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978-0-521-08906-7 - Revolutionary Syndicalism in France: The Direct Action of its Time

F. F. Ridley

Frontmatter

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Professor of Political Theory and Institutions
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Preface

France, May 1968. Students at the barricades, workers on general strike. Not quite a revolution, but something that might well have been a revolution had it occurred on the same scale sixty years earlier. Direct action was the slogan and direct action was what happened. More recently, a paperback by British students promising a renewal of revolutionary politics. Their struggle is against the social system as a whole; they refuse, therefore, to act according to its rules. Their revolutionary politics means the rejection of the politics of democracy as currently defined. They refuse to pin their hopes on the political parties, much less on parliament. They scorn the bourgeois passivity of a bourgeois system. Their aim is to conquer power from outside, by the extra-parliamentary opposition, a phrase already made popular by the students of Germany. The goal: power over their everyday lives exercised by the people themselves in all the particular institutions which comprise society.

Some sixty years earlier almost identical ideas had captured the French working class. Revolutionary syndicalism was the name of that movement. The syndicalists, too, rejected bourgeois parliamentary democracy and the capitalist system. Capitalism, however reformed, still meant exploitation and unfreedom. Democracy was a dead end—it could never lead to the emancipation of the proletariat. The system could not be destroyed from within, according to its own rules. They rejected political parties, election campaigns, reformist legislation, even the conquest of state power. They preached extra-parliamentary opposition, direct action and the general strike. They sought to replace the democratic state by a social order in which the workers would control their own lives through their own institutions.

Nothing is ever entirely new. Militant workers at the beginning of the century, militant students in the late sixties. There are links between what happened then and what has happened more recently, between ideas expressed then and ideas expressed more recently. They were in revolt against similar things; they advocated similar means to achieve similar ends. The syndicalist critique is echoed in later critiques, the syndicalist strategy in later strategies, the syndicalist goal in later goals. The parallels will strike the reader. It is not necessary to force them on his attention.

F.F.R.