

Question & Answers with the Bangladesh Anarcho-Syndicalist Federation

Bangladesh Anarcho-Syndicalist Federation

2018

We do not know anything about an anarcho-syndicalist movement in Bangladesh. Please tell us, how everything started. Had there been anarchist traditions or a union movement for a longer time? Had there been contacts to organizations in other countries?

Answer: The Bangladesh anarchist workers' movement is less than five years old, born out of the ashes of failed Marxism-Leninism.

The author of this answer recalls the antecedent period in Bangladesh history where Marxism-Leninism held hegemony. This was a time of deep faith and affection for the thought of Marx, Engels, Lenin, Stalin, Mao Tsetung, and Trotsky.

As far as the author understands, none in the movement knew of anarchism as a political ideology and would not know of it until decades later. We revered the hanging portraits of Marxist leaders, we studied their books, and we integrated discussion of their ideas into our daily lives. Our life's pursuit was to become socialist revolutionaries. We were so fervent in our beliefs of a better world that we sacrificed clothing for books, food for paper.

The socialist movement was already active in Bangladesh when my generation moved from studying socialism to helping develop a mass socialist movement. In Dhaka, the capital, we helped in the dissemination of pro-Soviet papers, we joined student organizations, and we participated in interviews. We explained socialism to the people, to workers, from the factories to the fields. Our path was guided by science and freedom of expression, and we spread our ideas without imposing on others. But we faced public rejection and death in our efforts.

When speaking in Muslim-dominated areas, many condemned us as atheists and unrighteous. And where we were not simply denounced, many of us were murdered. Our struggle has been the history of bloodshed. We have lost many of our companions. And although the oppressive apparatuses tortured and killed us, we proceeded ahead with the dream of revolution and continued to take those steps to make the revolution. Our work increased the number of socialist organizations and supporters across cities and villages. These bodies were intent to fight against the tyranny of oppression, against the national military dictatorship and against imperialism.

As early as 1980 we were able to hear about the Soviet Union and China's authoritarian nature and contradictions. We did not believe this was the truth, that "scientific" socialism could be

false. Rather, we believed this was imperialist and CIA propaganda. The subsequent collapse of the Soviet Union and the breaking of Lenin's statue greatly shocked us all. Together with the eastern bloc, the socialist countries of the world changed. They moved away from having even a veneer of socialism and openly embraced a capitalist restructuralization.

This produced a tremendous shock in the thought of our movement. We re-read Marxism's fundamentals over and over. But none of this helped us to better understand the failure of "socialism".

We did, however, take an interest in the revolutionaries who criticized Marxism-Leninism. This led us to read the works of many anarchists, such as Mikhail Bakunin, William Godwin, PJ Proudhon, Peter Kropotkin, Emma Goldman, Errico Malatesta, Alexander Berkman, Max Stirner, Élisée Reclus, and Noam Chomsky.

Their works are not in print form, nor are they in Bengali. So our medium of learning has been through reading anarchist texts through the internet in foreign languages.

By 2012, many of us former Marxists acquired a clear idea of anarcho-syndicalism from our continuous internet studies.

Because I have been involved in tea workers' struggles since 2000, it was among tea workers and close, political friends that we first introduced anarcho-syndicalist practices through the development of The Tea Workers' Council. This council did not bear the name of any specific doctrine or party. Because old, authoritarian ways persisted, a clear articulation of anarchism and a regrouping along anarchist principles was necessary.

As a result, on 1 May 2014, many militants formed a twenty three-member committee of those committed to the principles of anarcho-syndicalism. This committee has fostered the development of anarcho-syndicalist organizations in across 60+ places in Bangladesh today.

Presently, we are receiving help from the Anarcho-syndicalist Federation of Australia to improve our organization. With their help, we are also trying to become members of the IWA-AIT.

We seek solidarity from sister and brother comrades all over the world. We want to work together with everyone.

Why do you think anarcho-syndicalism is a good idea for your live in Bangladesh?

Answer: I think that capitalism is based on the subordination and exploitation of the working class. Workers are oppressed because they are forced to work under a coercive management regime and they are denied the right to control the use of their own abilities or control their own work.

For the working class to liberate itself from this situation, it is necessary to have a strategy. The strategy needs to be workable and show how it has a chance of achieving liberation. This means that the strategy needs to have a good "fit" with the goal or aim. If the masses are to fight to replace capitalism with a form of socialism, it is not worth the struggle if the result is just a new form of oppression, run by some new boss class. Thus it's necessary to think about how our strategy can lead to a form of socialism where the masses are actually in control of the society, and workers control the places where they work.

