

The Birth of an International Anarcho-syndicalist Current

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Contents

Abstract	3
Introduction	3
I. Origins of anarcho-syndicalism	6
Revolutionary unionism and anarchism	6
Evolution of pre-war syndicalism and the attempt for international coordination	8
II. After the war and the revolutions, a redefining becomes imperative	10
War and revolutions	10
The Moscow International	11
Split and foundation of the IWA	13
III. International decline and Spanish zenith	14
Crisis, fascist regimes, united and popular fronts weaken anarcho-syndicalism	14
Spanish revolution's lessons	15
Conclusion – Modern anarcho-syndicalism: integration or marginalisation, “pragmatism” or “orthodoxy”?	16
Appendix	17
List of abbreviations	17
The Author	18

Abstract

This article charts the historical emergence of an international anarcho-syndicalist current from the beginning of the twentieth century up to the 1930s. It is especially after the First World War and the Russian Revolution of 1917, that syndicalists (or revolutionary unionists), among which were many libertarians, had to specify the meaning of the revolution they advocated. One part joined up with Bolshevism while the other, underlining its anti-authoritarian and federalist dimension, formed an anarcho-syndicalist current. This process led to the foundation in 1922 of the International Workers' Association (IWA, taking over the name of the First International in reference to its anti-authoritarian tendency), which still exists today despite its marginalisation since the 1930s.

Introduction

This article aims to define anarcho-syndicalism through the way it has been historically constructed. First, we have to precise about what our object of study is since the term has been used in a confusing way or has been quite neglected by historians. Anarcho-syndicalism is difficult to understand precisely because it does not have any “scientific” definition nor even one that would be common to those who endorse it. Without claiming to solve this problem, I aim to contribute in this article to clarifying the meanings of anarcho-syndicalism in historical context.

The term anarcho-syndicalism first appeared as a derogatory commentary and an insult against certain working-class militants in the nineteenth century. It was often used to refer as a whole to the trade-union activities of individuals and groups who defined themselves as anarchists. To study such an object is in fact a multifaceted task, involving the analysis of a wide plurality of historical practices and comparisons. In this respect, I differ from the historiographical current specialised in studying French syndicalism, represented primarily by Jacques Julliard.¹ For him, anarcho-syndicalism first arises among libertarian members of the French *Confédération générale du travail* (CGT) between 1895 and 1914. I will opt for a more restricted notion without discrediting other definitions; after all, the words used are less important than the realities they refer to.² We nevertheless owe to this same historiographical current the formulation of the category *direct action unionism* that groups together revolutionary unionists and anarcho-syndicalists through the common denominator of their trade union practices.³

¹ For example we may mention JULLIARD, J. *Autonomie ouvrière: études sur le syndicalisme d'action directe*. Paris: Le Seuil, 1988. MITCHELL, Barbara. *The Practical Revolutionaries: A New Interpretation of the French Anarchosyndicalists*. Westport (Connecticut): Greenwood Press, 1987. See also the French labour movement historians who became “classical”: Jean Maïtron, Edouard Dolléans and Maurice Dommanget as well as the numerous writings of the protagonists themselves.

² DARLINGTON, Ralf. “Syndicalism and the influence of anarchism in France, Italy and Spain”. *Anarchist Studies*. 17:2, Autumn-Winter 2009, approaches it without finding any fundamental differences, and never uses the term “anarcho-syndicalism” without inverted commas. In *Syndicalism and the transition to communism: an international comparative analysis*. Farnham (GB): Ashgate Publishing, 2008 he reserves this qualification for Spanish and Italian syndicalism (p.5). DUBIEF, Henri in *Le syndicalisme révolutionnaire*. Paris: Armand Colin, 1969 – a seminal work on this subject although focused on the French case – also goes around it, designating as anarcho-syndicalists those who keep claiming to be revolutionary syndicalists after 1945 (p.53).

³ See particularly FERGO, José. “Le syndicalisme d'action directe: un objet épuisé ?” *A contretemps*. n°4, September 2001. In English the term “syndicalism” can play this role, even if we can translate it to French by *syndicalisme révolutionnaire*. See DARLINGTON. 2008. *Op.Cit.*

Anarcho-syndicalism is more frequently understood – at least by those who call themselves anarcho-syndicalists – as a specific working class current, stemming from syndicalism. It is seen as arising during the first three decades of the twentieth century with its deepest expression during the Spanish Civil War. After the 1930s, it falls into a lasting marginality. Anarcho-syndicalism is sometimes opposed to, sometimes assimilated to, notions of a particular form of revolutionary unionism, syndicalism, that arose at the end of the nineteenth century, partly initiated by anarchists and synthesised notably in the *Charte d'Amiens* adopted by the French CGT in 1906.

After the Russian Revolution in 1917, a part of the syndicalist movement adhered to Bolshevism⁴ while another part reaffirmed the specifically anti-authoritarian character of their approach, giving birth to anarcho-syndicalism. (The industrial unionism inspired by the Industrial Workers of the World in the English-speaking world does not fall within this pattern). Though anarcho-syndicalism and syndicalism share many essential principles (“class struggle,” “direct action,” “autonomy,” “federalism”), some criteria separate them: 1) the firm opposition of anarcho-syndicalism to political parties, while syndicalists declared political neutrality or strictly separate political and trade union commitments ; 2) the explicit statement that the goal of the anarcho-syndicalist organisation was to struggle for a “free,” “libertarian” or “anarchic” communism, rejecting any form of the state, even a “revolutionary” or “transitory” one; 3) the anarcho-syndicalists’ refusal to act within reformist or authoritarian organisations. 4) We may also note that anarcho-syndicalists tended to refuse all forms of centralization, criticizing the role of the unions and industry in the present and future society. These differences are sometimes difficult to fathom since some organisations, particularly in France, referred to themselves at the same time as revolutionary syndicalist and anarcho-syndicalist.

The new anarcho-syndicalist current after the Russian Revolution was consolidated by the formation of the International Workingmen’s Association (IWMA/IWA)⁵ in Berlin in 1922 even if the word “anarcho-syndicalism” does not appear in its statutes or in its declaration of principles. For most of its national sections, the organic link with the First International (also called IWMA) founded in the nineteenth century is only indirect, but for some of them, such as Spanish and Argentinian sections, there was a direct legacy from earlier internationalist groups. The IWA of 1922 (also called the Berlin IWA) arose in reaction to the creation of the Red International of Labour Unions (RILU, or Profintern), which tended to put the world labour movement under the Russian communists’ control. It brought together several national sections, mainly in Europe and Latin America, some of which were actually mass organizations. After the failure of the Spanish Revolution and World War II, the IWA was composed mainly by smaller and marginalised organisations such as libertarian-oriented unions that often resulted from schisms within other parties and organizations.

