The SPGB and the Guesdist

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When the Socialist Party of Great Britain was being founded in 1904, as a breakaway from the Social Democratic Federation which had pioneered Marx’s ideas in Britain, the main issue confronting the international Social Democratic movement was “Ministerialism”, or whether or not Socialists should participate in a “bourgeois government”. In 1899 a prominent member of the French section, Alexandre Millerand (a later President of France), accepted a ministerial post in a left-of-centre Radical government. This led to a split in the already rather amorphous movement in France, with the walk-out of the “Guesdists”, as the Marxist Parti Ouvrier Français (French Workers Party) was known after its most prominent member, Jules Guesde, but which also included the more well-known, outside of France, Paul Lafargue, Marx’s son-in-law.

The Guesdists had once before, twenty years previously, split off from the reformists, who they called “possibilists” and were in return dubbed by them “impossibilists” (probably the origin of the term). They were implacably opposed to socialists participating in a government of capitalism and in 1902 joined with other anti-ministerialist Social Democrats to form the Parti Socialiste de France (Socialist Party of France). The ministerialists, led by the parliamentary orator, Jean Jaurès, joined together in the Parti Socialiste Français (French Socialist Party) which was a pure and simple opportunist, reformist party.

The issue had come up at the congress of the Social Democratic International in Paris in 1900 when a resolution, proposed by Kautsky, was passed which, while opposing as a general principle socialist participation in a capitalist government, left the door open for this in exceptional circumstances. Naturally, the ministerialists pleaded that the situation in France in 1899 had been exceptional. The Guesdists were not satisfied and at the next congress of the International, held in Amsterdam in 1904, moved a stronger anti-ministerialist resolution, which was passed. The SPGB was represented at this Congress (but didn’t like having to sit as part of a single British delegation, alongside representatives of the ILP and the SDF from which they had just broken away) and applauded the carrying of this resolution.

Later that year an SPGB member obtained an interview in Paris with Paul Lafargue, mainly about the implications of the Russo-Japanese War that had just broken out. This was published in the November 1904 issue of the SPGB’s monthly journal, the Socialist Standard. In his write-up the member, after roundly condemning the attitude of Jaurès, commented:

“It was not for nothing that our comrades of the Socialist Party of France moved the resolution at the recent International Congress, which declared against compromise and intrigue with capitalist parties. The Socialists of France have fought and are fighting the same battle against treachery and folly of opportunism, which we of The Socialist Party of Great Britain are waging in this country.”

The Socialist Standard was still calling the Guesdists “our French comrades” in 1908. The January and February 1905 issues carried a translation of Guesde’s basic socialist pamphlet The Social Problem and its Solution.
Although the Guesdist had succeeded in pushing through a strong anti-ministerialist resolution at Amsterdam this turned out to be something of a pyrrhic victory for them in that the congress also voted that all the affiliated organisations in one country should take steps to unite into a single organisation. The SPGB refused this in Britain and eventually (1907 conference) decided not to be represented at the next International Social Democrat congress, in Stuttgart in 1907, but to try to enter “into communication with the known representatives of that uncompromising policy of which the SPGB are the exponents in Great Britain” and who one delegate named as “Ferri, Michels, Guesde, Lafargue and others”. The Guesdist, however, went along with unity call and in 1905 the Socialist Party of France and the French Socialist Party united to form a party with the unwieldy title of “United Socialist Party (French Section of the Workers’ International)” or, in French, SFIO, by which name it was known until the 1970s.

In the beginning the Guesdist were able to dominate the united party’s executive but soon the open reformists under Jaurès got the upper hand, relegating the Guesdist to a minority tendency within the SFIO. In 1907 the Guesdist started their own publication, Le Socialisme. The SPGB hoped that the Guesdist would split off from the reformist-dominated SFIO and form their own independent party. An article on “The International” in December 1907 commenting on the proceedings of the SFIO’s congress in August predicted:

“In France there was until the International Congress in 1904 at Amsterdam, a body of real revolutionaries – the Guesdist. But in consequence of the ‘unity’ craze these revolutionary fighters fused with the Reformers, the followers of Jaurès, about two years ago ( . . . ) The Reformers have, at least temporarily, bamboozled the Guesdist; but judging from the proceedings at the last Congress of the Party, some weeks ago, there are already many bad sores which can only lead to a split in the future.”