The advantage to anarcho-syndicalism, as I see it, is that it has the best chance of creating a form of socialism where there will not be a new ruling class, and where workers will be in control.

The anarcho-syndicalist strategy means building unions that are controlled by their members, and building broader solidarity throughout the working class. The idea is to build a labor movement that isn't narrowly focused on only fights with an individual employer but has the capacity

to fight for more systemic change, and can work in alliance with other social movements. This means that workers have to build solidarity between different sectors, different groups of the oppressed. Only a labor movement of this kind would be able to be a force for basic change in the social structure. Building unions controlled by the members foreshadows workers managing the industries.

The problem with other socialist strategies is that either they don't seem able to get beyond the present society (as with electoral socialism and cooperativism) or they end up putting power into the hands of state leaders, and tend to create a new bureaucratic boss class. Anarcho-syndicalism, on the other hand, is built to avoid creating a new bureaucratic boss class by avoiding concentration of power into a state bureaucratic machine.

How many groups are there and in which industries / workplaces are they organizing people? In which cities are they placed?

Answer: Bangladesh Anarcho-Syndicalist Federation (BASF) organizes workers at the lowest levels of diverse industries. Workers in BASF represent sectors from tea garden to food processing to rickshaw making to ceramics to brickfields to construction to transportation to maintenance work to domestic/factory guards to loaders to sweepers to employed salesmen to grocery shop workers to metal workers.

BASF, already organized about 60 groups in different places, whose membership currently is over 1,600+ with 45% women, only accepts employees as their members.

Despite working in some of the largest and most important industrial sectors, workers receive extremely low wages. For instance, working women in food processing receive 45 Taka (0.54\$) after an 8-hour work day. Ceramic workers receive 55 Taka (0.66\$) per day. Moreover, factories don't have proper ventilation, cooling, and supervisors mistreat workers. BASF, through sectoral associations, is organizing workers to demand higher wages, paid holidays, and better working conditions. Sectoral associations (shomiti/সমিতি) allow BASF to form struggles depending on specific needs and maintain sector specific autonomy. Each sectoral association has a secretary and a treasurer, and the secretary functions as a delegate to BASF in federation level decision-making. BASF's student association is working on developing demands for free education for all, while the tea garden workers' association is developing demands for land rights in addition to better wages and working conditions. Patriarchy pervades everyday life and hinders organizing when, for instance, women do not speak up in men's presence in association meetings. This happens less among tea garden workers since men and women work together in the hills. In order to address lack of women's participation, BASF has made efforts toward building a separate anarcho-syndicalist women's federation.

BASF is working independently and is not yet affiliated with any larger anarchist organization. BASF understands that capitalism is a worldwide phenomenon and has to be addressed at a global level through solidarities across locales. However, such internationalism requires developing a nation-wide organization—a major challenge for BASF. Assembling while being unregistered as an organization can lead to 5-year prison sentence for organizers in Bangladesh. BASF now has legal registration papers that they can use as shield, however it does not have permission from the local police station to assemble, despite having their organization registered. Anarchism still raises suspicion among local powerholders. BASF is vigilant about imperialist/colonialist tendencies among anarchist partners from the global north.

BASF is focusing on the challenges of eliminating entrenched domination in Bangladesh culture. Dominance has been naturalized across society, from domestic partner relations, to mullah-

believer relation, to student-teacher relation to minister-citizen relation. The person in the position of authority is seen as unquestionable and is allowed full of exercise of their sadistic impulses. Our student organizers talking about the widespread practice of “ragging”, where upper class students sexually torture lower classtudents in universities. When BASF organizers protested widely accepted sexual torture at universities, thousands of people protested their questioning of upper class authority.

People are habituated to think of politics as partisan politics organized in hierarchical bureaucracies. As soon as you talk to people about joining the organization (BASF), they think of being the president, secretary, etc. When they don’t get those roles, they lose interest and leave.

Among the membership base, workers lose work hours participating at BASF events. These are workers who live hand-to-mouth, unable to pay for food on days they do not work. BASF does not have enough resources (from food to furniture) to bring all of its association members together into long conferences and meetings. BASF has 60 associations and has received interest letters from many more but is unable to integrate all of them or even meet the interested persons in other parts of Bangladesh.