It would be excessively simplistic to think that anarcho-syndicalism suddenly appeared in 1922 with its definitive shape: its origins lie in earlier debates (especially within the First International, and around the 1907 Amsterdam and the 1913 London congresses) and it would continue to adapt to social changes. To fully understand the theory and practice of anarcho-syndicalism, it is thus

⁴ DARLINGTON. 2008. *Op.Cit.*

⁵ On International Workers’ Association, the reference to *men* was officially suppressed from the acronym in 1974, but it did not exist in other languages: AIT (Spanish, French, Portuguese), AIL (Italian) or IAA (German, Dutch, Swedish), and the IWA did not have any section in English-speaking countries until 1945. See GUINCHARD, François. *L’Association internationale des travailleurs avant la guerre civile d’Espagne: du syndicalisme révolutionnaire à l’anarcho-syndicalisme (1922–1936)*. Orthez (France): Editions du Temps Perdu, 2012.

necessary to explain how and why it was differentiated from syndicalism, how it grew during the 1920s and how it was almost destroyed during the 1930s.

On the theoretical level, anarcho-syndicalists gave pride of place to the ideas of the Russian anarchist, Mikhail Bakunin. In general, they also endorsed most of the anarcho-communist theorists (such as Kropotkin or Malatesta) and pre-war syndicalist writers (especially Pouget and Pelloutier). Later the writings of Rudolf Rocker, a founding member and first secretary of the IWA, would long influence the movement. Yet anarcho-syndicalism is a practice before it is a theory, and its main theoreticians were the revolutionary militants active in the movement. It is thus pointless to search for the theoretical “truth” of anarcho-syndicalism.

Contrary to studies of syndicalism,⁶ academics have not shown much interest in anarcho-syndicalism in the strict sense defined here. With the exception of a few rare articles and studies limited to national frameworks,⁷ we may highlight the work of two historians: 1) Wayne Thorpe, author of a 1989 Ph.D. thesis from the University of British Columbia entitled *Revolutionary syndicalist internationalism 1913–1923: the origins of the International Working Men’s Association* on the process which led to the constitution of the IWA.⁸ This study is fundamental, but it ends precisely where our object starts; 2) Vadim Damier also wrote a thesis entitled *The Forgotten International (Zabytyi Internatsional): The international anarcho-syndicalist movement between the Two World Wars*, but it was only published in two volumes in Russian. He also published a shorter book in English, *Anarcho-syndicalism in the 20th century*.⁹ Damier insists more than Thorpe on the transition from syndicalism to anarcho-syndicalism and on the differences between the two currents. We may also add Marcel Van der Linden’s works on the international dimension of syndicalism¹⁰ and the proceedings of the “Pour un autre futur” symposium.¹¹ It was organised in May 2000 by the French *Confédération nationale du travail* (CNT), uniting historians and militants in discussions around the revolutionary labour movement before 1936. Indeed, the militants themselves have contributed to this history of anarcho-syndicalism, writing many texts for propaganda or polemical purposes, but these are often too synthetic or ideological. We should nevertheless mention the important study by José Muñoz Congost (former secretary of the IWA) about the IWA

⁶ On this vast theme, apart from the references already mentioned, consult the broad literature reviews in AL-TENA, Bert. “Réflexions sur l’analyse du syndicalisme révolutionnaire: l’importance des communautés locales.” *A Contretemps*. n.° 37, May 2010, and LINDEN, Marcel Van Der. *Second thoughts on revolutionary syndicalism*. Amsterdam: IISG, 1998.

⁷ We can quote at least LINDEN, Marcel Van der and THORPE, W., Wayne. “Essor et déclin du syndicalisme révolutionnaire.” *Le Mouvement social*. n°159, April-June 1992, pp. 3–36 ; Van der Linden, M. *Second thoughts... Op.Cit.* DARLINGTON, R. “Revolutionary Syndicalist Opposition to the First World War: A Comparative Reassessment”. *Revue belge de philologie et d’histoire*. Tome 84 fasc. 4, 2006 ; LEHNING, Arthur. “Du syndicalisme révolutionnaire à l’anarchosyndicalisme: La naissance de l’Association internationale des travailleurs de Berlin.” *Ricerche storiche*. n° 1, January-April 1981. For national and local studies, see also LORRY, Anthony. “Elements de bibliographie internationale.” In: *De l’Histoire du mouvement ouvrier révolutionnaire*. various authors, Paris: Editions CNT-RP/Nautilus, 2001. pp. 289–299; DAMIER, Vadim. “Bibliographic essay”. In: *Anarcho-syndicalism in the 20th Century*. Edmonton (Canada): Black Cat Press, 2009. pp. 207–224.

⁸ THORPE, W. *Revolutionary syndicalist internationalism 1913–1923: the origins of the International Working Men’s Association*. Ph.D. Thesis, University of British Columbia, 1989.

⁹ DAMIER. *Op.Cit.* 2009.

¹⁰ In addition to the mentioned articles, see LINDEN, Marcel Van der and THORPE, W., eds., *Revolutionary syndicalism: an international perspective*. Aldershot (GB): Scholar press, 1990.

¹¹ Various Authors, *De l’Histoire du mouvement ouvrier révolutionnaire*. *Op.Cit.*

through its congresses.¹² I will refer in this article principally to these works. It is worth mentioning that there is a fine line between militants and researchers since most of the historians of this subject are or used to be involved in the labour movement.

