

Beyond "red" and "black": Publishing in pursuit of libertarian socialism

Jean Michel Kay
Les Amis de Spartacus

The history of a political current can never be reduced to that of its organisations or to the study of its doctrine, unless it has never had the least influence outside itself. On the other hand, it is difficult to identify such a current when it has not built any permanent organisation and has not produced a body of doctrine. Nonetheless, it is the surmise of such a current that we beg to offer as a research topic based on the story of an activist publisher from the 1930s on.

What is surmised here is that at certain periods of French contemporary social history, and probably elsewhere in Europe, a political current has sprung up that overcomes the historical deadlock between the protagonists of “State socialism” and those of “socialism without a State”. This current has not given birth to permanent political organisations; it has not spawned recognized theoreticians, it has not spelt out a formal doctrine. The reason that suggests itself for those three negatives is that this current has only emerged in periods of social upheaval and has generally lacked time to create a lasting political vehicle, and that the theory of what it stood for could only develop after the event.

As shorthand, we will designate this current as “libertarian socialism”. This label has no historical legitimacy; it has been used by Daniel Guérin as cover title of his first collection of essays aimed at reconciling those he called “twin brothers, feuding brothers¹”. In later editions, he has changed it to “libertarian Marxism”, and then to “libertarian communism”. But at the time when we surmise that libertarian socialism first materialized, libertarian communism was claimed as their objectives by the Spanish CNT and FAI, and they are clearly different.

We propose to search for that current through the enduring story of an unusual publishing house, which has carried on for fifty years thanks to the exertion of one individual, René Lefevre, and which has outlived him. The features of that publishing endeavour – the *Cahiers Spartacus* – qualify it as an appropriate tool for identifying that current and turning it into a legitimate research topic:

- It is an activist publishing house, i.e. one that pursues specific political goals.
- It is not-for-profit, and has no other concern than to publish whatever it feels should be made available to the readership it hopes to reach.
- It is independent, to the extent that it is not controlled by any political organisation.
- However, it does not rely on patronage or to any significant extent on donations. Therefore, while it does not need to be profitable in any sense, it can only carry on publishing if there are enough buyers for its output. It has not always been the case.

*

* *

¹ *Jeunesse du socialisme libertaire*, Marcel Rivière, Paris, 1959.

Libertarian socialism as we mean it only materializes as a political current after the October revolution. The lessons it draws from the 1917 revolution and its aftermath differ from those drawn by other anti-Stalinist currents such as the anarchists, the Trotskyists or even the council communists, whose experience was anyway practically unknown in France at the time. Its political assumptions may be summarized as follows:

- The evolution of society can only be grasped through the analysis of class struggles; class antagonisms, crises borne by the ruled can only be eliminated if they wrest political and economic power from the ruling classes and exert it themselves.
- The capitalist State is the instrument of domination of the ruling classes; as such, it has to be dismantled; but as classes will survive even after such dismantlement, and as social activities will need to be organised and decisions made, political institutions will remain necessary at various territorial levels.
- The nation is the framework of bourgeois power; it is not suitable for building socialism; libertarian socialism is internationalist by nature.
- Libertarian socialists know that trade unions have become institutions of capitalist society; they find however that in many instances taking part in union activity is the first means at the disposal of workers to take part in collective action and the class struggle.
- Political parties are necessary to formulate analyses and proposals, to gather means for education and action; but no party can claim a monopoly of power:

“The dictatorship of the proletariat cannot be implemented by a single sector of the proletariat, only by all sectors, without exception. No workers’ party, no trade union can exert any dictatorship.²”

Lastly, libertarian socialists do not view taking part, or not taking part, in the electoral process and discharging elective duties as a matter of principle. But for them, for any party coalition to obtain and retain government power through the electoral process cannot be a goal in itself.

*

* *

An activist publisher

At the request of his father, a master stone mason in a village in Brittany, René Lefeuvre also becomes a stone mason. But rural life does not suit him. Although with only primary schooling, he’s an assiduous and inquisitive reader. At 20, when called up for military service, he manages to be quartered in the Paris area, where, but for the war years, he will live from 1922 to his death in 1988.

By what he has learnt of it, and in spite of the repulsive picture drawn of it by the conservative opinion leaders in his home region, he is attracted by the Russian revolution and the achievements of the Soviet Union. He reads Boris Souvarine’s *Bulletin communiste*, which reports on them but will not hide the disputes that are starting to divide the Executive of the International, of which he is a member, and the

² Andres Nin, leader of the POUM, quoted by René Lefeuvre in his foreword to André and Dori Prudhommeaux’s *Catalogne 1936-1937, Cahiers Spartacus* n°6, March 1937.

leadership of the Soviet Communist party. Boris Souvarine's exclusion of the French communist party, of which he had been a founding member, and Souvarine's maturing understanding of the class nature of the Soviet regime will contribute to René's strengthening political beliefs: availing himself of the notions of classes and exploitation as developed by Marx, Souvarine asserts in the late 1920s that a new ruling, exploitative, class is being created in the Soviet Union through its control of the State. He also rejects what he sees as the invention by the Soviet leadership of a Leninist doctrine. Lastly, he also rejects what he perceives in Trotsky – whose right to hold dissenting views he had supported in the Executive of the International – as a commitment to reproduce the analyses and behaviour of the Soviet Communist party.³ René attends some of the meetings of the *Cercle communiste Marx et Lénine* launched by Boris Souvarine in 1926 with other members or former members of the CP opposition. In 1930, it becomes the *Cercle communiste démocratique*, whose purpose is to “uphold, continue and invigorate the democratic and revolutionary tradition of Marxism” and to “actively seek the seeds of the renewal of revolutionary thought and action”. Its manifesto expands on the theme: “Together with Marx and Engels, the Cercle declares itself democratic, by which it means to restore against fake communists, who negate it, and fake socialists, who debase it, a notion which is inseparable from the revolutionary idea. Communists and socialists of the Marxist school have in politics long simply called themselves ‘democrats’ before calling their party ‘social-democrat’. The Marxist critique of the implementation of the democratic principle in capitalist society is directed to the contradictions of its practice, not to the principle itself, and makes the point that it is impossible to achieve true political democracy without the foundation of economic equality.”⁴

