

‘Co-operatives’ And Socialism

By Jules Guesde

*A speech delivered before the July 1910 Paris Congress of the
French Socialist Party. Translated for the DAILY PEOPLE by
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Introduction: Jules Guesde on 'Co-operatives'

A treat is offered to the readers of *The People* in the speech “‘Co-operatives’ and Socialism” pronounced by Jules Guesde at this year’s national convention of his party in Paris, and published elsewhere in this issue.¹

The economics of the speech are clear as crystal, the reasoning cogent. In these days, when the “co-operative” scheme spooks in many a head in this country, Guesde’s critique is of interest—and it is especially so for us in a country like ours. Over and above the dangers that cluster around the “co-operative” in France, or Europe in general, the specific circumstance of a fluent population, that is blown into the United States from all the four quarters of the compass, renders the “co-operative” scheme specifically ticklish and fraught with perils for us.

But there is one passage in Guesde’s speech that is pre-eminently big with sense and warning. It contains so profound an observation that it applies not to “co-operatives” only. Guesde says:

The “co-operatives” may and oftenest do become a diversion, if not an obstacle, to the recruiting and developing of the socialist movement—a diversion because, and you can not deny it, when an elite of workingmen put their intelligence into a “co-operative,” when they carry

¹ See page 4, below.

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inside their heads nothing but commercial schemes, how to create a custom for it, how to secure its property and development, there is no room left in brains so occupied for the socialist idea, no more time for the socialist education of the masses. . . . The “co-operative” mustard catches easiest those who could render incalculable services to propaganda, but who, hemmed in, confiscated, paralyzed by a necessarily commercial work, become on the contrary dead losses to the struggling proletariat from whom they are torn away.

Substitute for the “co-operative” in this sentence the pure and simple union, any union other than the up-to-the-handle revolutionary union, and the parallel is exact. The identical danger presented by the “co-operatives” of tearing otherwise valuable elements away from the proletariat is seen latent in the pure and simple union. Hence the love and affection of the bourgeois for both drawbacks upon the socialist movement—the “co-operative” and the pure and simple union.

Guesde’s estimate of the “co-operative” is at once a lecture on the absolute necessity of the union being revolutionary, otherwise it becomes non- if not anti-revolutionary.

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Comrades:

I will detain you for a few moments because I am very tired and also because the party to which I belong has at its disposal only two hours, and I would not like to block those of my friends who desire to develop before you their ideas upon the question in order.

What I wish to do, and I believe it is necessary to do it, in order that we may speak with a knowledge of the case, is to examine what co-operation is in itself.

Co-operation is simply one of the forms of association, a means of grouping in modern society; it even belongs sometimes to the class of ordinary stock societies, with this only difference that the share offered by the co-operative barely reaches 100 francs, while the shares of capitalist societies go above 500, or even 1,000 francs. And it is because co-operation is nothing but a form of association or grouping that you see it advocated by all social opinions and categories. Co-operation has even been advocated as—what shall I say?—as nascent socialism; co-operators, some of them even workingmen, have set themselves from the start against the class-conscious organization of the proletariat. I recall, when I returned banishment in 1886—not to go very far in the past—the state of mind of the first Syndicalist Congress in Arras Hall. The **syndiques** of that time were exclusively co-operators and carried co-operation, which they called the brotherhood of capital and labor, so far that in their public meetings, when a portion of the proletariat was driven to fight under the form of

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a strike and they came as far as Paris to ask us for contributions, that is ammunition for our struggling brothers, Chabert, to name only one of them, rose against the collection for the benefit of the striking workmen of Monceau-les-Mines, claiming that it would be impossible for our hard-working class, which since a year was treading the road of co-operation, to uphold a strike without contradicting itself, even though said strike be born outside itself and forced on its victims by capitalist greediness.

REVILLON—It is an easy thing to make the dead speak!

GUESDE—I ask the testimonial of all our Parisian comrades, not one of whom will rise to belie me. What I wished to establish with this page from yesterday's history is that this form of association, of grouping, which co-operation is, can be put to all sorts of use, and is of value to us Socialists, only according to the use it is turned to. Leaving history aside, I will now turn your attention simply to what is happening in a neighboring country. Take Belgium, there you see admirable socialistic co-operatives; but you see others, powerful ones, too, organized by the clerical party, by the liberal party. And I ask you whether this co-operation thus cooked with all the different sorts of sauces, conservative, clerical, bourgeois here, socialistic and revolutionary there, is not enough to prove that the co-operative in itself has absolutely nothing socialistic. Co-operation and co-operatives become socialistic when they are made to help towards reaching the aim pursued by socialism, viz., the gathering into the same social hands of all the means of production and exchange. Any joining on a small scale of capital and labor in the same individual hands, such as is done by even the best co-operatives, is necessarily powerless, as long as in other co-operatives capital is still furnished by one and labor by others.

