

# Russian Anarchists in the Labour Movement in the Early 20<sup>th</sup> Century

by Anatoly Dubovik

In our native historical science the social base of the Russian anarchist movement in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century is traditionally regarded as being the petite-bourgeoisie. Thus, in works of the Soviet period a typical opinion is that of S. N. Kanyeov, who noted that the dominant elements among the Russian anarchists were “the petit-bourgeois peasantry... small proprietors, handicraft workers and artisans, and also part of the intelligentsia” [1]. Similar notions about “the typical anarchist” persisted even after the collapse of the USSR and the liberation of historical science from many previous dogmas. For example, the encyclopedia of “Political Parties of Russia” informs us: “The social basis of anarchist organizations was composed predominately of handicraft persons, artisans, and small traders, but the movement also attracted peasants, workers, and the intelligentsia” [2]. Paradoxically, these very same authors, when it came to elaborating the concrete events and facts of the history of Russian anarchism, did not discover among its adherents either traders or handicraft persons, and were compelled to limit their discussion mainly to anarchist-workers.

It seems to us that the only reliable method of determining the “social base of the anarchist organizations” at the beginning of the last century is the mathematical one of using statistics to find the proportions of members from the various social strata. The author of this paper has occupied himself over the course of many years with collecting and systematizing biographical information about participants of the anarchist movement on the territory of the Russian empire and the USSR, using both published and unpublished (archival) sources. The results obtained refute the standard *a priori* notions which originated as far back as the pre-revolutionary political journalism of the social-democrats. For understandable reasons, we have divided these results into three sets, corresponding to different periods of Russian history: 1) pre-revolutionary, from the origin of the anarchist movement in Russia in 1900 until 1916; 2) the revolution and Civil War of 1917–1921; 3) the period from the end of the Civil War until the physical annihilation of the last Russian anarchists at the end of the 1930s.

In the period between 1900 and 1916 we have identified 2,400 anarchists; occupations have been established for 1,593 of them. Of this number the majority (59.1%) were representatives of the working class (factory/plant, transport, and other workers). Another 72 persons (4.5%) belonged to white-collar occupations (postal/telegraph workers, clerical workers, shop assistants, bookkeepers, paramedics, teachers, etc.) situated socially close to the proletariat. Let us especially emphasize that the 59% does not include former workers serving in the armed forces or so-called professional revolutionaries, nor does it include the children of workers studying in elementary or secondary educational institutions. In some places the percentage of factory/plant and transport workers was even higher. For example, in Yekaterinoslav they made up more than 78% of the members of the local Federation of Anarchists. The skilled trades occupations most common among worker-anarchists were metalworkers and

machinists (111), tailors and seamstresses (47), printers (40), food industry workers (37), sailors of the merchant marine (35), and also a significant number of railway workers, metallurgists, shoemakers, cabinetmakers, and miners.

The Russian anarchist movement was never able to achieve unity on matters of tactics and organization. At the time of the Revolution of 1905–1907 a significant fraction of the anarchists, including those belonging to the workers, considered their task to be direct struggle against the tsarist government and the bourgeoisie, with concentration on organizing militant actions and rejection of any participation in “non-revolutionary” and “opportunist” movements, including the trade union movement. At the same time, the followers of Kropotkin and some other anarchist ideologues advocated organizing workers’ and peasants’ unions, which they envisaged as “natural organs of direct struggle with capital” and embryos of the future anarchist socialist society. They were also in favour of “preparing the General Strike of the dispossessed, both in the cities and in the villages, which ... could be the start of the Social Revolution” [3]. The advocates of these views, calling themselves “anarchists-syndicalists”, were active participants in the organized labour movement, which included the trade unions. Thus, in Petersburg, anarchists and their ideological allies the “revolutionary syndicalists” exercised a strong influence in the unions of printers, patternmakers, electrotechnologists, lithographers, and metallurgists. In Moscow, members of the anarchist groups “Buntar” [Insurgent], “Svoboda” [Freedom], and “Svobodnaya kommuna” [Free Commune] worked in the “Metals Refining Union” and in the trade unions of architectural-construction workers, plumbers, printers, and power engineers; they led strikes of workers of electrical and gas utilities, as well as strikes at a number of foundries and machine plants. In Kharkov the anarchists took the initiative in creating a “Union of workers for the defense of our rights”; in Riga a “Free Labour Union” was formed [4]. Participation by anarchists in trade unions took place as well in Baku, Warsaw, Nikolayev, Petrokov [Piotrków], and other cities. The most well known anarcho-syndicalist organization of these times was the Odessa “Registration”<sup>1</sup> and its successor, the Union of Black Sea Sailors, active in 1906–1918 and responsible for organizing several strikes of merchant marine sailors and dock workers during 1906–1907 [5]. In other regions anarchist organizations were frequently formed along occupational lines and thereby acquired the characteristics of trade unions. For example, the core of the Yekaterinoslav Federation of Anarchists in 1907 consisted of the federations of anarcho-communists of the Pipe Plant, the railway workshops, the Briansk Plant, and the interplant [6]; the Białostok group of anarcho-communists was re-organized at the end of 1905 as an association of federations of textile workers, leather workers, tailors, and cabinet-makers [7]; the Vilna federative group was composed of organizations of leather workers, butchers, and tailors [8]. Activity among the proletariat was regarded as being of primary importance even by those anarchists who did not belong to the working class. Typical was the example of the Kiev anarcho-communist “Black Banner” group, composed mainly of students, but focused on organizational and propaganda activity among the workers of the “Arsenal” plant, food industry workers, carriage-makers, sugar refinery workers, etc. [8].