Until 1928, René earns a living as a stone mason craftsman. Then, thanks to distance learning courses he had taken up when in Brittany, he is hired as a clerk in a claddings firm, which frees some of his time to pursue other interests. This is when he joins the *Amis de Monde*, and becomes their secretary. Launched in 1928 by Henri Barbusse, a Communist party member since 1923, *Monde*⁵ sought to be “a weekly publication, reporting major literary, artistic, scientific, economic and social information to provide an objective picture of current affairs”. But its launch reflects a disagreement between Henri Barbusse and the Communist International of the third period, in which the social-democrat, now dubbed “social-fascist”, has become the main opponent. In 1926, the International had requested Henri Barbusse to launch an international body of revolutionary writers. As this would have only brought together Communist party members, or writers already close to the Party, Barbusse has chosen instead to create “a hive of publications” – much more than a newspaper – aiming at a “world gathering of intellectuals”⁶. Contributors to *Monde* will therefore include Communist writers, some of them writing from the Soviet Union, but also former Communists and even Socialists, for which *Monde* will be condemned at the second congress of revolutionary writers held in Kharkov in November 1930. *Monde* is charged with being “a paper without guiding principles, which from the start has taken an anti-Marxist position”, of being distinctive by “its confusionism”, of harbouring contributors who are “Trotskyist agents, social-fascists, bourgeois radicals, pacifists”, in short with being hostile to proletarian ideology. It is worth mentioning that back in April 1930, Pierre Naville, Trotskyism's first official representative in France, had taxed *Monde* in his *Lutte de classes* with being a “collection of garbage from the most swampy, the most confused, and in the end the most anti-proletarian output of petty-bourgeois politico-literary circles.”

Monde is clearly not a Communist party paper, although Henri Barbusse would not condone attacks against the Soviet regime. The *Amis de Monde* are assigned ambitious goals: not only should they

³ About Boris Souvarine, refer i.a.to Jean-Louis Panné, *Boris Souvarine*, Robert Laffont, Paris, 1993.

⁴ Cercle communiste démocratique, *Déclaration et statuts*, Librairie du travail, Paris, 1931, quoted in *Critique sociale, Les vies de Boris Souvarine*, www.critique-sociale.info, 2008.

⁵ On *Monde*, refer i.a.to Bernard Frederick, *Confrontation entre Henri Barbusse et le Komintern*, Fondation Gabriel Péri, 2006, and Guessler Normand, *Henri Barbusse and his Monde (1928-1935)*, *Journal of Contemporary History*, 1976, 11.

⁶ The *Association des écrivains et artistes révolutionnaires* (AEAR), the French section of the International Union of Revolutionary Writers, will be launched in 1933.

support the paper's sales, but they should also contribute news and reports to it. In 1930, when René Lefevre becomes their secretary, the membership numbers about 800. Lucien Laurat⁷, who belongs to *Monde*'s editorial team, has organised a political economy study group, which in particular studies Marx's *Capital*. As the *Amis* are keen that other groups, on other topics, be set up, René will dedicate himself to the task to the full. Always eager to learn, he is also devoted to the transmission of knowledge, to popular education which will always remain the true aim of his publishing. New study groups are set up: for social studies, workers' movement history, architecture, Esperanto; also a drama troupe. René also organises movie screenings, visits to exhibitions.

After two years, members of the study groups are asking for a means regularly to publish the outcome of their work. René is put in charge of that venture. He suggests *Spartacus* as title of this new paper: members choose *Masses*, a reference to the American *New Masses*.

At first, *Masses*' outlook could not be significantly different from that of *Monde* and the manifesto published in its first issue, dated January 1933, states in particular that “*a revolutionary culture is opposed to bourgeois culture. In the great struggle, such a culture is a weapon*”; and also that “*against bourgeois calumnies, we will defend the Soviet Union's exertion to build a classless society by setting truth against lies.*”

Events will make *Masses* partly change its editorial course. This first issue does indeed include features on architecture, sociology, the theatre, and on workers' unity. In the second issue, there's also a piece from Rustico⁸ in which he reports on the activity and state of mind of the Berlin Communists he has joined in October 1932 in expectation of a decisive showdown in Germany between reactionary forces and the masses. The third issue, dated March 1933, pays tribute to Karl Marx for the fiftieth anniversary of his death, with, among other items, the beginning of a summary of the main thesis of Rosa Luxemburg's *Accumulation of capital*. *Masses* is a 20-page monthly, of medium format, with a fairly sophisticated layout and some pictures, particular care being lavished on the front cover.

Contributors to *Masses* are in their great majority young members of the study groups. But the editorial staff will quickly change: in May 1933, *Masses* briefly quotes an announcement from the *Cercle communiste démocratique* that Victor Serge, who had been living in the Soviet Union since 1919, had been arrested. He was among the writers who supported *Monde*. In July, *Masses* publishes a letter from Victor Serge in which he spells out the principles of his opposition to the regime. René Lefevre requests “*that authorized sources inform the Western proletariat of the reasons which justify Victor Serge's punishment and why he has been refused for so many years the passport he needs to leave Russia*”. Compared for instance to what the *Cercle communiste démocratique* was writing at the time, this is very moderate indeed. The same issue includes a new report from Rustico, on those events in Berlin which, from January to March 1933, have led to the Nazis' victory, the outlawing of the Communist party and the repression of its members. *Masses* does not publish the letters in which Rustico takes to task the leaderships of the Communist party

⁷ Otto Maschl (1898-1973). An Austrian Communist, he acts as a correspondent in Berlin for *l'Humanité* from 1921 to 1923 at the request of Boris Souvarine, then teaches economics in Moscow for the International until 1927, when he resigns.

⁸ Hippolyte Etchebehere (1900-1936), an Argentine revolutionary, expelled from the Communist party in 1925 for his support of the Left opposition. Leader of a POUM militia column, he dies in August 1936 fighting Franco's troops. His testimonial on the Nazis' accession to power is still available (*1933: la tragédie du prolétariat allemand*, Spartacus, Paris, 2003).

and of the International. Nevertheless, this is more than those contributors to *Masses* who are Communist party members can take. In a communiqué published by l'*Humanité*, the Party daily, they question the stand taken by *Masses* in favour of Victor Serge, against, according to them, the opinion of the editorial board, and also the “*controversy about events in Germany*” and warn readers “*that the Masses periodical is bound to become a tool in the hands of counter-revolutionaries*”. They will be made to leave the editorial board.