BASF is committed to moving from just wage struggles to building a broader social movement. Opposed to vanguardism, BASF wants to create spaces for collective reflection and action. It believes political praxis requires more education and consciousness raising among wage workers across sectors, but at the moment BASF is only able to organize workers in short durations for immediate needs. BASF lacks the infrastructure for further political education.

It does not have an office, library, or community space. It lacks computers, original and translated publications, and people capacity to take on popular education projects.

Despite resource drawbacks, BASF *shomitis* have generated collective “we feelings” among its members, negotiated higher wages, and engaged in practices of mutual aid within its sectors. After natural disasters in the region, BASF members work together to rebuild fellow members’ homes without any external aid. During health emergencies or family events like weddings, members pull together their resources to support one other.

BASF encourages other anarchist organization and federations to develop translations of publicly available literature for Bengali readers. There are a lot of people who are reading online nowadays and we can reach them if we have more Bengali anarchist writings. We should write in Bengali from now on.

Anarcho-syndicalism is an old, but still young :) idea out of the workers’ movement in Europe. The circumstances in Bangladesh – I guess – are different. Which parts of the anarchosyndicalist historical / modern practices had been inspiring, which were not useful and had to be dropped/changed? How could anarchosyndicalism be adopted to your economical and cultural circumstances in Bangladesh today?

Answer: While any modern economy will be complex, the simplicity of a future anarcho-syndicalist economy lies in the fact that it will be defined by a few basic principles. It will be a true anarcho-syndicalist economy if:

1. There is no mechanism for profit, or for concentrating wealth and capital.
2. Workplaces are collectively run and are controlled directly and democratically by workers.
3. Any organisational/administrative bodies are composed only of recallable, accountable delegates who are elected by mass meetings in the workplace or community.

4. Property is held in common (though clearly, we all have the right to our own living space, personal possessions, etc.).
5. All work is voluntary, and goods and services equally accessible. Money, wages and prices do not exist.
6. There is a significant level of economic planning, but not centralised. Regional or wider-scale planning is for complex and larger scale modes of production. Local production and consumption is not subordinate to regional planning, but is on the basis of self-sufficiency.

An economy that operates under these principles is one that is a lot more *desirable* and effective in ensuring quality of life than the current capitalist chaos.

There are lots of ways in which people will feel the incentive to work voluntarily, and there are lots of different ways in which local and regional economies might work. Some people may migrate to economies which suit them. Some economies may be simpler, based on self-sufficiency more than anything else; others will be more integrated and produce complex goods.

The options are many, but the principles will ensure that everyone has the time and the inclination to get involved in planning and participating in their economy – a far cry from the present rotten, corrupt, and cynically selfish system we have the misfortune to be saddled with.

Getting from here to there is not going to be easy, but humanity created capitalism, and humanity can replace it. The collective act of wrenching control of our own economic lives from the hands of capitalism is the long-overdue revolution we so desperately need.

The success of replacing capitalism will be measured by how much we take control of our own destiny, rather than simply passing it on to some other power, as previous failed revolutions have done.

Real progress is best made not by producing detailed blueprints (for that way lies the slide into abstract politics and leadership), but by sticking to basic principles, and concentrating our efforts on taking action for real change. Real democracy requires real solidarity – and that means agreeing on the basics and then trusting ourselves and the rest of humanity to get on with it. “Keeping it real” is the key.

Anarcho-syndicalism is a strategy for the working class to free itself from the capitalist regime of class oppression and create a system of libertarian socialism based on worker-managed industry.

This is possible in Bangladesh because it is possible for workers to form unions they directly control. I realize that since World War Two unions became increasingly bureaucratic. That was then, this is now. Unions have obvious problems.

What is needed now is for workers to form new unions they directly control, through general meetings and elected delegate (or shop steward) councils. A more directly worker-controlled and militant unionism, a unionism based on class-wide solidarity, would be a much better form of unionism and it would provide workers with a vehicle for making changes in society.

The basic idea is that unions that are self-managed by their members prefigure and foreshadow a form of socialism where workers self-manage the workplaces, the industries. This is a much better model of socialism than the failed statist models of socialism in the 20th century.

However, the building of self-managed unions is only a starting point. The aim of anarcho-syndicalism is basic structural change in society, doing away with the capitalist regime, its system of class subordination, but also anarcho-syndicalism targets the other oppressive aspects of

the capitalist regime — its systemic forms of inequality as on racism and gender inequality, its reliance on a top down repressive and bureaucratic state machine. So the question of how possible anarcho-syndicalism is, has to be interpreted as also asking about the possibility for the transformation of society into libertarian socialism.