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1 “Registration”, elected and managed by the sailors themselves, derived its name from the fact that it operated a labour exchange for filling vacancies on all ships in Odessa. (*Translator’s note*)

Along with taking part in trade union activity, conducting agitation and propaganda, creating workers' study groups, and so on – traditional forms of engagement with the workers' movement – a distinctive feature of the practice of the anarchists and the ideologically close to them SR-Maximalists during the first dozen or so years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was the widespread application of economic terror. During strikes the anarchists frequently devised acts of subversion and sabotage, destroying equipment and manufactured goods. The best known example of such practice was a series of acts of sabotage which accompanied the prolonged strike of Black Sea sailors (November 1906 – June 1907), when several steamships were blown up by anarchists and the total losses of the Russian Steam Shipping and Trade Society exceeded one million rubles [9]. Frequently strikes were accompanied by the armed confiscation and transfer to the striking workers of money, food, and other goods of prime necessity; most often such acts were reported in Northwest Russia, but they also took place in Odessa. However, the most widespread form of economic terror was assassination attempts directed at entrepreneurs, plant managers, and also strikebreakers. The anarchists carried out their first act of economic terror in August 1904 in the town of Krynki, Grodno governate, when the Białostok worker-anarchist N. Farber killed A. Kagan, owner of a large shoe-manufacturing workshop [10]; the last well known incident of this type in the history of anarchism prior to 1917 occurred in the spring of 1912, when members of the revived Riga group of anarcho-communists carried out several attacks on engineers and foremen of local plants and factories [11]. Let us note that economic terror was applied not only with the goal of pressuring the administration of enterprises, but also as a means of exacting revenge on the “class enemy”. For example, in May 1906, after a strike by Moscow transport workers was suppressed, the worker-anarchist Zuyev murdered the engineer Krebs, manager of the Miuskiy tram depot; and in April 1907, the Yekaterinoslav anarchists P. Arshinov and V. Babeshko shot Vasilenko, head of the Alexandrovsk railway workshops, in retaliation for the mass firings of strikers [12].

During the 1905–1907 Revolution, the slogans, and especially the practice, of the Russian anarchists appealed to a significant part of the working class, above all to its most resolute and radically inclined elements. Their point of view was expressed, for example, in the famous words of A. N. Matyushenko, leader of the uprising on the battleship Potemkin: “The more they clobber the owners, the better off they are”. That terrorist practice led to the most severe repression directed against participants of the anarchist movement. The veteran leaders and the new generation of anarchists which appeared on the eve of the First World War drew the necessary conclusions from the lessons they had received: during the last years of the tsarist era, the anarchists as before took part in the revolutionary labour movement, but the use of terror became an exceedingly rare phenomenon.

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For the second period under review (1917–1921), we analyzed the biographies of more than 2,800 anarchists. The type of occupation was established for 2,062 of these, of which 886 (43.0%) were blue-collar workers, and 127 (6.2%) were low-level white-collar employees of the categories mentioned earlier. The drop in the relative number of workers among the anarchists is explained both by the spread of anarchist ideas among the peasantry (the proportion of peasant-anarchists increased from 6.5% to 16.3%) and by the decrease in the numerical strength of the Russian working class due to the World War and economic devastation. The main occupations represented among anarchist-workers of this period were metalworkers and machinists (87), railway workers (45), metallurgists (44), and food industry

workers (39); lesser numbers were identified as marine transport workers, typographers, miners, and electricians.

During these years anarchists took part in all the organizations of the working class – soviets, trade unions, factory committees, producer and consumer co-operatives, etc. Judging by the records of the All-Russian congresses of trade unions which were held in 1918–1920, the anarcho-syndicalists enjoyed a significant influence in the trade unions of metalworkers, railway workers, textile workers, marine transport workers and dockers, bakers, miners, and postal/telegraph employees. A whole series of trade unions operated under the leadership of anarchists, including the Moscow Union of Bakers, the Moscow Union of Chemists and Perfumers, the Union of Black Sea Sailors, the Petrograd Union of Postal and Telegraph Workers, the Union of Volga River Transport Workers, the Gulyai-Polye Union of Metalworkers, Woodworkers and Other Trades, the Trans-Baikal Union of Goldminers Operating on Co-operative Principles, etc. On the Central Committee of the All-Russian Union of Metalworkers (VSRM), the anarchists were represented by A. K. Gastev and A. Z. Gol'tsman. Anarchists were also elected to leading positions in local branches of the VSRM in Yekaterinoslavskaya, Orlovskaya, and Kharkovskaya provinces as well as in the Urals. Anarchists were also members of the Central Committees of the All-Russian Union of Postal and Telegraph Employees (Grigor'yev and Shcherbakov), the All-Russian Union of Railway Workers (K. I. Kovalevich), and the All-Russian Union of Textile Workers (P. A. Arshinov)[13].

