COMMUNIST MANIFESTO and Its Origins

(Continued from the last Issue)

In France, at the time the International was founded, universal suffrage existed, but the method of voting reminds one, in some respects, of the present position in Russia, though in the latter country neither opposition parties, nor papers, not even candidates, are permitted. Journals hostile to the government were controlled, journals favorable were supported; government candidates were supported by prefects and mayors; the votes of all government officials, down to navvies on the roads, were requisitioned; the manifestoes of opposition candidates were confiscated in the post, and their placards mutilated; candidates were selected and presented to the voters by local officials, and voters were invited to do their duty — which they generally did! In 1858 a law was passed punishing by sequestration or banishment any provocation to attack on the government, whether or not it was followed by action; every communication or manoeuvre, at home or abroad, "entered upon with the design of troubling the public peace or inciting to hatred or contempt of the authorities" was to receive similar treatment. In spite of this, opposition candidates did manage to secure election. In 1860 Napoleon, in an effort to stabilise his declining position, had put through a law which divested him of his former independence of political factions in the Legislative Assembly. Instead of doing him any good, the law only helped his opponents to increase their power.

We have already given a sketch of political ideas in France from the eighteenth century up to 1848, but alongside this there was a movement of workers to better their labouring conditions. A law of March, 1791, abolished the guilds. Henceforth everybody was free to follow whatever business they chose, and change it when they wished to do so. Taking advantage of this law the workers began to combine for higher wages, under the cloak of organising benevolent societies. The masters met this by an appeal to the Constituent Assembly, which brought in a bill against combinations of workmen, on the ground that the interests of all the people were identical, and instructing workers to combine with employers in agreements on the basis of free contracts; further, the workers were instructed that they must maintain these agreements and not demand better conditions. The law against combination was sweeping, and precluded the workers from forming any associations with presidents, secretaries, and so forth. Contravention of this law rendered the culprits subject to severe penalties, and gatherings of working men were declared to be riotous and to be dispersed with force. Combinations of merchants and the like were declared to be outside the influence of this law. Under Napoleon I, the same principle was included in legislation, making strikes and all combinations of workers a crime, and making them the principal type of agitation subject to the supervision of the police for some years after. In 1834 the provisions were made even more stringent, prohibiting associations of even twenty persons if they were branches of a larger association.

In spite of the law workers did combine in various ways, and engage in numerous strikes, suffering severe penalties for so doing. The combinations that were able to keep going, and fight for better wages and conditions, were societies of skilled workers that dated back to Feudal times and persisted until late in the nineteenth century. They were societies with ceremonial rites, secret passwords and emblems, that served so well the needs of travelling journeymen. After the French Revolution benevolent societies began to grow, and it was these that acted at first in the capacity of trade unions. Later, as modern industry grew strong in France, new secret societies were formed by workingmen, primarily for the purpose of resisting the encroachments of capital. It was one of these societies that directed the strikes of the Lyons weavers in 1831 and 1834.

The revolution of 1848 gave an impetus to trade societies, but most of them perished in the early years of the Second Empire. Efforts made, later on, to bring about the abolition of the law against combination were assisted by the national and international Exhibitions to which it had become customary to send delegations of French working men, mainly with the object of improving the capacity of French industry. These delegations, however, also gained knowledge of conditions in other countries, and profited from contact with foreign workers. After they returned from the Exhibitions they published reports which expressed the ideas and feelings of workers, and also the claim that lack of the opportunity to combine hindered their working capacity. Eventually the government gave way, hoping to enlist the support of the workers, and the provisions of the law against strikes were abolished in 1864; but it was not until 1868 that the government agreed to tolerate organizations of workers, and that the formation of syndicates (or trade unions) really began to flourish. However, the principal plank in the programme of these trade unions was the building up of co-operative societies. By 1868 the movement had grown to a considerable size when suddenly it received a mortal blow by the collapse of one of the principal co-operative central banks which had to close its doors; money had been advanced on too large a scale, and for periods that were too long. This setback helped to turn attention from co-operative societies to the International Workingmen's Association.

As the ideas of Proudhon, backed by Bakounin, were the source of the controversy that split the International, and ultimately caused its decline, some account of them is pertinent at this point.

Proudhon had studied St. Simon and Fourier, but he was opposed to communism; he envisaged a world of small proprietors (he was himself a small proprietor) harmoniously exchanging their products at cost of production. Small proprietors in the main were, in his day, in a parlous condition, and workers and peasants were suffering from extreme poverty and insecurity. To remedy this, and as a transition to the society of his dreams, Proudhon advocated the establishment of a bank of exchange which would issue bank bills of exchange in return for drafts, orders and ordinary bills of exchange. These bank bills of exchange were to be issued in fixed denominations, and guaranteed by 100,000 merchants, manufacturers, miners, agriculturalists etc, who, by a "simple authentic declaration inserted in the 'Moniteur' newspaper, bind themselves respectively and reciprocally to adhere to the statutes of the Bank Exchange." (Page 63. "Solution of the Social Problem"). He traced social troubles to indirect exchange through money-gold. Gold was, to him, the root of all evil:

> "Gold is the talisman which congeals life in society, which binds circulation, kills labour and credit, and makes slavery mutual.
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> "We must destroy the royalty of gold; we must republicanize specie, by making every product of labour ready money." (Page 60.)

Dual exchange between producers without the intervention of money was to destroy the evils produced by gold.

> "What must we do to make possible direct exchange...between all producers and all consumers
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> "Simply this: centralize all the operations of commerce by means of a bank in which all the bills of exchange, draft bills, and sight-bills, representing the bills and the invoices of merchants, will be