New contributors make their appearances in the next issues. They are former members of the Left opposition of the Communist party, some of them quite experienced, like Marcel Body⁹. And as *Masses* had initiated an inquiry on German fascism, Kurt Landau gives his opinion, as do spokesmen for the SAP and for German communist workers groups, heirs to council communists. *Masses* is much less a product of the study groups, and more of a meeting place for activists looking for answers to the challenges of the times. Current affairs, including debates within the SFIO (the French socialist party), and theoretical insights take pride of place. In January 1934 – the fifteenth anniversary – *Masses* publishes Rosa Luxemburg’s last newspaper piece and Karl Liebknecht’s last speech. In May 1934, as it had done for German fascism, the editorial board launches an inquiry on the dictatorship of the proletariat and democracy, with an excerpt from Rosa Luxemburg’s *The Russian revolution* as a primer. Amilcare Rossi¹⁰’s contribution to that debate is published in the next issue, the 18th, in June 1934. But other contributions, if they have ever been written, will not be published: in issue number 19, which is the last, it is announced that they will be the material of a special issue, which has never appeared.

René Lefevre has had to discontinue *Masses* because, having lost his job, he can no longer meet its costs. The *Amis de Monde* have suffered from the split between Communists and opponents. *Monde* itself, initially flourishing in its first two years, now faces difficult circumstances. In addition, René is now committed to a new environment: in August 1934, with other contributors to *Masses*, he has joined the Socialist party.

It is at first sight surprising that revolutionaries, steeped in Marxism, should join such a party, with a significant industrial worker membership in only a few parts of France, and focused primarily on elections. But the SFIO has experienced a number of shocks over the past few months: it has renounced its alliance with the Radicals, who now participate in a government of National union. Its right wing has been expelled, but the debate it had started on the subject of planning has led the Party to consider an action program. Its left wing, the *Bataille socialiste*, led par Jean Zyromski and Marceau Pivert and in favour of joint action with the Communists, has lost the out-and-out pacifists among its supporters. Feeling it had to race against the fascists, it has started to develop new organisations and new methods: youth movements, uniformed self-defence units, action groups, new propaganda media. Also, Trotsky has ordered his French followers, the Bolshevik-Leninists, to join the SFIO, which they do this same month of August 1934.

But it is the bloody events of February 1934 and their aftermath that have convinced René and his comrades to join the socialist organisation. On the morning of 6 February, the day of the right-wing anti-parliamentarian demonstration, Marcel Cachin was writing in the *Humanité*: “*One cannot struggle against fascism without struggling also against social-democracy.*” If, on 12 February,

⁹ 1894-1984. A typesetter, he’s an avid reader and learns Russian. During the First World War, he’s a member of the French military delegation to Russia. In 1918, he refuses to take part in military operations against the Soviets and joins the *Groupe communiste français* in Moscow. He is then employed during several years by the International and, an opponent to the regime, returns to France in 1927. After a year spent in opposition in the Communist party, he launches in Limoges a *Union des travailleurs révolutionnaires*.

¹⁰ Angelo Tasca, one of the founding members of the Italian Communist party. Made a member of the Executive of the Communist International in 1929, he is expelled that same year. He was on the editorial board of *Monde*.

left-wing activists had gone on strike and demonstrated jointly, it was not due to the national leaderships of the parties. The *Bataille socialiste*, for its part, is clearly in favour of joint action. In May 1934, the Communist International changes tack and declares in favour of a united front with the Socialists. On 27 July, an agreement is signed by the two parties. Aimé Patri¹¹, in the last issue of *Masses*, may be mistaken about the reasons of this change when he writes: “*It is the French working class, by demonstrating spontaneously and through its deeds that it aspires to unity, which has obliged the Communist International as well as the French section of the Labour and Socialist International to act accordingly.*” However, for the activists, there is now a real prospect of efficient action on the ground, in joint committees.

In putting together *Masses*, René Lefevre had been trained in publishing techniques by the typesetters, and he was now able to earn a living also as a proof-reader. In December 1934, with members of the last team at *Masses*, he launches a new weekly: *Spartacus*, for revolutionary culture and mass action. It is said in its first issue that *Masses* will continue, but only as special issues. The first of those specials – indeed, the only one – is a brochure on the Berlin Commune of 1918-1919, the work of André¹² and Dori Prudhommeaux. It is made up mainly of the League Spartacus’ program and of Rosa Luxemburg’s speech on that program. For René, it is of primary import to disseminate the political writings of Rosa Luxemburg, which have not been widely translated and published in France. This concern is clearly apparent in pieces which are published in *Spartacus*.

André Prudhommeaux, briefly a Communist party member, had been active in 1929-1930 in the “*Groupes ouvriers communistes*”, inspired by German council communism, entertaining a relationship with Karl Korsch and rejecting the Leninist view of the party. He had been to Germany and had brought back documents. In 1930, his *Librairie ouvrière*, in Paris, had published as a brochure a French translation of Herman Gorter’s 1920 *Open letter to Comrade Lenin* in which he objected to the tactics foisted upon Western communist parties by the new International. In 1933, he is one of the French organisers of the committee for the defence of Marinus Van der Lubbe, who had set fire to the Reichstag. The collapse of the German workers’ movement makes him reject Marxism and become an anarchist. From 1936, he is very active in defence of the Spanish revolution, even if he grows critical of the CNT taking part in government. A publisher and printer (based in Nîmes, he has launched a printing co-op) as well as an activist, he provides René with material and practical advice, and sometimes loses his temper when René appears to be too slow in making use of both.

Spartacus won’t last as a weekly; in April 1935, the masthead of issue number eight recognizes that it is at best a monthly. The last issue, the tenth, is published in September 1935. It has only four pages and is dedicated to the matter of the exclusion of the Trotskyists from the Socialist Youth, to which it objects and asks instead for the Youth to be made autonomous from the national party leadership.

In May 1935, France and the Soviet Union enter into a pact of mutual assistance. Stalin “*understands and fully approves the policy of national defence pursued by France*”. The Communist party quickly falls in line with the new policy of the International and reclaims the Tricolour and the *Marseillaise*. The prospect of a new *Union sacrée* which, in 1914, has been instrumental in sending the people to the slaughterhouse, looms again.