This never happened and the Guesdist remained in the SFIO. Despite seeing this as a mistake, the SPGB continued to regard them as “real revolutionaries”. In the year 1908 the Socialist Standard carried in separate issues five articles translated from Le Socialisme and a sixth from Lafargue. A further four articles or news items from this journal were published in the following years, the last appearing in November 1912. The translations were done by French-speaking SPGB members, at least two of whom were working in France at the time.

**What was Guesdism?**

What was it that the early SPGB found in the Guesdist that led them to regard them as “real revolutionaries” and “our French comrades”?

Firstly, their Marxism. The Guesdist were the group which first introduced Marxist ideas into France in much the same way, and during the same period (1880s, 1890s), as the SDF in Britain. So, some of the articles chosen for translation were on aspects of Marxist theory. Three of them were translations of articles by Charles Rappoport on historical and philosophical subjects: “Evolution and Revolution” (July 1905), “The Society of Tomorrow” (September 1908) and “Fatalism and Historical Necessity” (given front page treatment in April 1911). Another theoretical article, on “The Evolution of Society”, by the leading Guesdist Eduoard Fortin, had appeared in the September 1905 issue. Lafargue’s article, in May 1908, dealt with “The Law of Value and the Dearness of Commodities”. In February and March 1912 the Socialist Standard carried a translation
of an 1882 article by Lafargue on « Socialism and Nationalisation » in which he argued that nationalisation was a capitalist reform not socialism. In fact, although the early SPGB did contain German as well as French speakers and the German Social Democratic Party was generally considered the most Marxist of such parties, apart from a translation of Karl Kautsky’s The Erfurt Programme (published in the Socialist Standard and then as the Party’s first three pamphlets) most translated articles on Marxist theory were from French not German.

Secondly, their position on socialist tactics. This was “the economic expropriation of the capitalist class by their political expropriation”; in other words, that the way to socialism lay via the conquest of political power by the working class. To this end, said the Guesdists, the working class needed to organise into a mass socialist party and it was the “first duty of socialists” (the title of an article by Charles Verecque, translated in the June 1908 Socialist Standard) to build such a party by incessant propaganda and organisation. Socialists were, in a perhaps unfortunate phrase of Guesde’s, to act as “recruiting sergeants” for this party. “It cannot be too often repeated”, wrote Verecque, “that what keeps the proletariat from its emancipation is the fact of its ignorance. If it could only understand it would free itself. The new form of Society is ready to take shape under its direction and for its benefit. Its consent is the only thing lacking. The daily task of Socialists is therefore to prepare the workers for the historic mission which they have to accomplish.”

“The vote,” wrote Guesde in an article on “Legality and Revolution” published on the front page of the February 1908 Socialist Standard, “however legal it may be, is revolutionary when on the basis of class candidatures it organises France of labour against France of capital”.

Thirdly, and as a consequence of this basic position, their implacable opposition to anarchistic notions of minority “direct action” and “the general strike”. Of what might be called the leftwing of pre-WWI international Social Democracy—the intransigent anti-Revisionists, anti-ministerialists, and anti-reformists—the Guesdists and the SPGB were almost alone in taking up such a position. Others such as Rosa Luxemburg and Anton Pannekoek were influenced by these ideas, though they talked about “mass action” and “the mass strike” to distinguish themselves from the anarchists. In America Daniel De Leon embraced industrial unionism to “take and hold” the means of production rather than “the economic expropriation of the capitalist class by their political expropriation”. So too, in fact, did some of the founding members of the SPGB, one of whom, EJB Allen, became a prominent “industrial unionist” and “revolutionary syndicalism”. This tendency was represented in the SFIO by Gustave Hervé (and in the Italian party by one, Benito Mussolini).

