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What is Anarcho-syndicalism?

George Woodcock

1943

Syndicalism is a method of industrial organisation which goes away from all the traditional conceptions of authority and government, of capitalism and the state. While communism in abolishing individual capitalism, creates a worse monster in its place in the form of the economic state, syndicalism leaves all the patterns of administration which have in the past resulted only in the oppression and exploitation of man by man, and sets out to build an organisational form based on the natural needs of man rather than on the interests of ruling classes, based not on the dictates of authority, but on the voluntary cooperation of free and equal individuals in satisfying the economic needs of the men who form society.

Syndicalism is the industrial manifestation of anarchism. Anarchism itself is a doctrine which teaches the necessity of a society without government... Anarchism advocates, instead of the governmental coercion of the individual, which exists in the most democratic society that still retains the state, a society based on the free co-operation of individual men and women for the fulfilment of their social and economic needs. Organ-

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isation on a voluntary basis is necessary for the operation of the means of production and the desirable public services, but no kind of superior body of authority, with its parliaments, police, bureaucracies, codes of law, taxes, armies and secretive intrigues in internal and foreign politics, has any place or value in a society based on justice and reason. In anarchy a man, once he has fulfilled his contractual economic functions, can live as he will, providing he does not interfere with the freedom of his fellows.

Anarchists believe that the means of production should be the property of society, held in common, and that only by such an arrangement will the restricting influence of private property be removed and the resources of nature and science be used to their full extent for the benefit of humanity. In order that there may be no possibility of such private interests arising, they advocate that, once the means of production have been taken out of the hands of their usurping controllers, they shall be run not by any authority or elite or leaders, but by the people who are themselves concerned in production, i.e. by the workers in each industry.

Syndicalism is, as I have already said, the method by which such control by the workers would be organised. It is, moreover, the method by which the workers under a property society would organise themselves for the attainment of the free classless society.

The syndicate is a form of union which differs from the ordinary trade union in that it aims, not only at the gaining of improvements in wages and conditions under the present system, but also at the overthrow of that system and its replacement by the free society by means of social revolution based on the economic direct action of the workers. This is not to say that it ignores the day to day struggle, but its members recognise that only by a complete destruction of the structure of property and authority can justice and security ever be attained for the workers.

gates chosen directly from among the workers who would administer the functioning of the various services in accordance with the wishes of the workers. These delegates would have no authority, nor would they make any decisions on questions of policy. Their job would be merely to co-ordinate the work of the railwaymen, which would be carried out entirely on a voluntary basis.

Such delegates would be in no way superior to their fellow workers in power, privilege or position. Under anarchism the wages system, one of the prime means by which the rulers coerce the workers, would be abolished, and the workers, giving in labour what was necessary for the carrying on of the function of society would in their turn receive the goods which they found necessary for a happy life. No worker would get more than his mate because tradition said that his craft was worth twice as much a week, and there would be no railway directors to live in high luxury while their lower paid employees starved on 60 shillings a week or less. Men would get not according to their worth, for social worth cannot be estimated, but according to their need, which is the only just means of sharing the goods of society.

The syndicate differs also from the ordinary trade union in its method of organisation. The ordinary trade union follows the pattern of governmental society in that it has a centralised form, with authority at the centre and a permanent bureaucracy, who, like any other bureaucracy, rapidly gain privilege and power and rise into a class with an economic position considerably higher than that of the workers who pay them and whom they are supposed to serve. The syndicate, on the other hand, is based on the organisation of workers by industry at the place of work. The workers of each factory, or depot or farm are an autonomous unit, who govern their own affairs and who make all the decisions as to the work they will do. These units are joined federally in a syndicate which serves to co-ordinate the actions of the workers in each industry. The federal organisation has no authority over the workers in any branch, and cannot impose a veto on action like a trade union executive. It has no permanent bureaucracy, and the few privileged officials are chosen on a short term basis, have no privileges which raise their standard of living above that of the workers, and wield no authority of any kind.

The syndicate being actually governed from below and being untainted by the idea or the institution of authority, represents more truly than any other type of organisation the will of the workers and the good of society. Its lack of centralism and lack of bureaucracy, of any kind of privilege or vested interest in the present order of society, give it a flexibility of action and real solidarity which make it the ideal instrument for canalising and influencing in the right way the spontaneous revolutionary activity of the people.

In the social revolution the syndicates will play their part by organising the economic direct action of the workers. On the railways for instance, they will lead the workers in the expropriation of the lines, stations and rolling stock, and their use only for the purposes of the revolution and not for those of the dispossessed masters.

After the revolution the syndicate will form the framework on which the first phase of the free society will be built. Anarchists do not make any plans for the free society in its maturity, as they believe in the free and continual growth of social institutions, and recognise that any hard-and-fast plan of development will create only a sterile society. Nevertheless they recognise that after the old society has been abolished some kind of social structure must be built immediately to take over the means of production and change the economic basis of society from that of a class society to that most appropriate to a free society. This means of organisation they find in the syndicate.

The organisation of industry, transport and farming under the syndicates will follow exactly the same lines as that of the organisation of the workers in the days before the end of the property society, except that now, instead of organising for struggle, the workers will organise for the construction of the economic basis necessary for the achievement and maintenance of true freedom and justice.

Each working unit, a factory or a railway yard, will be run by the workers who actually operate it. There will be no authority, no management, and each worker will be jointly and equally responsible with the rest for the proper functioning of the industrial unit in which he works.

It should not be assumed that the syndicalist regards the operation of industry as a simple matter. On the contrary, he knows from experience its complexity, and regards a bureaucracy divorced from the actual work as being incapable of operating to its maximum efficiency so involved an organisation as that of a railway. The workers are the men who have the knowledge of the actual operating of the railways, and if they were to study the problems of operation and of the co-ordination of their functions they would be able to work the railways far more efficiently than the bureaucrats. The opportunity of gaining this knowledge is, of course, kept from the ordinary rail-

way workers. (Instead, the companies prefer to work the other way round, by instituting classes to teach bureaucrats in an academic manner the elements of train working or signalling, usually with little success.) In this connection of course, I am using the word 'worker' in a broad sense, to include technical staff associated with civil engineering and locomotive construction, and also the sections of the clerical staff concerned with co-ordinating train operating, as these are both vitally necessary for the proper working of the railways and upon their direct co-operation with their fellow workers, eliminating the bureaucrats, will come a real workers control of railways. It is therefore vitally necessary that such men should be brought into any industrial movement along with the railway men.

The various units will be joined in federations which will co-ordinate their work throughout the country and make arrangements between the sections to ensure that each industry is properly co-ordinated. The industrial federations or syndicates will in turn be united in a national federation of industry which will act as the means of co-ordinating the activities of the various industries.

The old motives of profit and self-interest will cease to dominate economic life. Instead the incentive will be the good of the members of society, without distinction. In such circumstances there will be no impediment to the exploitation of the resources of nature and science to the full extent to which men desire it. Men will decide the standard of life and will work to get it. It is hardly to be supposed that they will be content with what they endure today, and the possibility of better circumstances, together with man's natural desire for work will ensure that the workers left to themselves, will find the means to operate industry a good deal more efficiently than has been the case under capitalism... The methods of hierarchical management would cease. Instead, the functions of administration would be vested in the workers themselves and, wherever it was impossible for the workers all to take part directly in administration, by dele-