Anarcho-syndicalism was *historically* constructed: economic, political and social evolutions determined its constitution and later adaptations. Thus, I employ a chronological outline, covering the first third of the twentieth century. Anarcho-syndicalism arose during the first internal disputes within the syndicalist movement (Section I), and from the challenges that surged after the First World War (Section II). It then declined through the period of crisis, fascism and the dominant strategies of the labour movement in the 1930s that weakened and isolated anarcho-syndicalism in general while at the same time exerted its most extensive influence during the Spanish Revolution, a unique historical development full of important lessons (Section III). Learning from and trying to adapt to social changes, anarcho-syndicalism was confronted with an existential alternative: keep its radical nature with the risk of staying marginal, or tone down its politics in order to fit into the mainstream union movement.¹³

I. Origins of anarcho-syndicalism

Revolutionary unionism and anarchism

At the end of nineteenth century, many anarchists committed themselves to the trade-union movement with the objective of anchoring anarchism into the working class.¹⁴ The most emblematic example is the French CGT¹⁵ but we find similar processes in other countries such as Holland, Italy and Germany. The French anarchists leading the CGT formed an alliance with other socialists, leaving apart their differences in order to find a common practice and strategy. They progressively moved away from anarchism to a new ideology, revolutionary syndicalism.¹⁶ The latter should not be described only as an intervention of anarchists inside the labour movement. It was differentiated from anarchism by its adhesion to the industrial system, which is regarded as a factor of social progress, by the acceptance of the centralization and specialisation of work, and by the leading role given to unions in the revolutionary process. The anarchists envisaged, on the contrary, a re-localised economy, orientated towards social necessities, based on autonomous and freely-federated communes. Nevertheless, some of them considered the idea of putting the means of production under unions' control as a possible transition stage to an anarchist society. This idea had points in common with the Marxist concept of a transitory workers' state. Some Marxists also found in syndicalism a return to the basics of socialism.

¹² MUÑOZ CONGOST, José. "La AIT a traves de sus congresos." *CeNiT*. n°250, September 1987 and following numbers.

¹³ See LINDEN, Marcel Van der and THORPE, W. *Op.Cit.* 1992.

¹⁴ For TREMPÉ, Rolande. "Sur le permanent dans le mouvement ouvrier français." *Le Mouvement social*, n°99, April-June 1977. pp.39-46 anarcho-syndicalism is the part of the anarchist movement which, being excluded from the Second International in 1896, turned towards syndicalism.

¹⁵ See, among others, the works of JULLIARD.

¹⁶ We can distinguish between the practice of syndicalism, which starts in the spontaneously use of direct action at the end of 19th century, and the doctrine of syndicalism. The second one is the creation of union leaders and intellectuals who intend, from the beginning of the 20th century, to give a theory to the movement. See DAMIER, V. *Op. Cit.* 2009. p. 23; DUBIEF, H. *Op Cit.* p. 5.

The 1906 charter of Amiens¹⁷ is a compromise text hashed out between various tendencies, declaring the political neutrality of the CGT. A division of tasks was established that is still pronounced in trade union and left-wing politics today: the unions would be in charge of economic demands and protests while political parties would take care of the political questions and social projects. The charter expressed a clearly revolutionary objective, but remained silent on the subject of the state; thus all the tendencies involved in the writing of the charter could adopt their own readings. Despite the national context in which the charter was developed, it received extensive international attention. However, the configuration of French syndicalism – with only one, almost hegemonic, confederation – was a specific case. In other countries, the larger unions were under the influence of highly bureaucratized, social democratic parties, forcing syndicalists to organise separately. Political neutrality was supposed to allow for unity, but in many cases it seemed to be more a myth, or even a dogma, than a fact. Nevertheless, the French CGT remained an international reference for syndicalism.

In Latin America, anarchists were also active in the early labour movement. Between 1901 and 1904, Argentine anarchists founded the *Federacion obrera regional argentina* (FORA, “regional” stands for anti-nationalist), which adopted the struggle for an anarchic communist society as its final objective in its 5th congress in 1905.¹⁸ At the beginning of the 20th century, the FORA was the main workers’ organisation in Argentina, giving rise to the *Forist* movement, imitated in several neighbouring countries such as Uruguay, Bolivia, Ecuador, Brazil, Chile, Mexico, Panama, Peru, and Cuba.¹⁹ Thus the Latin-American revolutionary labour movement was a type of working-class anarchism, closer to anarcho-syndicalism than to revolutionary unionism (even if it is impossible to assimilate the two currents). A strictly-speaking syndicalist movement based on political neutrality also appeared at the time, initiated by dissident socialists. They tried to take advantage of the propaganda and organising work realized by the anarchists. This strategy was characterised by the creation of separate organisations (*Union General del Trabajo* in 1903, *Confederación Obrera Regional Argentina* in 1909), unsuccessful attempts at unification (in 1905, 1907, 1909, 1912), and finally by massive entryism into the FORA. This latter tactic would eventually succeed, since in 1915, the 9th congress of the FORA would abandon the principle of anarchic communism. Henceforth the anarchists were in a minority and from this moment onwards the “FORA-5th congress,” marginalised but still active, would coexist with the “FORA-9th congress,” which would move towards reformism.²⁰ The experience of the *Forism* and the debates between Argentinian anarchists and syndicalists certainly influenced the emergence of anarcho-syndicalism in other countries. They were discussed widely by other militants in Europe and

¹⁷ See especially the works of JULLIARD, J. and CHUECA, Miguel. ed. *Le syndicalisme révolutionnaire, la Charte d’Amiens et l’autonomie ouvrière*. Paris: CNT RP, 2009.

¹⁸ This position is called *finalism*, see COLOMBO, Eduardo. “La FORA: Le “finalisme” révolutionnaire.” In: *De l’histoire du mouvement... Op.Cit.*, pp.107–111 ; see also the works of FINET, Hélène especially *Théories et pratiques de l’anarchisme argentin au début du XXème siècle: la FORA en question*. In: ANGAUT, Jean-Christophe (ed.), *Actes du colloque Philosophie de l’anarchie: Théories libertaires, pratiques quotidiennes et ontologie*. Lyon: ACL, 2012. pp.277–294, and *Le congrès anarchiste d’Amsterdam1907: Anarchie ou syndicalisme à la lumière de la réalité argentine*. Orthez: Temps Perdu, 2007.

¹⁹ DAMIER, V. *Op.Cit.* 2009. pp.36–37. See also ALEXANDER, Robert. *International Labor Organizations and Organized Labor in Latin America and the Caribbean: A History*. Santa Barbara (California): ABC-CLIO, 2009. pp.5–11 and also the brochure of FERNANDEZ, Serafin. *La AIT en el continente americano*. Buenos-Aires: FORA, 1968.

²⁰ Taking in 1922 the name of *Union Sindical Argentina*, it would then form the Argentinian CGT in 1930, which would become the mainstay of the Peronist regime.