Co-operatives therefore are and can be of value only through the use they are put to. In the measure in which this form of

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grouping or association serves and helps the Socialist Party, it certainly becomes a sort of arsenal bringing arms to the fighting proletariat. But there lies the exclusive sense of socialist co-operation. If co-operation remains autonomous, if workingmen gather and say: "We are going to ease our life by purveying our families with more articles for consumption, which we will buy in common, at wholesale prices so as to benefit by the difference with retail prices," no doubt this is a respectable aim. I understand very well that in our present state of society the workers try to ease as much of their misery as they can, and to give their families as much satisfaction as they can. I am not at all condemning those co-operatives; they are according to workingmen's rights, that is understood. But I must note, on the other hand, that if these means of diminishing their misery and rendering their life more bearable were generalized, instead of being as to-day an exception in the present state of affairs, the fatal consequence would be that the cost of living having become cheaper, wages would not increase or would even decrease. (Interruption and applause.)

I know very well that when I express myself thus, I go against the opinion of some of my comrades; but they will explain their opinion in a little while and I assure them I will listen to them with all the patience that I beg from them. (Applause.)

I repeat therefore that without any doubt, if consumers' co-operatives were generalized in the country, if they became the rule instead of an isolated fact, there would be two reasons why the morrow of these co-operatives would be either a stagnation or a lowering of wages. The first reason, the one brought forth by Lafargue, is that the bosses were the first ones to use this means: railroad companies, big industrialists, turned towards co-operatives born out of their own initiative when they refuse to increase the wages of their employes, saying to them: now you can live very well, with the cost of living thus reduced. There lies the first proof; but there is another one: everywhere,

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in all the localities, one may see that wages are higher where life is dearer, lower where life is cheaper. Why are wages higher in Paris than in the Normandy country or in the center of France? It is because in Paris, due to the **octroi**, life is more expensive, and nobody will deny that the high or low cost of living has an influence over the rate of wages. There is no question here of the iron law of Lassalle, I leave that aside. I speak purely and simply of a general fact which is within the reach of anybody who has eyes to see.

I am coming now to a third proof of my contention. In the resolution drawn up by the majority from the Seine, do they not tell you expressly: "we must do away with commercial parasitism, through co-operation"? Well now, what you call commercial parasitism is represented in France by a million or twelve hundred thousand small tradesmen. They manage to live somehow or other from the product of their shops, and at the expense of the workingman consumer, certainly; but after you close their shops they will have to keep on living. And then it will be a million or twelve hundred thousand new proletarians whom hunger will throw upon the labor market, and what will be the consequence of these twelve hundred thousand new unemployed coming on top of the unemployed already in existence? Will not this new reserve army forcibly be the cause of reduced salaries? Will not the bosses, seeing more workers at their doors than they need, shave the wages of those at work? Come now, comrades! (Applause.) If the co-operatives were being extended all over the country, wages would fatally be reduced at all points.

Do you want another example, taken from to-day and not from to-morrow? Which is the occidental country—and I am sure none of those who belong to that country and happen to be here will belie me, nor reproach me for giving it as an example in this circumstance—which is the neighboring country the workers of which pass the frontier in great numbers and come to work in our Northern France, either permanently or intermittently? Is it not Belgium, are they not our Belgian

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comrades? And why do they migrate so? Because in Belgium the wages are lowest, and they are lowest because Belgium is flooded with co-operatives of all colors. (Interruptions and applause.)

There is still another reason why co-operatives can have no socialist value. I know that I myself, when once I tried to throw light into bourgeois brains, in the Chamber of Deputies, when they refused to understand that a new society, our socialist society could be substituted for the capitalist society of which ours is at once the natural and legitimate child, I was obliged, in order to try to open their eyes, to make comparisons—which are not always reasons. I took co-operation as an example which could give them an idea of what the society of to-morrow would be, and I took co-operatives, not such as they are working now, but such as they should work by definition, and I said to them: “See how in the co-operatives for production the union of capital and labor in the same hands does away with all exploitation; see how in the co-operatives for consumption all antagonism between seller and buyer who henceforth are one and the same man is done away with just as with profit of one at the expense of the other.

