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Syndicalism for the Twenty-First Century

From Unionism to Class-Struggle Militancy

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The capitalism we grew up in has collapsed. Its democratic mask has become transparent and its social pretensions hollow. In times of crisis, capitalism resembles a wounded predator and attacks indiscriminately. Crises also open up new possibilities for workers' resistance, but this needs organizations that can sustain it. The last decade has painfully shown that such organizations do not exist. Capitalism's current crisis is far from over, though. There is still a chance.

We are both active in syndicalist organizations. One of us in the German Free Workers' Union, FAU, the other in the Central Organization of Workers in Sweden, SAC. In this text, we raise the question of where the future of syndicalist organizations lies. Our proposal might seem ironic: in order to save syndicalism's mass orientation, the focus on unionism needs to be overcome.

Since the election of Donald Trump as president of the United States, the Brexit referendum, and the rise of the extreme right in various European and Latin American countries,

there have been plenty of discussions about the left having lost touch with the working class. Oddly enough, syndicalists are largely absent from this debate, although the syndicalist tradition would predestine them to be an important voice in it and offer practical experience. When leftist pundits discuss what is often referred to as a “new class politics,” they regularly evoke inherent aspects of the syndicalist tradition, from direct action and self-management to horizontalism and internationalism.

Yet, syndicalists must blame themselves for their absence. “Real syndicalism” has largely become cliquish, paranoid, and self-marginalizing. The rejection and hostility that we experience from mainstream unions goes a certain way to explain this but not all of it.

One reason for the state of the syndicalist movement is that syndicalists dogmatically adhere to a particular form of organization that, with very few exceptions, hasn’t proven successful in almost a hundred years: the syndicalist mass union. Let’s be honest: if syndicalist unions that have existed for several decades struggle to have four-digit membership numbers, they have failed as aspiring mass unions. The Spanish CGT, with close to 100.000 members, is the only syndicalist union that can claim mass support today – and it is often accused of “reformism,” or even “traitorism,” by other syndicalist unions.

Syndicalist unions aren’t benefiting from the current crisis of mainstream unions, which organize no more than ten percent of the global proletariat. This although neoliberalism has given rise to a new army of “unorganizable” workers (today often called the “precariat”) who filled the ranks of the syndicalist mass unions a century ago. In short, revolutionary syndicalism as we know it might be a thing of the past. In order for it to survive, it needs to be reinvented.

Minuscule unions cannot be the answer. Militant workers’ organizations, however, might be. A union with a thousand members can only have limited impact; a class-struggle orga-

nization with a thousand members can have a huge impact if they are committed militants and organizers.

The dogmatic syndicalist attachment to the mass union is based on a false interpretation of history. Syndicalism's ultimate goal was not to establish mass unions. Syndicalism's ultimate goal was to establish a classless society, or, as many a syndicalist preamble declares, "libertarian socialism." A hundred years ago, building mass unions appeared to be a viable means to reach this goal. Today, it does not. This doesn't discredit the syndicalist idea of strengthening worker's self-organization and solidarity in order to fight capital and the state. It only means that syndicalism has to express itself in other forms.

Trying to prescribe these forms would be a waste of time. They can only develop from workers' self-organization. Syndicalism is what workers do. As a philosophy of action, it permanently reinvents itself. Workers fight in creative ways. They network, exchange experiences, and provide each other with material support and analytical tools. This is where syndicalism for the twenty-first century begins.

The syndicalism we envision is not centered on itself. Workers build alliances all the time, with political parties, solidarity movements, and mainstream unions. Syndicalists must be willing to do the same, even if this requires careful analysis each time. This is what makes mass influence for syndicalists possible: syndicalism as the prolonged, organized arm of grassroots workers' revolt. Its organizations must be built by dedicated class-struggle militants who strengthen rank-and-file workers' resistance.

For some, unions still carry the air of working-class unity and struggle. For many of today's workers, however – particularly the most exploited ones – unions either mean nothing at all because they aren't relevant to their lives, or they even reject them after having felt belittled as temp workers or employees in precarious sectors. In the best case, workers see

unions as institutions run by professionals who might assist them but who they have nothing in common with. The majority no longer considers them vehicles of radical social change.

We need working-class organizations that transcend the framework of contemporary unionism and unite a strong minority of workers able to radicalize their colleagues. A concrete example would be associations of workers centers or local solidarity networks. Advantages of workers centers are: they are relevant even in precarious sectors; they are able to respond to labor migration; they can easily be tied to community organizing; they offer collective spaces of workers' culture, which have largely disappeared during the neoliberal restructuring of labor.

None of this means that we are against unions. It is important to protect the pockets of organized workers' power that still exist. Unions belong to them. The broader you organize, the more obvious this becomes. Most syndicalists know that they usually can't get very far without the support of mainstream unions. It makes campaigns and industrial action more effective. If workers find it useful, we are all for dual membership. Syndicalist organizations should be a supplement, not a competitor, to mainstream unions. Their task is not only to support grassroots workers' struggles, but also to help create a working-class culture that can sustain these struggles. The struggles need to be documented, interpreted, evaluated, and advanced. It is crucial to move from theory to practice, to develop your politics in the mess of everyday life. If you turn an "infoshop" into a "workers center" by simply changing its name, you will achieve nothing.

Even if there is a renewed focus on class within the left, many leftists still see the working class as something external. This is what makes workers suspicious of the left. Questions such as "Why do they care?" and "What do they want to get out of this?" are common and understandable. There is good reason

to be wary of "labor organizers" who seem to be distinct from the working class.

There is a divide between the working class and the worker's movement in the global north today. The working class is multinational, female, and increasingly precarious. The worker's movement remains predominantly white, male, and based in the most secure sectors. If this divide cannot be resolved, the critique of the workers' movement as an allegedly antiquated and outdated tradition will, tragically, be proven right.