¹¹ André Ariat (1904-1983). A teacher, he had been a member of the Communist party, then in succession of Opposition groups, of the *Cercle communiste Marx et Lénine*, of the first Trotskyist groups and most recently of the *Gauche communiste*, with Alfred Rosmer and Kurt and Katia Landau.

¹² 1902-1968. He writes in *Masses* under the name Jean Cello. He will also use that of André Prunier.

This new political scene deepens the ongoing disputes within the *Bataille socialiste*. About unity with the Communist party, about national defence, about activism, Zyromski and Pivert differ significantly: Pivert is against a potential merger with the Communist party; he rejects national defence in a capitalist society. In October 1935, Marceau Pivert seeks to unite left-wing groups within the SFIO and launches the *Gauche révolutionnaire*, which is defined by what it opposes and by a prospect – that of the socialist revolution – more than by a doctrine, which is yet to be developed. It merges a number of small groups, among them revolutionary socialists who had been expelled from the SFIO because they were in favour of joint action with the Communist party, the group around *Spartacus*, and also former Communists. Above all, it attracts the younger, more active members of the SFIO.

This new tendency is going to publish a monthly bulletin of the same name, *La gauche révolutionnaire*, and René Lefevre is put in charge of it. He is also in charge of the trade union column, at the very time when the CGT is reunited.

René has sought to resurrect *Masses* by replacing items about internal party matters in *La gauche révolutionnaire* by pieces about doctrine or the history of the workers' movement, but this has been received unfavourably by some of the readers. Back in 1934, he had defined a publishing program aiming at “*providing the proletarian masses with ideological weapons and prepare them for the struggle in all areas*”: a periodical like *Masses*, but issued more frequently, providing more reports on daily struggles and more attractive in layout; brochures in which current issues would be dealt with in more depth; and brochures of revolutionary history. It is to the second leg of this program that he will henceforth devote himself. Not only urgent needs have to be addressed, but the *Librairie du travail*¹³, the publisher which, for the past twenty years, has been an anchor to revolutionaries, is in dire straits. It will cease to publish in 1937.

The subject matter of these brochures, the *Cahiers Spartacus*, sub-titled “new series”, is indeed of some urgency: reports on the soviet regime, the prospect of a new World war, the support to be provided to the Spanish revolution.

The first *Cahier Spartacus*, published in October 1936, bears as cover title *16 fusillés*, and *Où va la révolution russe?* as sub-title. It mainly consists of writings by Victor Serge, who has been freed at last and has returned to France during the summer. In the first of them, he reports on the most spectacular of the Moscow show trials, which had led to the execution of Zinoviev, Kamenev, Smirnov and other Bolshevik leaders. Two other writers contribute pieces against France's policy of “non-intervention” in Spain, in particular against the government's refusal to supply weapons to the Republicans. The next brochure, in November, has as its title “*Union sacrée 1914 -193...*”. It consists mainly in excerpts from Alfred Rosmer's essential *Le mouvement ouvrier pendant la guerre*, which has just been published by the *Librairie du Travail*. Also included are pieces on trade union unity and collectivisations in Spain, reproduced from *L'Espagne socialiste*, the French-language paper of the POUM, to which la Gauche révolutionnaire feels close; and also brief reviews of Souvarine's *Staline, un aperçu historique du bolchevisme* and of Trotsky's *La révolution trahie*. The following month, under cover of the *Cahiers Spartacus*, is a brochure by Jean Prader¹⁴, *Au secours de l'Espagne socialiste*, also published by the *Librairie du Travail*. René Lefevre has added to it the authorization he has received from Marceau Pivert, as Prader criticizes the *Gauche révolutionnaire*'s stand on the matter of arms supply, and also a warning call signed by Julian Gorkin, of the POUM's international secretariat, about the crimes that the Stalinists are about to commit in Spain. In his brochure, Prader not only discusses the pros and cons of the policy of “non-intervention” and gives his own views; he also deals in painful detail with the question of

¹³ See Marie-Christine Bardouillet, *La Librairie du Travail*, François Maspéro, Paris, 1977.

¹⁴ Édouard Labin (1910-1982). A member of the Communist Youth, expelled in 1930; briefly a member of the *Ligue communiste*, he joins the *Cercle communiste démocratique*. He becomes a member of the SFIO in 1934.

how are revolutionaries to respond should war break out, a conundrum that is going to undermine them during the next few years.

The next brochure is the first French edition since 1922 of Rosa Luxemburg's *The Russian revolution* in a new translation by Marcel Ollivier¹⁵. Next will come the *Gauche révolutionnaire*'s program and its response to the threat of dissolution it faces from the Party leadership, and, in March 1937, the writings on revolutionary Catalonia published at the same time by André Prudhommeaux in his *Cahiers de Terre libre*: a report by André and Dori Prudhommeaux on the arming of the people in the Spanish revolution and their translation of *Was sind die CNT und die FAI?*, written by the DAS *Gruppe* in Barcelona to try and counter Stalinist propaganda in the workers' movement. In June, the *Cahiers Spartacus* release, under the title *Le Guépéou en Espagne*, Marcel Ollivier's report on the May 1937 events in Barcelona. By November 1938, René will have published fifteen such brochures.

Until then, René Lefevre and his comrades had practically never met the anarchists and their doctrines. Rosa Luxemburg, in her pre-war writings, had nothing but harsh words for them. René had found them hard to fathom; their groups were fairly closed. It is the recognition of the committees of the CNT's leading role in the early months of the Spanish revolution and the necessities of international revolutionary solidarity which made René distribute those writings. In 1938, he will distribute another *Cahier de Terre libre*, a collection of Camillo Berneri's Spanish writings.

Growing disagreements between the majority of the SFIO and the *Gauche révolutionnaire* led to the dissolution of the latter in April 1937. René then took charge of the *Cahiers rouges*, the new monthly of what was henceforth an unofficial tendency. At the Royan congress, in June 1938, the tendency's leaders resolve to leave the SFIO and launch the *Parti socialiste ouvrier et paysan* (PSOP). For René, and he's not alone, this is an admission of failure, as the new party only attracts a minority of the erstwhile supporters of the *Gauche révolutionnaire*, whose influence was still growing. The PUP¹⁶ having joined the SFIO after the 1936 parliamentary elections, the PSOP becomes the French member of the International Bureau for Revolutionary Socialist Unity. In September 1938, the Bureau launches the International Workers Front against the War, which advocates a policy of revolutionary defeatism. But, as Prader had remarked in an issue of *Spartacus*, this policy, which Lenin had been promoting in the First World War, does not prevent war.