America and were directly spread during international congresses by anarchists who had lived on both continents, such as Emilio Lopez Arango and Diego Abad de Santillán.²¹

In Amsterdam, during the international anarchist congress of 1907,²² anarchists and syndicalists battled over their respective theories. We mostly remember from that congress the controversy opposing the French *Cegetist* Pierre Monatte to the Italian anarchist Errico Malatesta. Monatte expounded the revolutionary principles of the CGT, defending political neutrality and the idea that “syndicalism is sufficient by itself.” For his part, Malatesta criticized this “self-sufficiency,” while also being in favour of the union movement. He also thought that the unions must refrain from carrying out any political action, but he rejected syndicalism as a doctrine. For him, unions could only be inherently reformist, and anarchism must constitute the vanguard of the labour movement, an analysis which was very close to the Leninist one. Even if Monatte and Malatesta’s opinions fundamentally differed about the nature and role of the unions, nevertheless they both agreed to defend their unity and neutrality.

However, another path was emerging, but it was hard to see: some syndicalists began to endorse some anarchist principles and some revolutionary unions parted with the reformists, refusing the leadership of the social democratic parties. But this tendency did not yet have a theory and was considered illegitimate even though it was about to expand significantly. These revolutionary unions organized two meetings at the margins of the Amsterdam congress, with a view towards coordinating their action. They expressed the need for a permanent structure, actually competing with the International secretariat of trade-union councils (the embryonic international of the social democratic unions), in order to group together the revolutionary unions, and to facilitate information and solidarity between them. They decided to set up an international correspondence bureau, publishing the *International bulletin of the syndicalist movement*, weekly and in four languages, whose publication lasted until July 1914.²³

Evolution of pre-war syndicalism and the attempt for international coordination

After the Amsterdam congress, European syndicalism grew. In addition to the *Freie Vereinigung deutscher Gewerkschaften* (FVdG, *localist* branch of the German labor movement, which takes a clearly revolutionary turn and breaks with the SPD in 1908²⁴) and to the *Nationaal Arbeids-Secretariaat* of the Netherlands (NAS, inspired by socialism, but which broke with political parties between 1896 and 1905²⁵), new organizations appeared outside of major unions. These included the anarchist-inspired *Confederación Nacional del Trabajo* (CNT), in Spain and especially in Catalonia, founded in 1910; the *Sveriges Arbeters Centralorganisation* (SAC) in Sweden, also founded

²¹ Both authors of *El anarquismo en el movimiento obrero*. Barcelona: Ediciones Cosmos, 1925. This book presents clearly the working-class anarchism of the FORA and its criticism against syndicalism.

²² A report was published by DELESALLE, Paul. *Le Congrès anarchiste tenu à Amsterdam, Août 1907: Comptendu analytique des séances et résumé des rapports sur l'état du mouvement dans le monde entier*. Paris: La Publication Sociale, 1908. See also MIÉVILLE, ARIANNE, MANFREDONIA, GAETANO AND FINET. *Le congrès d'Amsterdam 1907–2007: un siècle d'anarcho-syndicalisme*. Orthez: Temps Perdu, 2007.

²³ THORPE, W. *Op.Cit.* 1989. pp.94–95.

²⁴ See BOCK, Hans Manfred. “Anarchosyndicalism in the German Labour Movement: a Rediscovered Minority Tradition.” In: LINDEN, Marcel Van der and THORPE, W. *Op.Cit.*, pp. 59–79.

²⁵ See LINDEN, Marcel Van der. “The many faces of Dutch revolutionary trade unionism.” In: THORPE, W. and Van der Linden. *Op.Cit.*, pp. 45–57.

in 1910; and the *Unione Sindacale Italiana* (USI), created in 1912 by the revolutionary minority excluded from the *Confederazione Generale Italiana del Lavoro*. Similar organizations were also established in Belgium, Great Britain, Austria-Hungary, Switzerland and the Balkans.²⁶ The French CGT was then the only revolutionary union who stayed within the International secretariat of national trade union centres, but was unable to influence it.

In the United States, the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) was founded, breaking with the corporatist, racist and sexist practices of the American Federation of Labor. It quickly spread to other countries with IWW groups created in Canada, Australia, South Africa, Great Britain, Russia, Chile, Mexico and Sweden.²⁷ In Latin America, anarchists continued to remain active in the labour movement.

In 1913 syndicalists from various countries decided to convoke an international congress in London. The entire movement supported the initiative, except the French CGT, fearing for its unity because its reformist tendency was strengthening.²⁸ The French attitude was strongly criticised abroad.²⁹ From September 27-October 2, 37 delegates representing 60 organisations (local and national unions, federations and propaganda groups) from 17 countries with a total membership of 220,000 members met at the international congress.³⁰ Two elements emerged from the discussions that foreshadowed the rise of anarcho-syndicalism: 1) the idea of the British delegate Jack Wills that parliamentary tactics must be rejected in favour of direct political actions, some of which were already happening such as in the anti-militarism movement; 2) the notion of the “capitalist system” suggested by the Italian Alceste De Ambris to characterise the structure of economic and political domination was debated and criticized on the grounds that it softened the anti-statism of the movement.³¹

Paradoxically, the final declaration of the congress sanctioned the necessity of fighting all forms of the state, yet also claimed that the syndicalist struggle was strictly economic. We can explain this by the confusion that existed at that time between “political” and strictly “parliamentary” action, or by the attempt to reconcile several different positions among the various groups. Finally, “The congress appeals to the workers in all countries to organise in autonomous industrial unions”.³²

Some delegates suggested forming an international structure to undertake solidarity and direct actions more effectively; others were opposed to this, thinking that the moment had not yet arrived. Depending on their national situation, for some organisations this suggestion represented an urgent necessity (FORA, FVdG, NAS, SAC) yet for others (USI, CGT, British syndicalists) it was considered a danger to their unity. The Spanish CNT was hesitant and divided. A consensus emerged around the Italian proposal to form an International Bureau and an information bulletin, to which syndicalist members of unified unions could subscribe and contribute without risk of exclusion, and to postpone the issue of the International to a future congress.

²⁶ See also THORPE, W. *Op.Cit.*, 1989. pp. 37–38.

²⁷ PORTIS, Larry. “Les IWW et l’internationalisme.” In: *De l’Histoire du mouvement... op. cit.*, p. 54

²⁸ THORPE, W., *Op.Cit.*, pp. 49–51. See also GRAS, Christian. *Alfred Rosmer (1877–1964) et le mouvement révolutionnaire international*. Paris: Maspero, 1971. pp.86–90.

²⁹ See THORPE, W. *Op.Cit.*, 1989. pp.48, 56, 61–54, and also international syndicalist press of 1913.

