Saïl Mohamed, 1894–1953

Life and Revolt of an Algerian Anarchist

Anonymous

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Saïl Mohamed Ameriane ben Amerzaine was born on 14 October 1894 at Tarbeit-Beni-Ouglis in the Berber region of Kabylie, Algeria. Like many Algerians, he recieved little schooling. A driver-mechanic by trade, all his life he thirsted for culture and took great pains to educate himself. From a Muslim Berber background, he became a convined atheist. During the First World War he was interned for insubordination and then desertion from the French Army. His sympathies for anarchism were already developing.

At the end of the War, with the rebuilding of the anarchist movement, he joined the organisation Union Anarchiste (UA). In 1923, with his friend Sliman Kiouane, a singer, he founded the Committee for the Defence of Indigenous Algerians. In his first articles he denounced the poverty of the colonialised people and colonial exploitation. He became an expert on the North African situation. He organised meetings with the anarchist groups of the 17th arrondissement of Paris on the exploitation of North Africans, which were delivered both in Arabic and in French. Saïl set up an anarchist group in Aulnay-sous-bois and became one of its most effective activists.

In 1929, he became secretary of a new committee: the Defence Committee of Algerians against the Centenary Provocation (France were preparing to celebrate the centenary of the conquest of Algeria on 5 July 1830). All the tendencies of the anarchist movement, the UA, the anarcho-syndicalist union Confederation Generale du Travail syndicaliste-revolutionnaire (CGT-SR) and the Association de Federalistes anarchistes (AFA) denounced "Murderous colonialism, bloody masquerade". They put forward the statement "Civilisation ? Progress ? We say, Murder !"

Following this, Saïl joined the CGT-SR, in which he created the Section of Indigenous Algerians. The following year, with the Colonial Exhibition in Paris, the anarchist movement restarted its campaign against colonialism. Sail was in the forefront of this struggle.

Social awakening

In January 1932, he became the director of "L'Eveil Social, le journal du peuple" ("Social Awakening, the journal of the people"). Following an anti-militarist article he was prosecuted for "provocation of the military to disobedience". The Secours Rouge International, a satellite organisation of the Communist Party, lent him their support, which he rejected in the name of the victims of Stalinism.

In 1934, the "Saïl Mohamed Affair" burst onto the scene. The demonstration of the fascist and anti-Semitic Leagues on 6 February 1934 set off a chain reaction throughout the workers' movement. Saïl collected arms and hid them. On 3 March he was arrested for "carrying prohibited arms". The workers' movement gave him their support, except for the Communist Party, which denounced him as an agent provocateur. Condemned to a month in prison, then another for "retaining weapons of war" he ended up serving four months in jail. He resumed the struggle.

"L'Eveil Sociale" merged with "Terre Libre" ("Free Earth", the monthly paper of the Alliance Libre des anarchistes du Midi — see Paul Rousenq). Saïl was responsible for bringing out the North African edition of "Terre Libre". He attempted to set up an Anarchist Group of Indigenous Algerians, with various appeals in the anarchist press. At the same time he continued to be active with the Union Anarchiste.

The Spanish Revolution

After the Francoist uprising in Spain, Saïl joined the Sebastian Faure Century, the French-speaking section of the Durruti Column, the anarchist militia unit in September 1936, and was elected its commander. Wounded in the hand during November 1936, he returned to France, after having sent out many letters describing the situation of the Spanish anarchist movement.

After his wound was healed, he took part in many rallies organised by the Union Anarchiste on Spain. Immediately after this tour, he participated at a meeting organised by revolutionaries in Paris to protest against the banning of the "Etoile Nord Africaine" ("North African Star") newspaper edited by Messali Hadj and against the repression of demonstrations in Tunisia, which had resulted in 16 dead. Again arrested for "provocation of the military" he was condemned to 18 months in prison in December 1938.

At the start of the Second World War, he was arrested again and put in a concentration camp at Riom. His large library was broken up after a raid. He escaped from there, forged false papers and went underground during the Occupation.

From 1944 he worked with others for the reconstruction of the anarchist movement. With the Liberation [veteran anarchist militia of the Spanish Revolution were the first troops to liberate Paris], he set up the Aulnay-sous-bois group again, and tried to reform the Committee of Algerian Anarchists. In "Le Libertaire", weekly paper of the Federation Anarchiste [the descendant of the Union Anarchiste], he wrote a column on the situation in Algeria. He produced a series of articles on the "Calvary of the Indigenous Algerians".

He died in April 1953. George Fontenis delivered an address in his honour in the name of the anarchist movement at his funeral on 30 April 1953.

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