René Lefevre is in charge of the PSOP's weekly, *Juin 36*. In January 1939, he starts a new *Masses*, of which three issues will be published.

At the time of mobilization, and in spite of having being sentenced to six months in jail because of his role in the PSOP, he is called up. He will be taken prisoner and as such will spend five years in Germany.

*

* *

¹⁵ Aaron Goldenberg (1896-1993). He attends the second congress of the Communist International as a delegate of the Socialist Youth, and then the fourth congress. Until 1928, he works for the Moscow Marx-Engels Institute and the International, in particular with D. Riazanov, B. Souvarine and V. Serge, and expresses his opposition to the prevailing policies. He then distances himself from the Communist party.

¹⁶ *Parti d'unité prolétarienne*, born from the merger in 1930 of several groups of former Communist party members. It had a significant electoral influence in several cities.

The trap of anti-sovietism

When back in France in June 1945, René Lefeuve has to adapt to a political landscape that has of course undergone significant changes. The PSOP has sunk without traces during the war. The Communist party has now been in a coalition government for a year, and it will remain in it for another two years. The movements born in the Resistance and which, from various standpoints, advocated a “revolution”, meaning the advent of a society making a clear break with the defunct IIIrd Republic on the basis of the popular alliances built during the war, have to make way for the political parties. Those have but one goal: to restore as quickly as possible the State’s apparatus, and authority in general. For instance, workers who have taken charge of their firms receive no support from any of them.¹⁷

Thanks to a friend, René gets a job in the editorial secretariat of the *Populaire*, the SFIO’s daily, and then at the Party’s *Éditions de la Liberté*. In January 1946, he starts publishing again on his own account: a new *Masses*, and the *Cahiers Spartacus*. He has been able to recover unsold brochures from before the war. Over the next four years, he will add around forty titles to his catalogue, from tiny brochures to sizeable books. His goal is obvious: to contest the Communist party’s and its daughter organisations’ monopoly of Marxist expression; to supply doubters with the tools of a revolutionary critique of the Russian revolution, the Soviet regime and the Communist party’s politics. Significant publications in this period include writings of Rosa Luxemburg (*Questions d’organisation de la social-démocratie russe*, published with other writings under the cover title *Marxisme contre dictature, Réforme sociale ou révolution?*, *Grève générale, parti et syndicats*), Anton Ciliga’s *Lénine et la Révolution* (excerpts from his *Ten years in the country of the disconcerting lie*, which was published only two years later), Sylvain Wisner’s *L’Algérie dans l’impasse*, which sought to draw attention to the looming crisis in that colony, Ida Mett’s *La Commune de Cronstadt*¹⁸, Guy Vinatrel’s *L’URSS concentrationnaire* and historical studies by Maurice Dommanget, among which, in 1950, his *Sylvain Maréchal*, 500 pages strong, which cost so much and sold so little at the time that it practically caused René to stop publishing.

Masses was meant to be a monthly, but only eleven numbers will be published until its discontinuation in May 1948. Among its contributors are comrades from the first *Masses*, from *Spartacus*, from the PSOP, revolutionary syndicalists and members of the left wing of the socialist party, such as Marceau Pivert; there are regular contributions from abroad, among which those of Victor Serge until his death in 1947.

The leading article of the first issue, under the title *Socialisme et liberté* (which is also the sub-title of the paper) reminds readers that statism and nationalism are enemies of socialism. Starting with the third issue, *Masses* becomes the mouthpiece of the International movement socialism and liberty, launched by Marceau Pivert and which, according to its manifesto, is grounded in libertarian socialism and revolutionary internationalism. But this movement, with no social basis, will quickly disappear.

René and his comrades feel the need to transmit the experience gained at such a high price over the past thirty years. But to whom? In 1946, to judge from party and trade union membership, mass interest is strong, even if the hopes raised at the time of the Liberation fade when faced by the

¹⁷ See i.a. Robert Mencherini, *La libération et les entreprises sous gestion ouvrière. Marseille 1944-1948*. L’Harmattan, Paris, 1994.

¹⁸ Ida Gilman (1901-1973). A Russian anarchist, she took part in Paris in the debate around the *Platform*. In 1938, she had submitted her *Kronstadt Commune* to the group of the *Révolution prolétarienne*, which had not wanted to publish it, finding it too harsh on Trotsky.

hardships of daily life, rationing, spiralling prices and the start of colonial wars. Never had the memberships of the Communist and Socialist parties been so high (the former's being twice as large as the latter's), and never will they ever be again. Another gauge of mass interest for social matters, *Le Libertaire*, the *Fédération anarchiste's* weekly, prints up to a 100 000 copies. But the SFIO belongs to the government coalition, it will head it several times in 1946 and 1947. It has no tendency to compare with the pre-war *Gauche révolutionnaire*. Its members are not for the most part attracted by a project which charts a route totally different from the Party's, even if it supports them in their hostility to the Communist party. The SFIO is soon caught in a pincer between that party, then the most powerful in France both electorally and socially, and a Gaullist party, the RPF, which is seen as a threat for the parliamentary republic. The opposition between the Soviet Union and the British-American alliance takes centre stage in the political debate, and, with it, the Communist party, whose overarching objective is to “prevent a Western coalition which would tilt the balance of power to the disadvantage of the USSR¹⁹”. The Communist party is setting the terms of the debate for years to come: on the one side (its side), the forces of socialism and progress, the working class, peace; on the other side, all the others (foremost among them the Socialists), the bourgeoisie, imperialism, war.

Those who, between those two poles, try to promote a third way, struggle all the more to get a hearing that “third way” is reminiscent of “third force”, the centrist coalition that now governs the country after the sacking of the Communist ministers. Such an attempt will nonetheless be made.

