

From Trade Unionism to Syndicalisme Révolutionnaire to Syndicalism: The British Origins of French Syndicalism.

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From Trade Unionism to Syndicalisme Révolutionnaire Origins of French Syndicalism

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Abstract

The French and British trade union organisations of the 1880-1914 period are usually presented as antagonistic, the former predominantly conservative, connected in turn with the Liberal Party and the Labour Party set up in 1893, while the latter held political power, and preached revolutionary methods. This opposition is epitomised by the contrast between the two: on the one hand, the TUC, the British trade union confederation set up in 1864, with its adamant rejection of political action; on the other hand, the CGT, the French trade union confederation set up in 1895, with its adamant rejection of political action. These oppositions are often taken to reflect profound differences in the political orientations of skilled workers (with their ties to the aristocracy), and in the maturity of industrial development (between France's decentralised and workshop-based industrialisation). In spite of these partly debatable alleged ideological and socioeconomic differences, the years between 1880 and 1914 saw tactical exchanges between France and Britain, as trade union organisation and ideology underwent rapid changes on both sides. The reformist and elitist culture of the mid-Victorian social consensus into larger, more democratic and combative "industrial unionism" was very weak during the 1880s, until the development of the CGT and its formal rejection from parliamentary politics. This was a problematic.2 In both countries, these years witnessed a succession of periods of strength and decline, in ideological and organisational movements, developments occurring across the Channel provided both an example and a counter-example through which chapter maps out these ideological transfers within the revolutionary branch of the international labour movement. It focuses on exchanges and on the processes of reinterpretation and adaptation such cross-influences required. It focuses on organisational levels3: it is a study in transnational exchanges of ideas and debates, which leaves aside the question of the workers.

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