them with. Anarchism, indeed, is against all oppressions, all constraints, it does not assign any limit to its action... From where do humanity's sufferings come? ... I put side the inherent suffering that arises from nature itself, but all the other sufferings, all the other pain has to due with bad social organization... Here is what the anarchist says to the oppressed, to the suffering ones.

A differently important force of revolution, is the Socialist Party. The Socialist Party organizes on the political ground the working mass and its friends. I add with intention "friends", because there is not, in the Socialist Party, any workingmen. The Socialist Party places the economic problem at the head of its concerns; I will even say that the Socialist doctrines are before all economic doctrines. The Socialists know that under capitalism, the economic situation dominates the political situation, that the authorities are only the political expression of the economic power of the bourgeoisie... Simply, the Socialist Party says: "There are two organizations: a specifically worker and, consequently, specifically economic organization, the General Confederation of Labor (CGT ed.); it thus rests with the Socialist Party to represent the political effort in the great movement which pushes humanity towards new destiny."

Just as trade unionism is to put the hand on the means of production and exchange, in the same way the purpose of the Socialist Party is to take possession, by all of the means, of Government, the State, of Authority. I knew a brief thirty-five years ago — that does not make me young person — a Socialist Party which was then like me, full of heat, full of ardor. I kept mine somewhat. Alas! The Socialists lost almost all of theirs. That moment, one did not split hairs; the social system was fought, one wanted to get rid of it at all costs, and one was taken by a mad hope. The Socialist Party was then impetuously revolutionary. It was young. Alas! It aged...it became old and somewhat petty bourgeois.

(Faure then lays out how the party fell into ministerialism, compromise, weak-kneed reformism all as a result of parliamentarianism. He also notes how some members inspired by the example of the Russian Revolution seek to re-invigorate the Party and sees hope there. ed.)

Another considerable force of revolution, is trade unionism. Trade unionism groups the workers specifically on an economic basis. Trade unionism has a very particular advantage: it is a natural grouping, and which I will to some extent describe as instinc-

tive. A grouping made up not by heterogeneous elements, but, on the contrary, by homogeneous elements. There are, within trade unionism, the employees, men on which the life depends on an owner, or a director, or an administration, and who, consequently, belong truly by their situation, by their daily labour to the working class. There is a very special advantage in this fact that trade unionism is a natural grouping, instinctive, homogeneous, When animals — and we are only animals having the claim to be higher animals, but I am not of course clear that this claim is justified, — when animals are threatened, they approach each other. They do not need to give each other the word... It is enough that the enemy is there and then, immediately, all the ants, all the bees, all the birds which form to part of the same species, of the same family, feeling a danger to threaten them, all get together, are linked, and thus is created a force allowing resistance and incalculable defense.

Trade unionism is this natural grouping, an instinctive association against the enemy who is, the owner, the exploiter, the capitalist... Trade unionism is governed by the legislation of 1884, whose author is Waldeck-Rousseau. Do not believe however, that trade unionists and guilds only go back to this time. They were there before him, and, here like always, the legislator simply recognized them in order to regulate, to channel, to hold it in some way under his dependence, his domination, the movement which existed already. Only, hitherto, the labour movement was absolutely guild like; each group had special claims concerning its working conditions, its habits, according to the places or the type of work or industry. One occupied oneself very little with one's neighbor. Pelloutier came. He rendered to the trade unionism this inappreciable service... he came to bring to trade unionism doctrines, an organization, a method.

(Here Faure lays out the doctrine, organization and methods of anarcho-sindicalism — class struggle unity, federalism, direct action, abolition of the wage system. ed.)

the million carried out each year in the Paris area, what admirable social projects one could make! Where are social projects either created or supported by the co-operative movement?...

I well agree that some large co-operatives give a few hundred or a few thousands francs to these projects, but where is the effort comparable with that which could, which should, be carried out? What immense efforts of education could be especially accomplished in favour of women and children, who one could interest thus in the revolutionary movement: festivals given, schools founded, school colonies, holiday camps, etc...penetrated of a new spirit, renouncing the defective practices, moving away more and more from the commercial spirit, co-operation could become, also, similar to trade unionism and a powerful force of revolution. And here I arrive at the last of the forces of Revolution which I want to study: Anarchism.

It is, in my opinion, the force of revolution par excellence, the incomparable force of revolution. I hear well that one could say to me: "Mr Josse, you are a goldsmith! It is not astonishing that you praise your goods, i.e. anarchism, since you are anarchistic. It is very natural!" Ah well, it is very natural. But if I did not believe that anarchism is the best of all social doctrines, the purest and highest of philosophies, if I did not estimate it as the noblest revolutionary movement, and that I knew of some other purer and more fertile than anarchism, I would go to this other! Anarchism, comrades, summarizes all the forces about which I already spoke. It is, so to speak, the synthesis...

Not only the bourgeoisie are not mistaken there, but all the eminent sociologists, all the philosophers, all the thinkers who occupied themselves of the social question, all the theorists, even those of the schools which are not anarchistic, recognized very honestly that anarchism was the point terminus, the climax of the social ideal and that it was there, through thousands and thousands of difficulties, humanity, finally released, would move one day. Integral Communism or anarchism, it is the same thing. It is, indeed,

operative, by way of refunding, a profit refunded. The remainder is for with the overhead, the payment of the personnel, the reserve funds and, finally, with the extension of the business. Ah well, I am opposed to the rebate of the profit, and here is why:

The prospect for this profit, the need for allotting a part to the members and for showing of it thus, this need involves the realization of large benefit and, naturally, in this form, the co-operative makes a return on the trade, the trade consisting in buying the cheapest possible, to resell as expensive as possible. A co-operative company which has the desire to refund its members an appreciable benefit makes a return, without wanting it, instinctively, to commercial practices and a mercenary attitude. Moreover, this rebate, this profit refunded stimulates the love of the profit in the member, and maintains, consequently, also the spirit of social conservatism...