In November 1947, a number of renowned intellectuals, among which Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus and David Rousset have signed with Marceau Pivert and a few socialist MPs an Appeal for a neutral and socialist Europe. David Rousset went further down that road and, in February 1948, with Sartre, some journalists, a few left-wing socialist MPs and trade unionists, launched an appeal for a *Rassemblement démocratique révolutionnaire* (RDR). Its aim is to move beyond the confrontation between the SFIO, a loyal manager of capitalism, and the Communist party, a tool of Soviet foreign policy. The RDR is not a party, Rousset explains: “It is only in the experience and practice of common struggles that the necessary theoretical solutions will be found...The rally...is the result of an agreement on more limited, more immediate, objectives, which fit more directly the current situation, in what are its limits and urgency.²⁰” He is also aware that the RDR is not grounded in the workers' movement: “A party is also the expression of a social class...Our aim is to unite, at the side of the working class, those elements of the middle classes which are led to struggle by today's social and economic situation.²¹”

In the first issue of *La Gauche*, the RDR's bi-weekly, Sartre calls for “the rally of this country's men, as consumers and as producers, in neighbourhood committees, in village committees, in factory committees...where they will become conscious of their democratic and revolutionary humanism...The first goal of the Democratic Revolutionary Rally is to bind revolutionary claims to the idea of liberty.” This call for “soviets” to be thus created “on tap” in firms, in the towns and in the countryside is repeated in the RDR's program, which also includes the creation of a democratic revolutionary federation of peoples and a “positive” struggle against the Marshall plan. The RDR attracts a few left-wing socialists, such as Jean Rous and Léon Boutbien, who have contributed to *Masses*. Jules Moch, the Socialist Home Office minister, an old foe of the left who's in the process of bloodily crushing the miners' strike in the North, brands them as “Stalinist agents”. For the Communist party, the RDR is “the RPF disguised as a left-wing party”, “an appendage of the

¹⁹ Gilles Martinet, *Partis et mouvements dans la France nouvelle*, Questions d'aujourd'hui n°35, Editions du Chêne, Paris, 1945.

²⁰ David Rousset, *Autour du Rassemblement démocratique révolutionnaire*, in *Les Temps modernes* n°36, Paris, 1948.

²¹ *Ibid.*

SFIO". For *La Vérité*, the paper of the *Parti communiste internationaliste* (Trotskyist), it is "an enterprise in confusion".

After one year, the RDR has established branches throughout the country, with total membership something less than 2,000. In the Manche department, for instance, members publish a paper called *Combat prolétarien*. The RDR has attracted trade unionists who campaign for trade union unity "on a democratic basis". But it focuses on the organisation of grand meetings to promote that Europe which would be independent from both imperialisms and for which it was set-up. In what appears to be a response to the World Peace Congress held in Paris two weeks earlier, it organises on 30 April 1949 a day of "international resistance to war and dictatorship". But the support it receives from the SFIO and the CGT-FO is too obvious, some of the speakers at its main meeting are too controversial, for the RDR to capitalize on it. Geopolitics on its own rarely attracts support from exploited classes. Sartre, for his part, had already distanced himself from the RDR, assessing it as anti-communist.

The exposure of the Soviet regime's bleakest features, even when widely advertised as is the case in 1949 and 1950 with the Kravchenko and Rousset trials, seems to have little impact on the political orientation of working class activists as long as they haven't directly experienced the consequences of Communist party policies. The war and the Resistance have weakened conservative influences over a new working class generation in areas where they used to be strong, and the case of the *Mouvement de libération du peuple* may confirm that hypothesis.

The *Ligue ouvrière chrétienne* is a family self-help charity sponsored by the Roman Catholic church. In 1941, it changes its name to *Mouvement populaire des familles* (MPF)²². In 1946, its membership is about 150 000 strong. *Monde ouvrier*, its weekly, prints up to 200 000 copies. State-financed family support introduced after the war turns it into more of a manager of social services. A good number of its activists are keen to contribute in a more radical manner to the improvement of workers' lives. In their actions, the reference to the faith fades. In 1948, they actively support striking miners. They also campaign with the Communist party against the Marshall plan. In 1949, the MPF opens a debate on political action; it widens its membership to technicians and engineers who find it difficult to join trade unions. Recognizing that new orientation, the Church takes away from it the "action catholique ouvrière" label.

In 1950, the MPF changes its name to *Mouvement de libération du peuple* (MLP) to publicize its new role. No later than the following year, it splits in roughly two equal parts: some of its members want to focus on popular education (they launch the *Mouvement de libération ouvrière*), while the majority of the MLP wants to turn it into an "organised political force", based on the following principles:

1. *The final goal of the Movement is the total fulfilment of Man through the collective advancement of Man based on the sense of History.*
2. *To achieve that goal, two means: the downfall of the capitalist regime, the setting-up of a classless society.*
3. *We will contribute to the downfall of the capitalist regime through the class struggle.*
4. *To reach that classless society, there will be a workers' revolution, and the Movement has to conduct it (l'animer).*

²² About the transformation of the *Mouvement populaire des familles* into the *Mouvement de libération du peuple*, see *Cahiers du GRMF* (Groupement de recherche sur les mouvements familiaux), in particular issue n°9, 1995.

5. *In the current period of workers' resistance, the Movement, while retaining its identity, must operate with all working class forces striving for an authentic revolution, including Communist organisations, even if they stand alone.*"

Because of the fierceness of social conflict at the time, the MLP's members were convinced that a revolutionary upheaval was imminent. For them, expression of anti-communism (hostility to the Communist party and to the Soviet Union) is anti-workers. The prospect of a revolutionary rising recedes with the improvement of economic conditions in the early 1950s. In 1953, some of the members will leave to resume the family, union, cultural and social work which was once that of the MPF. Others, asserting that there's but one party of the working class, the Communist party, will leave the MLP when it will try to chart its own political course.

The MLP then reaches out to the youth and to students, and joins the anti-colonialist struggle. As for other organisations claiming revolutionary socialist intent, the Algerian war will open an opportunity for strong commitment: the MLP, like the *Fédération communiste libertaire*, like the Trotskyist groups, like anti-colonialist socialists, will materially support Algerian nationalists. This involvement, and the condemnation of the Hungarian crackdown in 1956, will distance the MLP from the Communist party. In 1957, it merges with part of the *Union progressiste*, itself an association of the *Parti socialiste unitaire* and of progressive Christian movements, until then very close to the Communist party, and with the *Tendance socialiste révolutionnaire*, an offshoot of Trotskyism, to launch the *Union de la gauche socialiste* (UGS). In 1960, the UGS and the PSA, an anti-colonialist scission of the SFIO will merge with other smaller outfits to create the *Parti socialiste unifié* (PSU).

