

F. F. RIDLEY. — *Revolutionary Syndicalism in France: The direct action of its time*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970.

The radical pretensions of organized labour in pre-1914 France have continued to attract scholarly interest. Two recent works on *le syndicalisme révolutionnaire* ("revolutionary trade-unionism," but usually translated as "revolutionary syndicalism") show that this subject can be approached in very different ways. Peter Stearns' *Revolutionary Syndicalism and French Labour: a cause without rebels* (1971) uses a variety of archival and primary materials to support a case for the essential "moderation" of French workingmen in this period. The book under review here, however, represents a more traditional treatment: it is concerned with the *ideas* of revolutionary trade-unionism and the ways in which they developed. The author points out, though, that revolutionary trade-unionism as a movement preceded syndicalism as a theory; therefore he is interested in "what those who called themselves syndicalists thought and did" — in other words, the actual leaders of the movement, not the middle-class intellectuals who put syndicalism on the political theorists' map. With his own approach he aims to "bridge the gap" between the method of the historian and that of the analyst of political theory. This is a promising beginning; unhappily the book does not live up to this promise.

There are three sections. The first or "Historical Background" consists of brief chapters on people, movements, and structures which putatively affected, in one way or another, the development of revolutionary trade-unionism. These start out with a pot-pourri of allusions to the impulsive "Latin temper" of Frenchmen, their fascination with the rhetoric of the revolutionary tradition, and so on. The chapters on Proudhon, Blanqui, and Bakunin (they are supposed to have influenced the French labour movement or at least to have expressed ideas similar to those that would later characterize revolutionary trade-unionism) are not much better. At this point one might legitimately ask if the book is not in fact a series of interpretive essays on "the European socialist tradition," especially since the references cited are often works on just this subject. Moreover, if we go along with the author's original premise — that revolutionary trade-unionism was a movement first and a theory only afterwards — then we have to ask why he wants us to consider syndicalism's intellectual pedigree after all.

Ridley is more successful in sketching in what one is tempted to call "genuine" historical background: the antagonistic attitude of the state toward labour, the persistence of small-scale units of manufacturing, the localism of the French economy. He describes how the doctrinal schisms and personal infighting that afflicted French socialism in the Third Republic encouraged an apolitical stand among labour leaders disgusted with the careerism or reformism of socialist politicians. His useful summary of the development of the labour movement from the 1870's presents a familiar picture: with few exceptions unions were weak in numbers and financially poor, workers were reluctant to pay dues and fickle in their union loyalty. But Ridley does not ask (as Stearns does) whether this situation was unique to France or was in fact duplicated to some degree in other European countries.

The middle section, "Principles and Practice of the C.G.T.," is the heart of the book. Here Ridley attempts to summarize and analyse the strategy and tactics of revolutionary trade-unionism: labour autonomy and political neutrality, changing attitudes toward the strike and the general strike, ideas about post-revolutionary society, the tension between everyday reformist measures and the eschatological goal. The author introduces the reader to some of the pamphlet and newspaper writings of national syndicalist spokesmen, principally Griffuelhes, Pouget, Yvetot, and Delesalle. Though this is certainly an advantage — too many studies on this subject concentrate on the works of Sorel and his followers — it has to be pointed out that his treatment of these writings is neither systematic nor comprehensive. There are also difficulties in Ridley's approach to specific

questions. For example, he states that violence was a "common feature of French strikes during this period" (p. 110) or that "strikes frequently involved violence" (p. 187). A few examples are given, mostly without sources, but the author does not take up the obvious question of how representative these examples are. He does not ask what percentage of strikes involved violence against persons or property, nor does he attempt cross-national comparisons. We are simply left with a statement—and one which more probing researchers (Stearns, Edward Shorter, Charles Tilly) have recently cast doubt upon. Similarly, when analysing strike tactics Ridley does not look for correlations between the number of successful strikes and the changing attitudes of union leaders—a question which Jacques Julliard asked and answered five years before this book was published. In discussing labour's anti-militarism the author stresses the C.G.T.'s propaganda against "the Army as strikebreaker." Though this is certainly important it ignores an even older tradition, best exemplified in the writings of Emile Pouget, which attacked the Army as a debaucher of young workers and a school of cruelty and crime. Finally, though the author raises the issue of the relationship between the ideas of the syndicalist leaders and the outlook of the ordinary worker, his approach comes nowhere close to the way in which Stearns attacks this problem.

In the last section, "Ideological Context," the author's aim is to place syndicalism in the framework of *fin-de-siècle* attitudes, the assumption being that "the causes of the syndicalist revolt were in part at least those of the wider revolt against reason" (p. 192) and that other contemporary movements (such as right-wing nationalism) paralleled syndicalism in means and mood, if not in ends. The aim may be legitimate, but the result can strike the reader as a none-too-relevant ramble in intellectual history. The "revolt against reason" (its lineage traced back to Pascal and Rousseau) is represented by Nietzsche, Bergson, William James, and Georges Sorel. There are also descriptions of contemporary disgust with the artificiality and venality of parliamentary democracy. Certainly there is good reason to argue that the syndicalist attitude toward official institutions and middle-class culture was part of a wider dissatisfaction. But surely the argument can be made more effectively and economically than the way it is done here, where every sort of man, movement, or incident is dragged in to make the point: Boulanger and Dreyfus, Futurism and Dadaism, Mussolini and Fascism. Again the question of relevance must be raised: if the ideas of revolutionary trade-unionism grew out of the labour struggle, then do we really need to be reminded that Nietzsche's thought was also in the air at the time? This kind of shotgun approach unfortunately detracts from Ridley's worthwhile remarks on the "activist temper" of the C.G.T. leaders and their role as interpreters of working-class action.

Though generally well-written this book is repetitious and is marred by a tendency toward abstraction not always appropriate to the subject. It is flawed by errors of fact as well as dubious points of interpretation. It is based on some of the writings of leading *militants* and on an uneven selection of secondary sources, many of which are dated. Several relevant articles which appeared in *Le Mouvement social* during the 1960's are ignored. Finally, there is no evidence of archival research. This is a serious drawback, for, as Ridley himself rightly insists (pp. 6-7), a movement like syndicalism demands the scholar's empathetic understanding. How such *Verstehen* could be built up without a thoroughgoing analysis of the trade-union press, a study of national and local union congresses, and a long *trempage* in the various police archives is something I find difficult to understand. This book may be useful to the general reader as an English-language introduction to the ideas and tactics that characterized revolutionary trade-unionism in France. It will not be of much interest to specialists.

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