The question was to make them foresee, through an ideal co-operative, what would be and shall be a society in which neither the production nor the distribution of products will give to rise to profits or exploitation. But, as well try to open the eyes of the blind, or make the deaf hear me. (Laughter.)

At the present time anyhow, our co-operatives do not at all belong to this order of things. Nearly all of them are obliged by the capitalist milieu, to go in for capitalism themselves, for instead of selling only to their members at the price of cost, they are more and more obliged to sell to outsiders for the sake of profits. The antagonism between seller and buyer, which it was the role of co-operation to abolish, is still in existence. I admit there are exceptions. But as a rule you are more and more compelled by a milieu based upon competition to look for means of existence and development outside the distribution of

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products; you are compelled to sell to the public; to realize profits, to go in for commerce; in a word, you thus become only a new sort of department store, constituted by small workingmen—share-holders instead of department stores constituted by large bourgeois share-holders. (Applause.)

Such is reality. It is no use going off on illusions; such is and will be more and more that co-operation, which they would have us look upon as nascent socialism. To imagine that it could be otherwise in our present society, would be to fall back upon the Utopias of former days, represented by Fourier and his “phalanstery,” or Cabet and his “Icaria” To pretend that you can go in for anything but capitalism in a capitalist society is really an unheard-of folly. General laws, born out of the form of property, impose themselves, and those people who want to build oases in the desert cannot escape those laws; the oasis will be swept by the simoon [simoon] just as the desert is. And the oasis in this case is the co-operative, forced to bow before commercial or mercantile necessities. I know that you can remedy this evil partly by confederating your societies, and I congratulate you for entering upon and persevering in this road; but, once more, whatever you do upon co-operative ground, you cannot help being governed by all the laws which determine and regulate production and exchange in the society for profit of to-day.

I repeat therefore that it is impossible to attach any socialist value to co-operation in itself. It does not even prepare the elements of the new society, prepared as they have been for a long time, both as material and as organization, by capitalist concentration which preceded co-operation by far and in proportions which it will never equal. It is precisely because, thanks to this capitalist concentration, all the work to-day is one of administration, direction, execution, the most scientific sort of work as well as the most manual, executed by hired men, that we can exchange any day, without any shock, the present order of things for a new one. Everything is ready for this transformation or revolution, because the nominal

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property of the capitalists of to-day, does not represent any sort of work, even of directing, and it may disappear to-morrow without anything being touched or destroyed in the operating of the different sorts of industries; factories, fields, railroads, stores, etc.

There you have the conditions which not only do more than allow collectivist order but render it necessary. Co-operation does not enter there for an atom, and when I heard this morning our friend Poisson saying: “But, if to-morrow you became the masters of the government before co-operatives had covered the country, how would you establish the new society?” I thought that Comrade Poisson was imagining useless nightmares. We can, once we conquer power, realize the whole of socialism, what in America they call the **co-operative commonwealth**, because co-operation is not a means, but the aim of the proletariat. It will then triumph and gather into the hands of the whole of society all capital and labor, so that there shall be no more exploitation, sale, nor profits. Co-operation, I say, is not a means—or it can only be one of the means, if co-operatives bring their help to militant socialism. Yes, the co-operatives’ only value is to coin money, to furnish the workingmen’s party with arms and ammunition. It is not the duty of the party to help the co-operatives, but it is the strict duty of the co-operatives to help materially the party with all of their strength.

The co-operative as an auxiliary to the party—that is how we have always viewed the problem, and how we have always worked towards its solution. This morning they spoke of our former campaigns with some contempt, comparing us to skylark hunters with mirrors. My answer is that we have never made to shine before the eyes of the workers any but good living realities. We, the Socialists, were the first ones to take the initiative of the co-operative movement in the North; I, with a comrade from the Bouches-du-Rhone, went in 1885 to Roubaix there to organize the first socialist co-operative: “L’Avenir du Parti Ouvrier.” I don’t mean to say that there

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were no co-operatives already in existence, but all were of a bossist or clerical type. Those co-operatives destroyed any classconscious spirit in the workingmen who belonged to them. All they found there was a material advantage for themselves and their families. We told them: come to the socialist co-operative, you will find in it not only a low price store, but also powder and bullets for your everyday struggles, strikes and elections, and therefore a new means of emancipation. And remembering the old saying of Esop, "The tongue is at once the best and the worst," I added: co-operatives are the worst things if they tend only to lower the cost of living, for the benefit of the bosses; they are the best, if they tend to constitute as many citadels for the party and bring to it new resources for the battle of final freedom. (Applause.)