*

* *

The last golden age?

After 1950, René Lefevre will cease to publish until the end of the 1960s. He has left the SFIO, which is on its way to oblivion. He has kept unsold papers and books. In 1968, René, now retired, and supported by the small group operating the *Vieille taupe* (Old mole) bookshop which sells the writings of non-Leninist Marxist revolutionaries, starts publishing again. The first new *Cahier* of that age, Ida Mett's *Le paysan dans la révolution russe*, is released in 1969. Over the next ten years, René will add about fifty new titles to the *Cahiers'* catalogue, not including books supplied by other publishers and new editions of past titles. From 1975 to 1979, he will also publish fifteen issues of a periodical called *Spartacus*, sub-titled "*Socialisme et liberté*": the continuity of the editorial project is obvious.

In the aftermath of May 1968 comes a boom in publishing of workers' movement and revolutionary writings. Revolutionary ideas and history attract the interest of a wider range of social groups and individuals than ever. All major publishers vie to meet this new demand. New, activist, non-for profit publishers also crop up, sometimes for a brief existence, concerned only with contributing to the debate by publishing as quickly as possible writings they deem to be essential. In 1969, for instance, Bélibaste releases, among others, Archinov's *Makhnovchtchina*, Rosa Luxemburg's *Letters from prison* and a collection of documents on the Kronstadt Commune; Champ libre publishes Krouchtchev's report to the XXth congress of the Soviet Communist party, followed by Lenin's *Testament*. Available in the *Cahiers Spartacus* are Rosa Luxemburg's major political writings, to the exception of the *Crisis of social-democracy*. In that same year, the *Cahiers*

Spartacus release again Herman Gorter's *Réponse à Lénine* and publish, among others, Louise Kautsky's *Souvenirs sur Rosa Luxemburg*. They reissue Karl Kautsky's *Les trois sources du marxisme*, with a critique of Lenin's theory of class consciousness by the comrades of the bookshop.

This abundance of publications about revolutions and revolutionaries will increase in the following years.

At the same time, it seems that it is the groups which claim the Leninist inheritance, and the Communist party foremost among them, that are increasing their memberships the most. Various Trotskyist groups, others claiming to be Maoists, are gaining in visibility and influence, particularly among the young. For René Lefevre, as was the case twenty years earlier, it is necessary to try and propagate not only the works of the diverse historical strands of non-Leninist socialism, but also viewpoints on current events broadly in continuity with those strands. His achievement will be to gather around this project small groups, and individuals of all ages, who accept a plurality of viewpoints, a diversity of experience, and who have understood that sectarianism is often the product of thought no longer exposed to practice. Events in Poland, the capitalist development in China, the Portuguese revolution of 1974, the findings of collectives on trade union practice or the ways to the abolition of wage earning, will enrich the catalogue together with historical studies and works by Karl Marx, Max Stirner or Anton Pannekoek.

Again, who are the intended readers of those publications? It is true that the interest kindled by the resurrection of the idea of revolution explains the general increase in sales of revolution-related books, without their readers necessarily being activists in any way. Because of their singularity, the *Cahiers Spartacus* indeed face a peculiar phenomenon: anarchists will generally not consider "Marxist" writings, and few, at the time, will recognize the *Cahiers* as "libertarian". For Trotskyist tendencies, the *Cahiers* breed "confusion". Their more knowledgeable members know that the "Old man" had designated the PSOP as "centrist" and that René Lefevre had been a member of the SFIO after World War II.

But the groups and individuals who, in that period, offered their writings or support to René had a feeling that the reach of his publications was not circumscribed to a hypothetical "council communist" constituency which had never had any influence on social movements in France. It was unthinkable that the mobilization in 1968 of a large part of the French people, in particular of new social categories, and taking new forms, would not spawn new political projects: it was necessary to provide all those who were taking part in that process with as many tools as possible to identify and avoid the traps laid for them by those whose aim was above all to gain and exert power.

This is Alain Guillerme's²³ purpose in his 1974 foreword to the *Marxisme contre dictature* brochure of Rosa Luxemburg writings: "...the grand workers' party that could arise from the merger of the Socialist party, of the PSU, of the CLAS²⁴ and of other members of the CFDT cannot be anything – let's say it clearly – but 'luxemburgist'. Without a distinctive theory, it can only be either a reformist and conservative party...or an ideological and practical appendage of the Communist

²³ 1944-2005. A member of the *Socialisme ou Barbarie* group, then of the PSU. His writings include *Le luxembourgisme aujourd'hui*, Spartacus, Paris, 1970; *L'autogestion généralisée*, Christian Bourgois, Paris, 1979; *Rosa Luxemburg, la Rose rouge*, Picollec, Paris, 2002; and, with Yvon Bourdet, *De l'autogestion*, Seghers, Paris, 1975.

²⁴ *Comité pour L'Autogestion Socialiste*, a forum of the PSU, the Alliance marxiste révolutionnaire, the Centres d'initiative communiste (set-up by former Communist party members), Objectif socialiste, and non-party movements such as La vie nouvelle and the Groupes d'action municipale (GAM).

party...The comrades who work towards that merger...are fully conscious of that danger. They believe they can counter it by putting forward the rousing rallying call of ‘*autogestion*’...The word has taken so many meanings that it has become confusing...For some, it means the management by people of society at every level, the withering of the State and of wage earning, while for others it is only a variety of economic management...leaving Capital and State unchanged.”

Alain Guillerme was probably mistaken about the class nature of the Socialist party. But he was stressing the specific political phenomenon that had emerged in May 1968: the formulation, outside anarchist circles, of a political prospect designated as “self-management”. At the time when he writes his Foreword, an appeal has been launched by well-known union leaders for the convening of “Assizes for socialism” which could result in the birth of a unified self-management socialist (“*socialiste autogestionnaire*”) movement.