For this to be possible there would need to be an alliance of unions and social movements of sufficient size, organizational strength and militancy as to pose this kind of threat to the survival of the capitalist regime.

What do you and your comrades think about a bangladeshian/german exchange? A big part of anarcosyndicalist practice is not only being organized in unions but to take the production in our own hands. What about the possibility to raise a collective industry and exchange of goods a labour between Germany and Bangladesh anarcosyndicalist movement? So to say not only capitalist “fair trade” but collective “revolutionary economy”. Is there a possibility to built up anarcosyndicalist collectives for a future economy in our way of thinking? (This point may lead to a bigger discussion, so take you time to answer it, please.)

Answer: It seems that the germs of a possible Bangladeshian/German exchange or the “revolutionary economy” as mentioned are already present.

As of now we do not have the technical or financial means to start co-operatives by ourselves, but we have already considered it as a possibility if the means were to be made available.

Funding co-operatives would be something we could do with surplus funds, if we ever have them. It is difficult to have surplus funds when we are still having problems just making sure people have food in their stomach.

As mentioned above, the BASF is currently in a period of rapid growth that it is struggling to keep up with. The task of building anarchist-worthy workplace unions consumes all our time. But this is seeming all the more possible the more sisters and brothers from abroad talk about this to us. And it is welcomed news that contrasts the immoral spending habits we have seen our entire lives.

We have seen the terrible injustice of stronger nations and their peoples coming to or using indigent nations such as Bangladesh to take advantage of the high purchasing power of their home currencies that is made possible by our cruel impoverishment.

The proposal of such an exchange is in a completely contrary spirit to this. In the least, its solidaric content excites us.

I know anarchists and workers in the USA would also like to use such an economy to turn the weapons of the exploiters against the exploiters themselves here in Bangladesh.

I am glad to hear others from abroad wanting to do what little they can to help us.

If such collectives grew here, its participants would have to carefully chart their development, so that they are in harmony with the general movement and add to its revolutionary character.

I imagine they would socialize their resources, helping to meet urgent organizational and material needs among our rank-and-file that could offer unique opportunities that are not possible outside the framework of such a solidarity economy.

We are seeing successes in our union organizing, and it is difficult to concentrate our efforts elsewhere, especially while our hands are clenched fighting in so many workplaces.

I imagine comrades from abroad would have to come here to offer us technical assistance to make this possible since our hands are so full.

This is an idea and sentiment that I hope continues to grow. I thank all comrades who are discussing this.

What about other aspects of a free society — for example how is the question of women emancipation realized in your organizations? What do the female comrades think about it?

Answer: For the emancipation of women we already formed Bangladesh Anarcho-Syndicalist Women's Union (BAWU).

The BAWU identifies the cause of women's oppression as the economic systems of feudalism and capitalism, rather than in a perceived weakness in national character or culture.

Most of its ideology has been formulated by its founding members. They focus on the class-based exploitation of women, singling out sex workers, domestic servants and female factory workers as the most oppressed.

They condemn the unequal distribution of wealth and refuse to subordinate working women's struggle to any other ideological cause. Declaring that "the goal of equality cannot be achieved except through women's liberation", BAWU views women's freedom as something that women must accomplish on their own, since relying on others to give them their rights has not worked up to now and likely never will. Revolutionary change, not reform, is seen as the only way forward.

At this point, BAWU and the ideas it represent is still a new phenomenon to Bangladesh women.

There is a mixture of joy, curiosity, and hesitation.

We hope that our liberatory vision and practices continue to grow.

The recent awakening of the anarchist spirit in the Bangladesh people is causing big social changes that we hope can continue with the broadening of our experiences and education.

For decades we knew nothing of anarchism, very simple yet profoundly unique ideas that resonate to the core of our essential humanity.

Some of us who have grown up in authoritarian society and discover anarchism later in life have the least grounds to assume that our vision of freedom is the most comprehensive. After all, we lived completely oblivious to something simple and innate for decades, in some cases.

We will continue to be ready to receive and consider new or better ideas that enrich individual liberty and dignity. Some will come from our interactions from other societies. Perhaps we will discover pre-colonialist ways of life that have been hidden from us and reclaim our heritage.

Being open to new ideas is the easier thing, of course. The task of spreading them and defending those who wish to elevate them against innate conservatism in ordinary people and institutions is the more difficult task.

We hope we are cultivating an anarchist generation that will be able to continue this work.

We are just the beginning, of course.

Are there any syndicalist research groups connected to your unions / syndicates?