A significant fraction of the anarchists regarded the trade unions as an “obsolete form” of the labour movement, as opposed to factory-plant committees (fabzabkoms). Anarchists of different persuasions saw in these new-for-Russia organs the instrument which would allow the proletariat to establish “real workers’ control”, followed by self-managed production and distribution, culminating in the re-organization of the whole economic life of the country on the basis of stateless socialism. It was with this perspective that anarchist delegates participated in the conferences of the fabzabkoms of Petrograd and its environs in June–December 1917, in the First All-Russian Congress of Fabzabkoms in October 1917, and in the First All-Russian Congress of Trade Unions in January 1918. Among the best known activists of the anarchist movement working in the fabzabkoms, and even heading them, one can mention K. V. Akashev and G. P. Maksimov (Petrograd), V. P. Bekrenyev and M. S. Khodunov (Moscow), M. A. Petrovsky (Odessa), Yu. Rotenberg (Kharkov), I. P. Zhuk (Schlüsselburg), B. K. Shatilo (Kuzbass), and other activists. The Petrograd anarcho-syndicalist V. S. Shatov was elected at the end of 1917 to the All-Russian Central Executive Committee of the Fabzabkoms [14].

In late 1917 – early 1918, as the old state system was unravelling and the new, Bolshevik state, was still taking shape, the anarchists proceeded to the so-called socialization of enterprises, i. e. their transition to full control by labour collectives. From the point of view of the anarchists themselves, this was only the first step, after which would follow the re-organization of the whole system of production and distribution: first on the scale of whole regions, and then for the whole country. Socialization was conceived as the direct realization of one of the main slogans of the October Revolution: “The Factories to the Workers”. But putting this program into effect already encountered opposition from the Soviet authorities, whose economic policy was limited initially to a system of workers’ control, and then was reduced to the total nationalization of the whole economy. Despite this opposition, the anarchists, relying on the support of labour collectives, carried out the socialization of the Black Sea merchant fleet

(along with the port of Odessa and its shipyards), plants in the cement and machine tool industries, businesses in the service sector (cafeterias, restaurants, hotels) in Kubano-Chernomorskaya oblast, mines in the Cheremkhovskaya basin (Irkutsk governate), and individual enterprises in other regions, including large ones like the Schlüsselburg gunpowder works [15].

These experiments in socialization of the economy did not last very long. Already by the spring–summer of 1918, the anarchists found themselves back in the underground in Ukraine and Siberia, the Urals, the Volga region and the Kubano-Chernomorskaya region, all of which were occupied by interventionists and White Guards. At the same time, the Soviet authorities were beginning the persecution of the anarchists. In spite of this, a fraction of the anarchists continued to see the Bolsheviks as allies in the struggle against the bourgeois system, remaining at their jobs in the organs of the Soviet state. Others rose in opposition to the Bolshevik regime, which included taking part in economic strikes (Petrograd, Bryansk, Tula, Ryazan, etc.) [16] and the creation of illegal trade unions, an example of which is the “Federation of Food Industry Workers”, organized by Moscow anarchists and SR-Maximalists in early 1920. Finally, many anarchists engaged in open armed struggle against Bolshevism, above all in the ranks of the Makhnovist insurgent movement. Prominent roles in this movement were played by such outstanding activists of the Russian labour movement as P. A. Arshinov, a former member of the Central Committee of the All-Russian Union of Textile Workers, and P. A. Rybin, a former member of the Territorial Bureau of the Union of Metalworkers of South Russia.

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The third interval in our periodization of the anarchist movement embraces the years from 1922 until the end of the 1930s. Of the approximately 1,100 anarchists known to us from this period, we have established the occupations of 543. Among them we find only 156 workers (28.8%); it is not possible so far to be more specific about the occupations represented.

Studies of the history of Russian anarchism in the 1920s–1930s have been few and fragmentary in nature. Nevertheless, there is information available about several anarchist formations of those times, including worker-anarchist formations. Illegal circles and groups, composed of both veterans of the movement and representatives of the new generation of anarcho-communists and syndicalists, were active predominately in Moscow, Leningrad, Kharkov, Odessa, and Yekaterinoslav (Dnepropetrovsk). In these historical centres of the movement, up to the early 1930s agitation was continued among various strata of the population, including the workers. Attempts were made to publish illegal literature and strikes for economic demands were launched [17]. According to some sources, one of the last underground anarchist groups was still active in 1937 among the workers of the Stalingrad tractor plant [18].

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*Translated from the Russian by Malcolm Archibald.*

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