³⁰ According to Alfred Rosmer’s estimation, quoted by Gras, C. *Op.Cit.*, p.91, with a list of names of the delegates. See also THORPE, W., *Op.Cit.*, 1989. pp.70–71.

³¹ *Ibid.*, pp.79–81

³² The declaration is quoted in *Ibid.*, p 81

Regarding anarcho-syndicalism, the interest and the significance of this congress was that: 1) it highlighted the fact that an international syndicalist movement existed that was not just characterized by attempts to export the French model; 2) it formulated the theoretical and tactical basis of the movement in more explicit terms than the *charte d'Amiens* involving anti-statism and the abandonment of the objective of “class unity” within major unions; 3) finally, it created a permanent institutional link between the international community of militants and organizations. I believe that the syndicalists of the London congress came significantly closer to what would later become anarcho-syndicalism. Indeed, the term anarcho-syndicalism began to be used by Spanish and Russian organisations to define themselves during this period. In Spain, it was due to the influence of the anti-authoritarian IWMA (or St. Imier International), showing the strong roots of anarchism in the workers and peasants’ movement. In Russia, it was a result of a long-standing anarchism and the labour movement, both repressed by an authoritarian regime, and galvanised by the revolution of 1905. Formerly, the word anarcho-syndicalism was mostly used by reformist unionists to denigrate the revolutionary wing, and after the war the Bolsheviks would use it again for the same purposes. At that time, other syndicalists would endorse it, being forced to explain what they mean by “revolutionary.” The war, and then the Russian Revolution, with their worldwide repercussions, would underline some contradictions of the movement. The delegates delayed the fulfilment of the internationalist project discussed in London, but they were also gradually clarifying what would become anarcho-syndicalism.

II. After the war and the revolutions, a redefining becomes imperative

War and revolutions

The beginning of the conflicts of World War I abruptly interrupted revolutionary activity in Europe; no organisation was able to materialise the watchword of general strike against the war. Most socialist parties³³ and their union allies supported the war, turning their backs on internationalism. The French CGT supported the *Union sacrée*, with the exception of a minority led by Merrheim, Monatte, and the newspaper *La Vie ouvrière*. In Italy, the USI declared its opposition to the war and organized protests, but a pro-war section split. The IWW in the United States led a campaign against entering the war, but suffered violent repression from which it would never fully recover. Overall, however, revolutionary syndicalists maintained an internationalist and anti-militarist course.³⁴

The International Bureau of Amsterdam, prevented from pursuing its work of information and coordination due to the war, soon ceased its activities. Nevertheless, the NAS published a call for all revolutionary organizations to participate in an international congress after the war, denouncing the reformist social democratic parties and labour unions as bearing a part of the responsibilities for the horrors of war. It also recommended the creation of a revolutionary

³³ The minority opposed to the war met in 1915 at the Zimmerwald conference. Some of them would join the Communist International while others founded in 1921 the International Working Union of Socialist Parties, which would join the Socialist International in 1923.

³⁴ See THORPE, W. “The European Syndicalists and War (1914–1918)”. *Contemporary European History*. vol. 10, n.1, 2001. pp. 1–24 and DARLINGTON, R. “Revolutionary Syndicalist Opposition to the First World War...” *Op.Cit.* Without calling into question this assertion, the latter brings certain nuances.

syndicalist international, the only way to fight both nationalism and capitalism, and to prevent future wars, lamenting that it could not be done before 1914.³⁵

In February, as in October 1917, the Russian anarcho-syndicalists took an active part in the revolution, gathering around the anarcho-syndicalist propaganda union and newspaper *Golos Truda* (*The Voice of Labour*) that had been formed by Russian exiles. The anarchist influence, while less than that of the Marxists, is nevertheless significant: they were particularly active in the factory soviets and in some unions.³⁶ Increasingly critical of the one-party state in construction, they were soon censored, then repressed, and silenced before the founding congress of the Communist International in 1919.

The Bolshevik communists aimed to gather around them the left wing of the socialist parties and the syndicalist movement. The latter, enthusiastic about the initial form of the revolution (the soviets), had little information about the state control process underway in Russia. Lenin was, moreover, in the beginning, often better welcomed by the anarchists than by the social democrats, supporters of orthodox Marxism, and his theories were commonly thought of as a synthesis between Marxism and anarchism. Even for many anarchists, Soviet Russia then appeared as the centre of an invigorated world revolutionary movement.

At the same time, revolutionary movements taking the form of workers' councils exploded in Germany and Italy in 1918–1920 (and to a lesser extent in Hungary and England), in which revolutionary syndicalists actively participated. They drew from these experiences the conclusion that it was councils such as these, and not the unions as they used to believe, that must freely unite to lead the process of revolutionary collectivization. They nevertheless underlined the possible corporatist and reformist drift of workers' councils, demanding the construction of a revolutionary union.³⁷ In the rest of Europe and in Latin America, strikes and workers' revolts broke out, and several syndicalist organisations (the Portuguese CGT and the Chilean IWW) or anarcho-syndicalist organisations (the Mexican CGT and the Peruvian Regional Workers' Federation) were founded. In Spain, the CNT officially set its goal to establish libertarian communism, and acquired an industrialist structure (by branches and no longer by trade, but the local industrial unions were not organized in industrial federations), counting several hundred thousand members. From that date onwards, the CNT can unequivocally be described as anarcho-syndicalist. An anarcho-syndicalist organisation was also created in Japan.³⁸

The Moscow International

After the Russian Revolution, the Bolsheviks intended to form a new international, and the entire labour movement was obliged to take a stand towards this call. At the beginning, most revolutionaries around the world were unreservedly enthusiastic about such an initiative. The CNT and the USI temporarily adhered to the Communist International (CI), pending the establishment of a syndicalist international, as well as the revolutionary wing of the French CGT,

³⁵ THORPE, W. *Op.Cit.*, 1989. pp.101–102.

³⁶ THORPE, W., W. *Op.Cit.*, 1989. p.110 ; DAMIER, V. *Op.Cit.*, 2009. p.47.

³⁷ VENZA, Claudio. "L'anarcho-syndicalisme italien pendant le Biennio Rosso' (1919–1920)." In: *De l'Histoire du mouvement...* *Op.Cit.*, p.161 ; and DAMIER V. *Op.Cit.*, 2009. p.49, 51. The USI adopted this position during its third congress in Parma in 1919. For the German anarcho-syndicalists, see their organ *Der Syndikalist* n°3 (1918) and n°36 (1919). Those in Russia adopted a similar position.