Answer: Not yet.

What are your goals in the next future? How can european comrades support these goals?

Answer: Our main goals are as follows:

1. The Anarcho-Syndicalist Federation is a libertarian workers' movement organized according to anarcho-syndicalist principles. We aim to create a society based on liberty, mutual aid, federalism and self-management.
2. We believe the working class and the employing class have nothing in common. Between these two classes a struggle must go on until the workers of the world organise as a class, take possession of the earth and the machinery of production and abolish the wage system.
3. In the present we take an active part in the struggle for worker solidarity, shorter hours, immediate wage increases and improved working conditions. And we actively oppose all attacks on workers such as conscription of labour, strike breaking, drives for increased production and longer working hours, wage cuts or unemployment.
4. We want worker/community self-education for complete self-management of production, distribution, social organisation and preservation of a healthy ecological environment. This will come about by worker/community expropriation of wealth and the creation of alternative economic systems.
5. We are opposed to all economic and social monopoly. We do not seek the conquest of political power, but rather the total abolition of all state functions in the life of society. Hence we reject all parliamentary activity and other collaboration with legislative bodies. We believe in fighting organisations in the workplace and community, independent of, and opposed to all political parties and Trade Union bureaucracies.
6. Our means of struggle include education and direct action. To ensure the full participation of all in both current struggle and the future self-management of society, we oppose centralism in our organisations. We organise on the basis of Libertarian Federalism that is from the bottom up without any hierarchy and with full freedom of initiative by both local and regional groups. All co-ordinating bodies of the Federation consist of recallable delegates with specific tasks determined by local assemblies.
7. We see the world as our country, humanity as our family. We reject all political and national frontiers and aim to unmask the arbitrary violence of all governments.
8. We oppose all attitudes and assumptions that are harmful and injurious to working class solidarity. We oppose all ideologies and institutions that stand in the way of equality and the right of people everywhere to control their own lives and their environment.

European comrades can support these goals the following fields:

BASF seeks technical and financial support in the following areas:

1. We need some financial assistance to develop our communication infrastructure for our organizing work. Funds left over would be spent according to our membership's discretion toward necessary efforts, including education, union campaigns, co-operative opportunities, transportation, and food.
2. Our movement is currently growing throughout the country. Improving our communication infrastructure would help our organizing activities in over 60+[?] locals we have already established and in different industries we currently have a footing in.

3. Translation costs from English to Bengali language:

The Bangladesh anarcho-syndicalist workers' movement is less than five years old, and we are in dire need of printed material to educate and organize..

We are undertaking the "Bengali Translation & Publication Project" here in Bangladesh.

We have begun translating some basic books on anarchism written by thinkers such as Bakunin, William Godwin, Proudhon, Kropotkin, Emma Goldman, Malatesta, Alexander Berkman, Stirner, Élisée Reclus, Noam Chomsky, and so on.

Our initial plan is to translate and print ten books to build a strong knowledge base of anarchism in our country.

Most of our Bangladeshi comrades come from very poor family backgrounds, so although the audience and organizers are there to share these books, but the means to finish printing them are still lacking.

You can help us print books with a small donation at <http://www.bangladeshasf.org/#donation-button>
Even just one euro would go a long way!

You can also contact us if you have any idea about inexpensive ways to print.

basfsylhet@gmail.com

facebook.com/basfsylhet

We will appreciate your help very much.

Perhaps anarchist, Bengali books will be useful for workers who live outside Bangladesh, maybe in your places of action. If you want to organize conferences or pre-order books, contact us through the same means shown above.

Here are the books we are working on printing,

1. The Conquest of Bread by Peter Kropotkin
2. What Is Property? by P.J. Proudhon
3. The Anarchist Revolution by Errico Malatesta
4. God and the State by Mikhail Bakunin
5. Anarcho-Syndicalism: Theory and Practice by Rudolf Rocker
6. Nationalism and Culture by Rudolf Rocker
7. ABC of Anarchism by Alexander Berkman
8. Post-Scarcity Anarchism by Murray Bookchin
9. Program of Anarcho-Syndicalism by G.P. Maximoff
10. Demanding the Impossible by Peter Marshall

Do you regularly publish any books or magazines with anarcosyndicalist content?

Answer: We have taken the initiative to publish a little magazine.

Is there the possibility to send one or two versed comrades for a rally/connective tour to the anarcosyndicalist groups and unions of Europe / Germany?

Answer: Yes. It is important to share our news and ideas.

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