This profit obliges one to maintain commercial prices: one sells like the neighboring tradesman, only one says to the customer members: "Here, you will not find immediately an economy, but at the end of the year, you will find, in the form of profit which will be refunded to you, a part of the benefit which we will have carried out." Such are the reasons for which I am against the refunded profit. And however I am of opinion to maintain a light difference between the cost price and the selling price, constituting a gross profit on which the overheads must be taken, the reserves to be constituted and even the execution of the projects of extension of the business even. The remainder would be allotted to the social projects which the co-operatives must support.

When I think that in Paris, or in the Paris area, it is a million, — you hear: it is a million, — which is the amount of benefit carried out by the co-operative companies!... Notice that I find it only natural that those who work in the co-operative live of this co-operative: they devote to it their time, their activity, their knowledge, it is thus perfectly normal that they live by it. But, that being said, and all doing suitably and reasonably, you see from here, with

Thus conceived and practiced, what a force of revolution trade unionism could be! Here as in the Socialist Party, we also await an effort of goodwill achieved by a certain number of men who have the resolution to return to the trade unionism of pre-war period, to return to class struggle trade unionism, with direct action, the former revolutionary trade unionism.

Here still, I say: Bravo! I assist with great joy, this movement of rectification; and in the weak measurement of my means I am very ready to give my support, if as well is as it can have some utility, with those which make effort in this direction. Only, I will allow myself to give them a council of certain dangers. It is not a question, in a movement as vast as the trade unionism, to modify the personnel, to change purely and simply the men. If you change only the men, you will not have done anything, In fact the methods must be changed, If the machine squeaks, if it does not function well, if it does not move towards the goal; if it does not carry out what it must carry out, it is necessary to see from which this defect comes from the machine, in order to bring the remedy necessary, essential there. It is not in the men that the vice of the trade unionism resides. Today, trade unionism became a powerful machine and, because of this formidable power, it took on a massive, heavy, character. It suffers from a centralism which moves it away from the federalist base that Pelloutier created. This centralism requires a formidable army of bureaucrats. And see sometimes language is enough to indicate a whole situation: they are called the "permanent ones", which wants to say that they are there permanently and encrust themselves there so a long time that one cannot get rid of them.

...When they remained five years, ten years in the same function, they became, to some extent, bureaucrats, civil servants of the C.G.T., not going to the "job". Their hands end up becoming white; not manipulating tools, they do not know any more the vicissitudes of the workers... They can let pass unemployment, their position doesn't change, they eat nevertheless. They are to some extent a worker aristocracy...

Interruption: “But what will one put in their place?”

Here is a comrade who asks me: “What one will put their place?” If you want to understand me listen more attentively than this comrade, or it would be better really that I ceased speaking altogether. I already said and repeated that it is not a question of changing the men and that if you change simply that without transforming and amending, you will not have done anything... And I say that if those who hold a mandate or exert a function because they have the confidence of their comrades, either because of their competence, or because they are active, or because they have particular aptitudes, were obliged to give up this mandate or to give up this function at the end of a given time — one year, eighteen months or two years, for example — I suggest this, it is up to you to make it practical; it is quite obvious that you would not have this army of permanent functionaries...

Trade unionists, return to the honest and constant practice of federalism; and then, assign a term for the mandate of your office holders. Then, you will have a movement that is flexible, alive, combative, always young... You will then have fewer doubtful elements and you will give to the trade unionism an incomparable force of revolution.

Another force of revolution: the cooperatives.

When one examines how the majority of the co-operatives function, one wonders to think that cooperatism can be a revolutionary force. But as well as trade unionism, co-operation could be an incalculable force of revolution. On the same basis? Why? Because co-operation has the aim of grouping the working world on the ground of consumption, like trade unionism has the aim of grouping the working class on the ground of the production. Workers, you are not only producers, — and in this moment even, there are those among you who, struck by unemployment, cannot produce,

— but you are above all, always and necessarily consumers. Do you understand well the importance there is to organizing you on this ground, like the enormous importance to group you around production? Ah well! This is precisely the role of co-operation.

(Faure then describes how Charles Fourier laid the groundwork for cooperatives in France) Then the idea came to him (Fourier ed.) to remove all this mass of parasites which are intermediaries between the producer and the consumer. It is this idea, comrades, that is at the base of the co-operative idea. The co-operatives have as an aim to get directly for the profit of their members, or those who buy on their premises, the products which these customers need, without supporting all the intermediaries... large merchants to small retailers — and you know how numerous they are. You see, comrades, there is a thought which, made in a spirit of social transformation and not only in a spirit of economy or lucre, could become the starting point of a force for revolution...

Unfortunately, with their success (because the co-operatives started to be prosperous and successful), the state of mind of the co-operators did not remain the same. Today, there is this powerful machine called the Grand Store, which makes F140 or F150 millions business per annum; which has a formidable organization and whose benefits rise each year with tens of millions of francs! There is, around, a more or less high number people who are attached to commercial prosperity (let us say the word) in this establishment; so that the spirit of revolution, the spirit of social transformation which should have directed the initiators of this movement, this spirit almost completely disappeared. The practices became defective and, the spirit of the co-operators became, alas! “petty bourgeois”.

Here, I indicate the remedy: I am the adversary of what is called the “rebate” or “refunded profit”. You know of what it consists: at the end of each year, in each establishment, they do the accounts and one sees the profits. These profits are, for example, of 10, 12, 20 %. They allot a share to the members or to customers of the co-