³⁸ See PELLETIER, Philippe. "Un oublié du consensus: l'anarcho-syndicalisme au Japon de 1911 à 1934." In: *De l'Histoire du mouvement...* *Op.Cit.*, p.178.

which had become a minority. In the countries closest to Russia, however, there were more critical positions: the Swedish SAC and the *Freie Arbeiter Union Deutschlands* (FAUD, a fusion of the FVdG and other unions in 1919, defining itself as anarcho-syndicalist) considered Leninism as a new variant of social democracy.³⁹

The second congress of the CI (Moscow, July 1920) aimed to place the labour movement in each country under the authority of the communist parties, themselves controlled by Moscow.⁴⁰ The voting system gave the Bolsheviks a majority.⁴¹ To counter reformism, the creation of a Red International of Labour Unions (RILU, or Profintern, the Russian abbreviation) was announced by the prominent Bolshevik Solomon Lozovsky who would become its leader. Its mission was to work with the reformist unions and to collaborate with the Komintern and its sections. The founding congress was scheduled for 1921 and was received as an insult by most syndicalists present at the congress. They suggested that an autonomous congress composed of the concerned organisations take place so that they could decide their own orientations.⁴² But only members of the CI were allowed to participate in the debate and the initial proposal was accepted. The congress was also an opportunity for delegates to meet Russian anarchists, who informed them about the repression, the centralism and the authoritarianism of the new Soviet regime. Many syndicalists then lost any illusion about the nature of Leninism and the CI, but some held out hope that the RILU would be the type of International that they most needed and that they would be able to influence. On the voyage back home after the congress, several delegations (FAUD, CNT, USI, SAC, NAS) stopped in Berlin, discussed the situation and convened in the same city an international labour union conference in December 1920.⁴³ The result was a position of participation reserved for the RILU, but mostly differences between pro and anti-Komintern delegates.⁴⁴ For its part, the Russian government repressed any anti-authoritarian movement (Ukraine, Kronstadt, anarchists, etc.) and denigrated the “old syndicalism” in its organs.

The FAUD was the first, by an internal referendum, to refuse to participate in RILU and to send delegates to Moscow.⁴⁵ In the clandestine CNT, its leaders imprisoned, a communist fraction succeeded in stacking it and in delegating its partisans to the Moscow congress.⁴⁶ Most of the other countries sent delegations with the objective of imposing a total autonomy of the RILU from the IC. Many organisations were in fact divided on what to do (NAS, French *Comités syndicalistes révolutionnaires* – CSR, etc.). During the congress, the communists, still controlling the votes, imposed their vision of unions as a communication channel for the communist parties, and advocated for the infiltration in reformist unions. The opponents were prevented from expressing themselves freely, and the Red Army was even brought in to end their protests.⁴⁷

³⁹ THORPE, W., *Op.Cit.* 1989. pp.132–135.

⁴⁰ WOLIKOW, Serge. *L'Internationale communiste (1919–1943): Le Komintern ou le rêve déchu du parti mondial de la révolution*. Paris: L'Atelier, 2010. pp.26–27.

⁴¹ THORPE, W., *Op.Cit.*, 1989. pp.137–139

⁴² *Ibid.*, pp.141–142. See also the *Compte-rendu du Conseil international des syndicats rouges pour la période du 15 juillet 1920 au 1 juillet 1921*. Moscow: ISR (French acronym for RILU), 1921.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, pp.157–158, a report of this conference (in Dutch) figures in the NAS archives (IISG).

⁴⁴ Final declaration reproduced in THORPE, W. *Op.Cit.*, 1989. pp.172–173.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p.185, The German Communist Party (KPD) was looking to destroy the FAUD by encouraging splits. See DAMIER, V. *Op.Cit.* 2009. p. 73.

⁴⁶ THORPE, W. *Op.Cit.*, 1989. p.190

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p.216.

Split and foundation of the IWA

After the founding congress of the RILU, the SAC, the USI and the IWW decided in their turn to withdraw from it, while the CNT, the FORA and the CSR disowned their pro-communist delegates. The FAUD, supported by others, convened a new conference in Berlin in June 1922, to draw the conclusions of this split. The pre-war *International Bulletin of the Syndicalist Movement* was launched again, now with a clear anti-state, anti-party, and particularly anti-Bolshevik line, while the international communist press railed at syndicalism and anarchism.

The conference adopted an anarcho-syndicalist statement of principles:⁴⁸ it advocated the establishment by direct action and by a general strike of federalism and “free communism.” The delegates also noted their failure in Moscow, the impossibility of uniting with authoritarian communists, and proposed the construction of a genuine revolutionary union international. An international congress was convened for this purpose in December 1922, again in Berlin.

The founding congress of the International Workers’ Association was the logical outcome of the international dynamics of syndicalism, and directly ensued, if not from the First International, at least from the 1907 and especially the 1913 congresses. The thirty-odd present delegates claimed to represent more than two million workers⁴⁹ in fifteen countries.⁵⁰ They agreed to describe Soviet Russia as “state capitalism” and the RILU as an agency for the foreign policy of the Russian government. A declaration of principles, continued from the debates at the June conference, was adopted, as well as a proclamation entitled “To the working class of all countries”. Without the term anarcho-syndicalism being adopted by everyone, it was truly anarcho-syndicalism which had just been established as an international tendency and organisation. The IWA displayed its affinities, in all its independence, with the anarcho-communist ideal, being halfway between a union and an anarchist organisation, seeing itself as a bridge between the anarchists, as long as they were not anti-unionists, and the syndicalists, as long as they were not authoritarian.

The adopted statutes were of federalist and libertarian inspiration. They considered the possibility of occasional alliances with other unions and revolutionary organisations, and allowed the membership of revolutionary minorities in labour unions. Rudolf Rocker, Alexander Schapiro and Augustin Souchy were appointed to the secretary’s office of the IWA, based in Berlin.⁵¹ Each section appointed one of its members to the international office, which would in fact be the privileged interlocutor of the international secretary and a correspondent for the IWA’s press service. The role of the international secretariat was limited to allowing an organic communication between the sections and to coordinate certain actions such as solidarity campaigns and the organisation of congresses. It sometimes helped new sections or sections that were in trouble, and attended national congresses when it was possible. Rocker’s presence was predominant, as well as a network of historic activists, among whom may be mentioned Fritz Kater, Augustin Souchy Albert De Jong, Arthur Lehning Muller, Albert Jensen, Pierre Besnard, Alexander Schapiro, Armando Borghi, Diego Abad de Santillán, and Valeriano Orobón Fernandez. The IWA congresses

⁴⁸ Reproduced in *Ibid.*, p.373.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p.342. The number used by the Dutch newspapers *De Arbeid* (January 13, 1923) and *Alarm* (January 20, 1923), Thorpe assesses that the number of 1.5 million is more likely.