There, comrades, is what distinguishes us from other comrades who think differently. However, I will add that if they should show us that we are wrong, that co-operation in itself is socialism aborning, how many things have already been represented as socialism aborning, just to make the workers forget it, when they have nothing to hope for outside it! Yes, if they would show me that there really is an embryo which only needs to be developed, to-morrow's society in the germ, I would surely renounce my fears and welcome the new light brought to the proletariat. But until now, not one argument has been offered me. And I am bound to say once more that co-operatives, as they are operated to-day, have nothing in common with socialism; if they do not contribute with their dollars and cents to the struggles the working class has to undergo, they may and oftenest do become a diversion if not an obstacle to the recruiting and developing of the socialist movement; a diversion, because—and you cannot deny it—when an elite of workingmen put their intelligence into a co-operative, when they carry inside their in heads nothing but commercial schemes{,} how to create a custom for it, how to secure its prosperity and development, there is no room left in brains thus occupied, for the socialist idea, no more time for the

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socialist education of the masses, to whom we cannot repeat often enough that there is only one means of emancipation, viz., the capturing of the political power, and by the help of it, of the capitalist property, industrial and commercial. As I wrote once, the co-operative mustard catches easiest those who could render incalculable services to propaganda, but who, hemmed in, confiscated, paralyzed by a necessarily commercial work, become on the contrary dead losses to the struggling proletariat from whom they were torn away. (Applause.)

Comrades, in the industrial realm of the factory, co-operation brings nothing to the socialist movement but the funds it can contribute when it is a socialist co-operative. But there is another realm where co-operation can play a great and useful role: the realm of the country. Ah! the socialist idea, the idea of a society owning its means of production, utilizing them socially, and distributing between all its members the products of a common labor; in the industrial towns it is the factory which does the work of teaching this freedom-giving notion to the workingmen, it is the factory, with its work in common, which puts up in front of the workers the necessity of collectivist or communist society. Hence no need there for the co-operatives' school: the communism of the shop is enough. But in the country, it is different; there we have small scattered land-owners, cultivating individually their bits of land; they, too, are exploited by capitalism in several ways, but no common action or association unites or joins them together. Co-operation presents itself as the very thing to create this bond, this common interest. A co-operative which brings together 500 vineyard farmers, takes them out of their individualism, initiates them to the work in common, teaches them solidarity; it does not prepare, as some people claim, the co-operation or socialization of the ground; that will be the work of the new society—no, but it prepares the formerly individualistic brain of the peasant for that society in which the individualistic character of property has here a really socialistic meaning, because it has an educational meaning. But do not claim that

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it would have a similar meaning in the towns, for I will tell you once more that it is the factory, the exploitation in common which, by creating laboring collectivities, is the best school of collectivism—by showing them that the collectivist society is not only possible but necessary to human liberation.

I spoke at such length, because it seemed to me necessary to say certain things, however ill I be. But I am going to stop, and here is my conclusion:

The co-operatives in existence to-day have either been founded by Socialists, or penetrated by them. In those where they have penetrated they must promote the idea, the party they represent. In those which they founded, they must increase to its maximum the material collaboration given the idea and the party. Anyway, I hope there will not be a single comrade in this Congress to reproach the co-operatives of the North for having served, as they did, the cause of socialism! It would be too frightful that Socialists should make themselves the echoes against our co-operatives, of our worst enemies among the bosses. What Motte and the other great bosses of the North cannot forgive them, what they throw in their faces as an insult, is that they are the **milch cows of the revolutionists!** And you would take up this language here! (Applause.) No, you will not want to unarm our brothers over there in accordance and with the arms of the pillars of the capitalist class. You will let the co-operators of the north do their duty as Socialists. If you knew how beautiful a scene it is in the general meetings, when man, woman and child are present! They do not come there only to receive a “dividend,” they come to know the use to which has been put this dividend which they have abandoned to the party, to the collectivist future, to the general emancipation of mankind! You would have to be present at a general session of the Union de Lille, for instance; then I am sure that you would not hear one single speaker pronounce words such as I had the sorrow to hear this morning, meaning precisely these co-operatives of the north, which are at the head of the whole French co-operative

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movement, don't forget it. Have you got in Paris co-operatives like ours, helping all the battles with their strike funds, unemployment funds, etc.? I am very glad to greet the co-operatives of the Seine, but don't forget that your elders over there gave you the example, which you ought to follow to the end. (Prolonged applause.)

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