The Guesdist position, shared by the SPGB, was put in an article by Paul-Marius André translated in the November 1908 Socialist Standard. Entitled “The Two Possibilisms”, it argued that the anarchist direct-actionists were just as much reformists as the parliamentary gradualists since they, too, were not prepared to knuckle down to the longish haul of winning majority support for socialism and of building up a strong socialist party that would eventually be able to gain control of political power and abolish capitalism, but wanted “something now”—reforms; the only difference between them and the parliamentary reformists was that they favoured “direct” as opposed to “parliamentary” action to try to get them. Not only was this ineffective as a reformist strategy, but it unnecessarily put working class lives in danger.
The Socialist Standard of the period carried a number of articles, some written by members on the spot in Paris, recording the failure of the tactics of the anarchist leaders of the main French trade union grouping, the CGT, to hammer home the same point as the Guesdists: that the way to expropriate the capitalist class was not by industrial action with the state still controlled by their representatives but by political action once socialists had won sufficient working-class support to take over the state.

**Were they really real revolutionaries?**

But were the Guesdists the “real revolutionaries” that the early SPGB considered them to be?

While the SPGB was an organisation of a few hundred working men and women, the Guesdists had thousands of members, more than a dozen MPs and controlled a number of local authorities, including Lille, the third biggest city in France. This reflected itself in the different attitude towards reforms, which the Guesdists party had some chance of influencing. On paper, the Guesdists took the view that, as long as capitalism lasted, working-class problems would continue so that reforms would at most only be palliatives and single-issue campaigns were diversions from the struggle to win political power to expropriate the capitalist class and make the means of production the common property of society, which alone could provide the framework within which these problems could be solved.

However, unlike the SPGB, they did advocate reforms. So, their MPs, mayors and councillors had not been elected on a straight socialist programme but on a programme of socialism and reforms. Which meant that, in practice, they were just as much the prisoners of their reform-minded, non-socialist voters as were Jaurès and his supporters. No doubt this was why in the end, contrary to what the early SPGB hoped and urged, they were not prepared to break away from the reformist-dominated SFIO and branch out on their own in opposition to it. So they stayed in, with the result that, as an article in the Socialist Standard in October 1910 on the Copenhagen Congress of the Social Democrat International (the same article which represented the SPGB’s definite break with the International, which was described as having been taken over by pro-capitalist elements), noted:

“In France, the Guedists, who at one time, in spite of their small numbers, wielded enormous power for Socialist enlightenment, are absorbed by the reformist followers of Jaurès and Vaillant”.

Another mistaken, or at least ambiguous, position of the Guesdists was their attitude to patriotism. This was an issue that had been discussed within the SFIO in the light of the anti-militarist and anti-patriotism campaign launched by Hervé. Even though Hervé was not a Guesdist, the members of the SPGB who followed affairs in France were aware that some of his views on this question were similar to ours. Thus, the June 1907 Socialist Standard carried a translation of his views:

“The workers are disinherited and ill-treated in every existing country. All nations are equal, or nearly so, in this respect, particularly now that the capitalist regime renders more and more uniform the material, intellectual, and political conditions of life for the labouring class in all countries; and now that the introduction of the capitalist system in Russia will compel even Tsarism to accord to the Russian workers the essentials of political liberty. No country at the present day, is so superior to the others that the workers of that country should get themselves killed in its defence.”
The article agreed with this position, but went on to disagree with Hervé’s conclusion that, in the event of war breaking out, the workers should stage an armed uprising to try to overthrow capitalist rule (“Rather insurrection than war”, as he put it), pointing out that this “would be courting a shambles that would make war peace by contrast”, with workers sacrificing their lives in “a fruitless and bloody” action. The article also pointed out that as militarism was the product of capitalism the only way to end it was to end capitalism; the efforts of socialists should be aimed at this rather than at mere anti-militarism.

Guesde and the Guesdists made the same two points in the debate within the SFIO, but they did not join Hervé in denouncing patriotism. The full implications of this refusal to denounce patriotism did not become evident until the First World War broke out. Guesde himself entered the French War Cabinet. Hervé, it has to be added, did a complete U-turn and became an ardent patriot and nationalist, joining the army to go and fight. Jaurès, who was assassinated before the war started, went down in history as an anti-war hero, even though there can be no doubt that had he lived he too would have rallied round the French flag and joined the war cabinet instead of Guesde. This of course completely discredited Guesde and the Guesdists with the SPGB.

After the war, some Guesdists, Charles Rappoport for instance, went over to the Communist Party. Others remained in the SFIO (including Guesde who died in 1922 at the age of 77) and represented a strand of anti-Leninist Marxism in France that survived until a few years ago.