⁵⁰ Germany (FAUD), Argentina (FORA), Chile (IWW), Denmark (Syndikalistik propagandaforbund), Spain (CNT) Italy (USI), Mexico (CGT), Norway (NSF), the Netherlands (NAS), Portugal (CGT), Sweden (SAC), Uruguay (FORU) with observers from the German, French, Dutch, Russian and Czechoslovakian organisations.

⁵¹ IISG, IWMA archive, dossier “1st congress, Berlin 1922.”

were held every three years, interspersed with conferences, also called plenums (meetings of the International's representatives, without sovereign power). The delegates' mandates were still imperative, monitored, and if necessary revoked.

Since it is impossible to go into the details of the IWA sections' union activities in this text, I will rather examine the coordinated actions at the international level. In the foreground are the solidarity campaigns against attacks qualified as "reactionary" (whether fascist, Bolshevik or republican) and collections for strike solidarity and lawsuits involving prisoners and exiles (primarily Italians and Russians), members or not of the IWA, and their families. The release of prisoners was sometimes obtained. Propaganda also played an important role through the IWA's *Press Service* and manifestos published in particular on the occasion of Mayday. The main themes were anti-fascism, anti-militarism, the activity of the IWA's sections and criticism of other left wing movements, but all social issues were addressed. The IWA finally tried to set up international federations of industry, in the metallurgical, transportation and construction sectors.⁵² Only within construction would the IWA have some success, but it was short-lived due to the explosion of unemployment. The Latin American sections also created the *Asociación Continental Americana de los Trabajadores* (ACAT).

III. International decline and Spanish zenith

Crisis, fascist regimes, united and popular fronts weaken anarcho-syndicalism

The 1920s ended with an international wave of repression in reaction to the revolutionary wave. The 1930s were characterized by a general strengthening of states and of doctrines based on the nation state, as an answer to the global crisis which shook the world. This context would prove fatal for many anarcho-syndicalist organisations, caught between left-wing and right-wing states/nationalisms. Thousands of members would lose their lives or their freedom.

The Italian USI was the first to fall, eradicated by Fascism between 1922 and 1927 with only a clandestine core remaining as well as some exiles in France.⁵³ The Portuguese CGT was outlawed in 1926 by Salazar's regime and then went underground, still claiming to be the most important union in the country, but it was nearly destroyed in 1934.⁵⁴ The German FAUD lost most of its members between 1923 and 1933, and during the early 1930s the majority of those left were unemployed. It became clandestine in 1933 and organized until the end of the decade an emigration and propaganda import network through the Netherlands, where militants took refuge.⁵⁵ The French CGT-SR⁵⁶ remained quite small despite an increase of membership after the 1936 strikes, but it too would disappear during the Second World War. The modest sections of Belgium, Bulgaria, and Poland were destroyed by state repression. The Scandinavian SAC and NSF, as well as the Dutch NSV, remained stable overall, but most of their members were unemployed.

⁵² See in particular the *Service de presse de la Fédération internationale du bâtiment* (International Federation of Construction Press Service), n.1 to 5, June 1931 to April-May 1932.

⁵³ *Rapport sur la situation en Italie*. IISG, IWMA archive, 1st congress.

⁵⁴ DAMIER, V. *Op.Cit.*, 2009. p.87. See also SCHAPIRO, Alexandre. *Procès verbal des séances du plenum d'Amsterdam*. IISG, Albert De Jong archive.

⁵⁵ DAMIER, V. *Op.Cit.*, 2009. p.88-89, MUÑOZ CONGOST, J. *Op.Cit.*, p.7232. see also *Les anarcho-syndicalistes allemands face au nazisme*. Besançon (France): CNT-AIT Doubs, 1999.

⁵⁶ *CGT-Syndicaliste Révolutionnaire*, a small syndicalist split from the communist *CGT-Unitaire*, which joined the IWA in 1926.

Thus, in Europe, only the Spanish, French, Dutch and Scandinavian sections remained legal, but apart from the CNT, they were a small minority within their respective labour movements. In all other European countries, anarcho-syndicalist organizations only persisted clandestinely or in exile, cut off from workplaces, unable to attract a new generation of militants, and most often reduced to propaganda and fund-raising activities. Emigrant militants were often expelled from country to country, with many ending up in Spain from 1936 onwards.

In Latin America, a similar dynamic obtained. In Argentina, a coup outlawed the FORA in 1930; all its representatives were arrested, deported or killed yet it still kept up substantial workplace activity.⁵⁷ The establishment of dictatorships also hit hard all the other Latin-American *Forist* or anarcho-syndicalist organisations: in Cuba between 1925 and 1927, in Peru and Brazil after 1930. Those of Bolivia and Paraguay disappeared during the Chaco War between 1932 and 1935. The Mexican CGT converted progressively to reformism from 1928 onwards. So in 1936 only the Chilean, Bolivian, Uruguayan and Argentinian sections of the IWA remained, but they were weak, isolated and powerless. Likewise, the Japanese section was destroyed in 1935–1936.

On several occasions the IWA offered to the two other trade-union internationals proposals for joint campaigns (for example demanding the six-hour work day in 1930 and boycotting German products in 1933), but it was always rebuffed. Nevertheless, some joint struggles occurred at the grass-roots level. On the other hand, it refused any alliances from the top down, seeing them as a political and bureaucratic manoeuvre, such as the idea of the “working-class united front” (1920s) or of the “popular front” (1930s). The anarcho-syndicalists held the communist organizations responsible, through their reformist and authoritarian strategies, for the consequences of the crisis, for the rise of fascism and for the failures of the workers’ movement.