How did that prospect emerge? Outside some anarchist groups, “self-management” used to refer more specifically to the management system that Yugoslavia had introduced for firms after its break with the Soviet Union in 1948, and then by Algeria, in particular for some of its farms, after having gained its independence in 1962. Such self-management “actually existing” in countries where most social activities were controlled by the State did not help to clarify the notion. In France, *Autogestion*, a periodical launched in France in 1966, is dedicated to surveying its various meanings.

It is the CFDT trade union federation which, as early as 1968, puts forward self-management as a radical, society transforming project. The notion itself may be vague, but its meaning is easy to understand: if socialist revolution becomes once again a prospect for social forces, the CFDT makes it clear that it will oppose the advent of state socialism. It rejects State control of firms and the subordination of trade unions to the State. Its stand is not a product of theorization: in May, the longing for self-management has been much in evidence in a good number of branches and activities, in the economy and in the wider society. In 1970, the CFDT fleshes out this prospect at its congress. It comes out in favour of a democratic socialism resting on three “pillars”: self-management, social ownership of the means of production and exchange, and democratic planning. It does not deny that power has to be wrested from the ruling classes, but it firmly opposes monopoly power by a revolutionary organisation. From then on, in the French workers’ movement, a new socialist project, self-management socialism, is joining battle with the old democratic socialism and state socialism. The Communist party, and Leninist revolutionaries of all stripes, are quick to reject what they denounce as a new idealistic or opportunistic deviation. For his part, the PSU will endorse self-management in 1971, but only painfully, by a small majority of its members. In the immediate aftermath of May, its membership, although still minute compared to that of the Communist party, had increased significantly and the PSU had become a battleground for a number of tendencies, some inspired by Trotskyism and several others by Maoism. The self-management socialist majority was mainly united by its rejection of the competing proposals for the construction of a Leninist-type vanguard organisation put forward by other tendencies.

If, by 1972, the PSU had reformulated its project as self-management socialism, the Socialist party was also making references to self-management. Later on, the Ligue communiste révolutionnaire, and even the Communist party will also embrace self-management.

The Assizes for socialism will prove an opportunity for nearly half the membership of the PSU to negotiate their entrance in the Socialist party. The rump of the PSU then has to clarify the exact nature of its political project. A minority will demand in vain that self-management socialism be recognized as the project for achieving power of a new, emerging, class within wage-earners; and as

facing this new potential ruling class, an emerging exploited class much larger than the industrial working class which it was necessary to help achieve political expression²⁵.

As the PSU went on to support the government of the Left, it sunk in irrelevance and folded. As of today, the self-management socialist heirloom is being claimed only by the Alternatifs²⁶, with a membership in hundreds, and no clear political project beside anti-liberalism.

*

* *

Bearers of tradition, or bearers of the future?

Having worked for many years as a proof-reader in newspapers, René Lefevre was fully acquainted with the workings of the press. In France, the NMPP, a publisher cooperative, was in charge of distributing all papers and magazines throughout the country. Through it, his publications could be found at newsagents', much more numerous and more accessible to a popular audience than bookshops. But to benefit from this network, the *Cahiers Spartacus* have had to maintain the fiction that they were a periodical²⁷ and meet two requirements: a minimum frequency of eight issues per year, and print runs high enough to supply a significant proportion of all newsagents. To reach the required number of issues, previous publications have had to be repackaged as new; high print runs have meant significant upfront costs and also returned quantities for which handling charges had to be paid.

In 1979, a combination of health trouble and straightened circumstances led René to set up a formal collective to help him more and, in due course, to ensure that his publishing endeavour would live on. In the 1980s, new authors were added to the catalogue and a number of important titles were published, as for instance a new edition of Anton Pannekoek's *Workers' councils*, the translation of which by ICO had originally been published by Béliabaste; under the cover title *Trotsky, le Staline manqué*, writings by Willy Hühn analysing Trotsky's political project; *À la recherche d'un communisme libertaire*, a revised collection by Daniel Guérin of his writings in the perspective of the reconciliation of the "twin brothers, feuding brothers"; Larry Portis' *IWW et syndicalisme révolutionnaire aux États-Unis*, the only book in French dedicated to the history of the wobblies. Altogether, about twenty new titles.

René died in 1988, shortly before the break-up of the Soviet empire. This downfall may have rendered the fight against Marxist-Leninist theories and projects less necessary. The *Cahiers Spartacus* carry on, faithful to the history of their catalogue²⁸. But their editorial work is not fed anymore by revolutionary attempts in Europe, as had been the case in the 1970s. In France, the publication of writings on social revolution and revolutionaries remains lively. Several dozens of publishers keep them available and add to the list. But for the *Cahiers Spartacus*, it seems that once

²⁵ See contributions of the PSU's "Courant communiste autogestionnaire", or "courant 'C'", to its IXth, Xth et XIth congresses (1974, 1977 and 1979) or, for a synthetic approach, André Fontaine, *Les socialismes : l'Histoire sans fin*, Spartacus, Paris, 1992.

²⁶ The Alternatifs publish a periodical, *Rouge et vert*.

²⁷ This is why, and to this day, each book carries a chronological number.

²⁸ The list and description of available titles can be found on <http://atheles.org/spartacus/livres/index.html>

again the libertarian socialist current which gave them birth and that legitimates their existence has gone back to sleep. Hence a number of questions, which may be so many research topics:

1) Assuming that the history of the *Cahiers Spartacus* may be backed by less visible data, such as the internal debates of political organisations and trade unions, could it be:

- That doctrines of social revolution do not exist before revolutionary crises, but that they are produced by them?

- Therefore, even if teachings can be drawn from previous revolutionary episodes by those who could live through new ones, that the doctrines themselves will have lost a good deal of their relevance because of the changes wrought into the social structure between episodes?

- That once the revolutionary wave has broken, the social groups that have ridden it will not necessarily maintain the doctrine which they have formulated during it, either because they are now ensconced in the new power structure and in need of a new doctrine (re. the Bolsheviks) or because the doctrine is of no use outside the revolutionary moment (re. the *autogestion généralisée*)?

2) Political currents of the workers' movement have as often as not expressed themselves in writing and their travaux are also a subject matter for historians. Is it at all possible to gauge the influence that may have had, or can still have, writings such as those once published by René Lefeuve, or published today by publishers of the social revolution, on their intended readers?