Spanish revolution’s lessons

Spain has a special place in the history of anarcho-syndicalism. The CNT was the largest section of the IWA internationally and was the largest union in several regions of Spain. The organization was not only a militant political organization; it often organized education, leisure and a significant part of the socialization and cultural life of its members and sympathisers, gaining workers and peasants to the libertarian communist ideal. In 1931, the end of the monarchy gave impetus to social struggles, with revolts and strikes multiplying throughout the country (general strikes in Seville and Barcelona in 1931, the anarchist insurrections of 1932 and 1933, the Asturian uprising of 1934). In reaction to this, the repression was harsh. The members of the IWA – which held its 4th congress in Madrid in 1931 – then saw Spain as the only country where the revolution would be able to stand in the way of fascism and reaction.⁵⁸

At the Zaragoza congress in May 1936, with the adoption of the *Confederation concept of libertarian communism*, the CNT was equipped with a real concrete revolutionary action plan, able to be applied in the short term. But it was not prepared for the upcoming events: after a long period being underground, numerous militants had given all their energy in the unrests of the previous years and thousands of them were imprisoned. In addition, the CNT was divided (mainly between the moderate tendency, called *trentism*, and the radical one, the *Federación Anarquista Iberica*). In general, it was disorganized, many of its representatives were jailed, it had no industrial federation or a generalized influence over the whole national territory of Spain.

⁵⁷ MUÑOZ CONGOST, J. *Op.Cit.*, p.7233

⁵⁸ *Mensaje del Secretariado de la AIT a la CNT*. June 1934, quoted by *Ibid.*

This situation of weakness of the IWA at the international level, and of their isolation at the national level, would lead the CNT to reluctantly adopt the tactic of a united antifascist front, which would end up turning against its own members. Indeed, the organization included a reformist (or moderate) current, and also an embryonic wage-earning bureaucracy, which would spearhead *Cenetist* participation in the republican government. The same government would vehemently overturn many of the revolutionary achievements. Consequently, many Spanish and foreign anarcho-syndicalists harshly criticized anarcho-syndicalist participation in the Spanish republican government, but without calling their solidarity into question. On the other hand, members of CNT were often in the forefront of those who organised the collectivizations during the Spanish revolution, mainly in Catalonia, Aragon and Valencia. For agriculture in rural areas as well as for industry in the large cities, workers' self-management had never been experimented on such a large scale. That explains why the Spanish revolution still remains an ever-present reference in libertarian culture.

After the war, the Spanish CNT, in exile as well as underground in Spain, split on the conclusions to be drawn from the civil war and from participation in the Republican government. Some wanted to maintain the alliance with all the anti-fascist forces and pressure the Allies to free Spain, while others did not trust them, preferring to go back to anarcho-syndicalist basics.⁵⁹

Conclusion – Modern anarcho-syndicalism: integration or marginalisation, “pragmatism” or “orthodoxy”?

From 1945 onwards, the other sections of the IWA were often reduced to small groups with a tiny presence in workplaces, with their activity largely oriented toward support for anti-Franco activities in Spain.

The Swedish SAC, in a context of welfare state development, took a reformist turn (co-determination, participation in city councils and state subventions) in order to survive as a union, trying to get the IWA to follow. It ended up leaving the IWA in 1958, followed by the Dutch section. The French CNT (founded in 1946) was weakened by the anti-Stalinist schism of the CGT which spawned the creation of *Force ouvrière*, and then by the temporary radicalism of the CFDT (many anarchists would join these two confederations). But anarcho-syndicalism enjoyed a modest revival after the protest wave of 1968.

The Spanish CNT reunified during the 1960s, but split again shortly after Franco's death, with a “pure” anarchist wing on one hand, and a “pure” unionist one on the other. The state exploited this schism trying to break up the revolutionary movement, giving rise to the Spanish CGT. Other splits occurred around similar issues in France and Italy during the 1990s, while anarcho-syndicalism reappeared in Eastern Europe after 1989.

Thus, today the IWA is not the only international organisation claiming to be anarcho-syndicalist: in 2010 the SAC, the Spanish CGT and a few other European organisations, most of them deriving from the IWA, formed the Red & Black Coordination. This tendency is more prone to alliances with other unions or parties, and uses the means allowed by liberal democracies (workplace representative elections, full-time union officers, public subsidies) to grow, leading to a certain institutionalization. The IWA refuses these strategies and tactics on the grounds

⁵⁹ See HERRERIN LOPEZ, Ángel. *La CNT durante el franquismo: Clandestinidad y exilio (1939–1975)*. Madrid: Siglo XXI, 2004.

that they cause deviations from libertarian principles. Its sections prefer to build a syndicalism radically different from bureaucratic trade-unions, at the risk of being more marginal in the present situation. As a result, the first ones see themselves as “pragmatists” and criticize the “dogmatism” of the second ones, who, for their part, denounce all kinds of “class collaboration.” We need to point out that strong nuances exist within both of these international organizations and that many anarcho-syndicalist groups are members of neither, with diverse positions on many questions.

Appendix

List of abbreviations

ACAT *Asociación Continental Americana de los Trabajadores* (American Continental Association of Workers)

AIL *Associazione internazionale dei lavoratori* (IWA)

AIT *Association internationale des travailleurs, Asociación Internacional de los Trabajadores* (IWA)

CFDT *Confédération française démocratique du travail* (French Democratic Confederation of Labour)

CGT *Confédération générale du travail, Confederación General del Trabajo* (General Confederation of Labour)

CGT-SR *Confédération générale du travail – Syndicaliste révolutionnaire* (Syndicalist CGT)

CI Communist International

CNT *Confederación Nacional del Trabajo, Confédération nationale du travail* (National Confederation of Labour)

CSR *Comités syndicalistes révolutionnaires* (Revolutionary Syndicalist Committees)

FAUD *Freie Arbeiter Union Deutschlands* (Free Workers’ Union of Germany)

FORA *Federación Obrera Regional Argentina* (Argentinian Regional Workers’ Federation)

FVdG *Freie Vereinigung deutscher Gewerkschaften* (Free Association of German Trade Unions)

IAA *Internationale Arbeiterassoziation* (IWA)

IISG *Internationaal Instituut voor Sociale Geschiedenis* (International Institute of Social History, Amsterdam)

IWA International Workers’ Association

IWMA International Workingmen’s Association

IWW Industrial Workers of the World

NAS *Nationaal Arbeids-Secretariaat* (National Labor Secretariat)

NSF *Norsk Syndikalistisk Forbund* (Norwegian Syndicalist League)

RILU Red International of Labour Unions

SAC *Sveriges Arbetares Centralorganisation* (Central Organisation of the Workers of Sweden)

USI *Unione Sindacale Italiana* (Italian Syndicalist Union)

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